

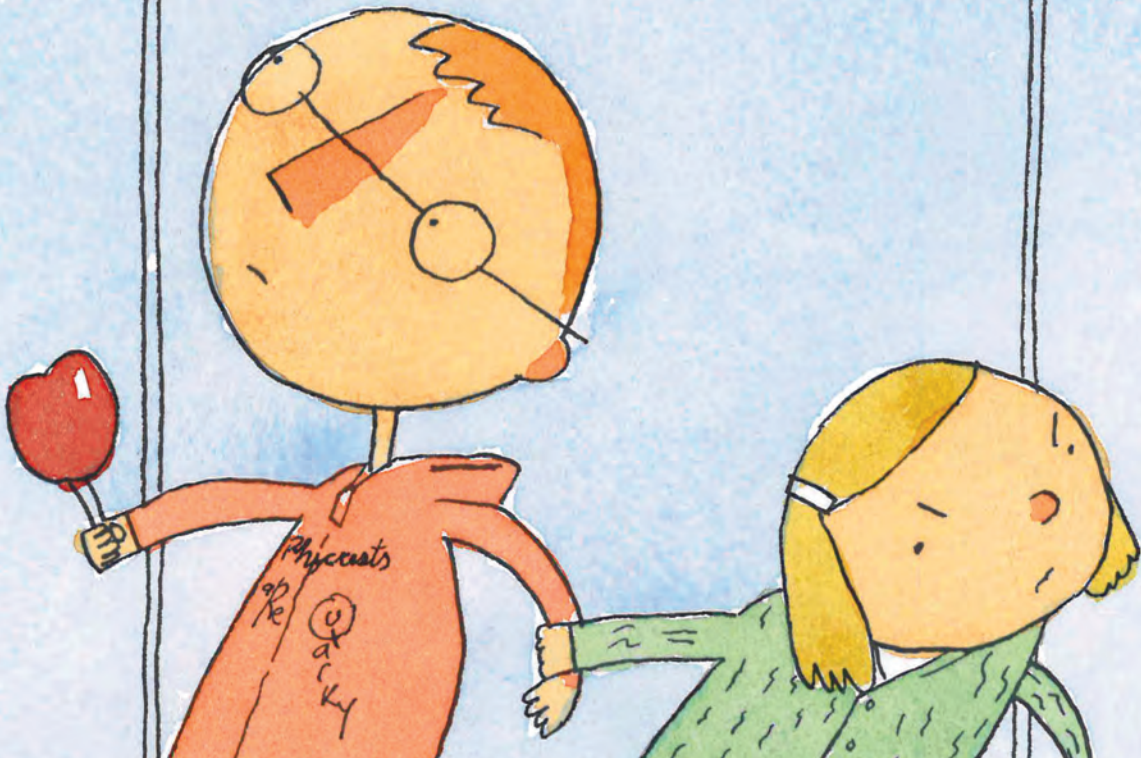
the Universe of

FAIR

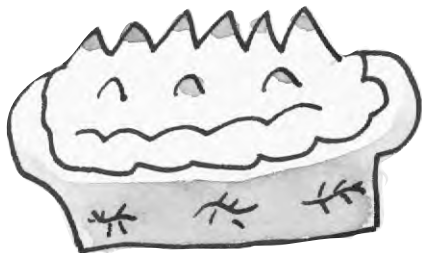
Leslie Bulion

drawings by

Frank W. Dormer



The Universe of Fair



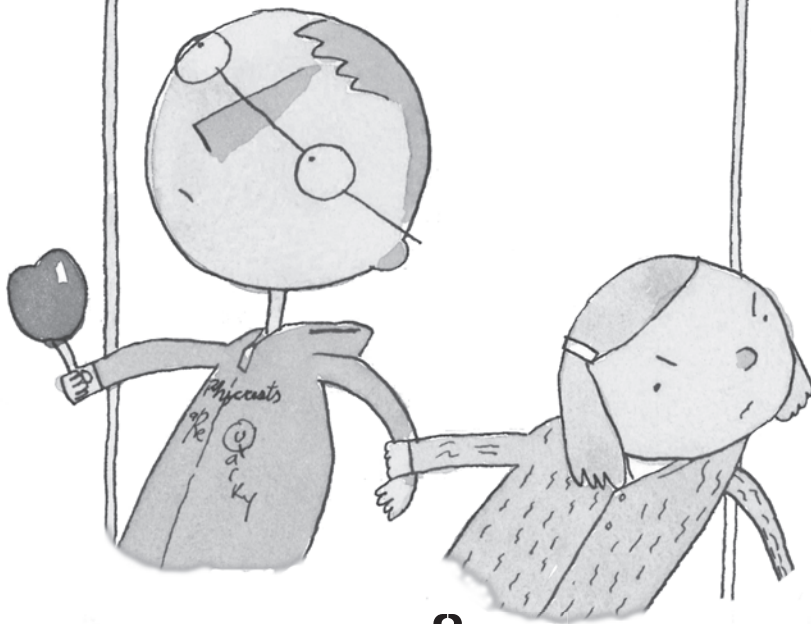


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For Carrie
—L. B.





1

THE FORCE FIELD

 In the way home from school on the bus I'm staring off into space and thinking about how weird it is that I ended up to be me, Miller Sanford, from Holmsbury, Connecticut. I think how much more likely it is that I would have been born in China, because there are more than a billion people there and only three hundred million here, and even less in Connecticut, and way less in Holmsbury.

Then I think that if I was born in China, I'd probably be allowed to ride my bicycle home from middle school. Unless I had the same mom in China that I have now. Which I guess I'd want, even if she wouldn't let me ride my bicycle home from school. Which she wouldn't.

What's even weirder to think about is that if my molecules and atoms and electrons and quarks were put together in a different way, I could just as easily be an earthworm.



Or a rock. Maybe I am a rock. Maybe I'm a rock that just thinks I'm an eleven-and-a-half-year-old boy.

"How do you know you're not really a rock?" I ask my friend Lewis, who's in the seat behind me.

"Because rocks don't make movies," Lewis says. He waves his hand sideways, keeping his eyes glued to the flip screen of his video camera. "Stand up and look out the window."

Lewis makes movies every minute he's not in school—and some of the minutes he is, if the teacher steps out and Lewis has time to get his camera from her desk drawer. It's a hand-me-down video camera from his uncle, which is why his parents let him take it everywhere. He has some really big movie ideas, some funny ideas, and some ideas I just don't get. I'm in all of his movies, but I don't have to act. I'm just me, Miller.

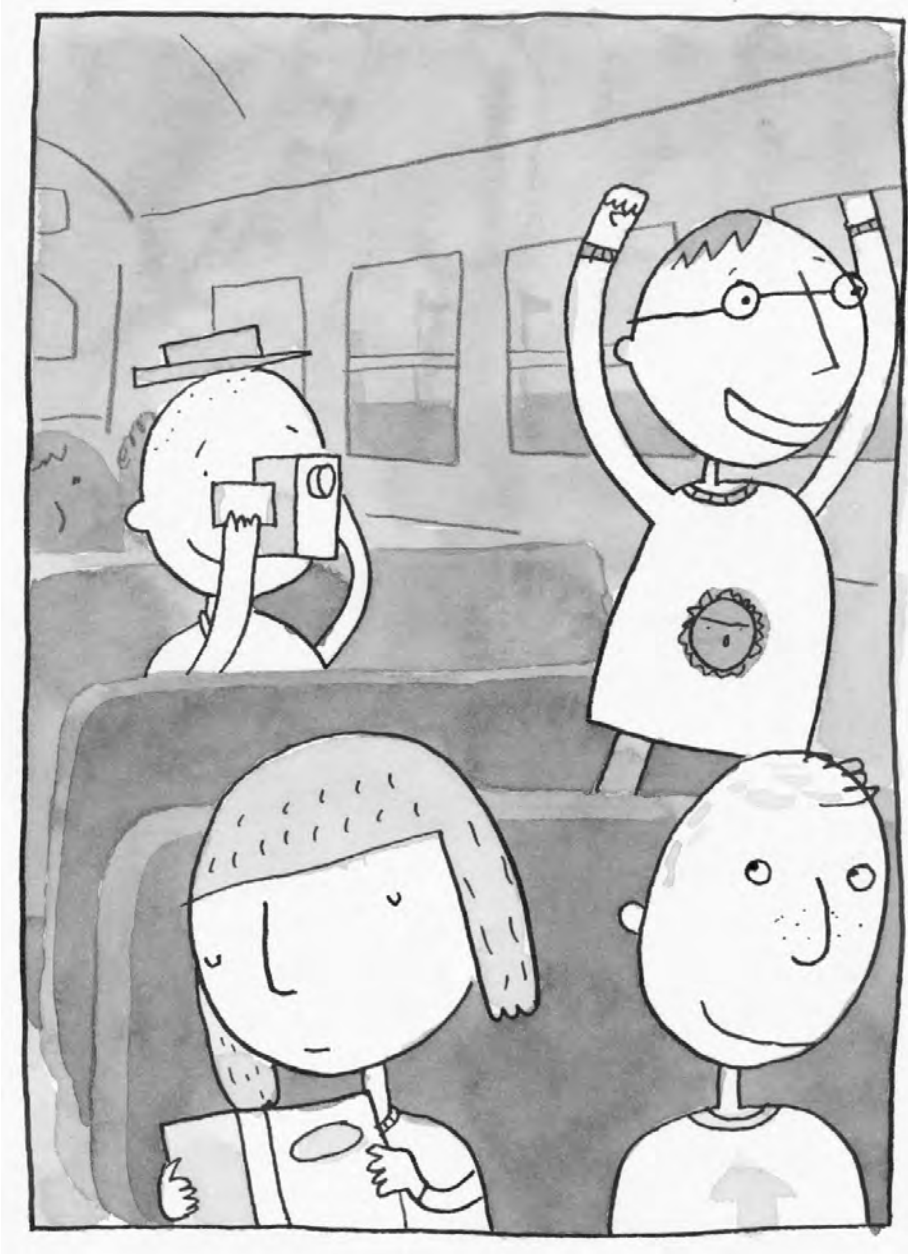
I look out the bus window as we pass through town and right away my heart starts thumping and I grin like crazy, because where poles and canvas lay in heaps on the grass this morning, huge white tents now billow in the breeze and they fill the entire town green.

"It's ready!" I shout.

A police officer in the middle of the street holds up her hand and the bus stops short in front of the library. I have to grab the edge of the open bus window so I don't fall over.

"That was a good shot," Lewis says, peering at his screen.







“Sit down!” the bus driver yells. “All of you just SIT DOWN! You’ll get to see the Fair when it opens tomorrow, same as every year.”

The bus lurches forward again, so I face sideways, then backward in my seat and I can’t stop looking until we go around the bend and pull away from the Fair’s force field. I don’t know why the bus driver didn’t feel it, but she didn’t, because if she had, she never would have said “same as every year.”

The Holmsbury Fair is not just a rerun of the same rides and the same games, and the foods and the crafts and the animals. And the high school jazz band, the frog races, the day off from school, and wondering whether you got a first or second or third place for your giant zucchini are not the “same as every year” either. Every year at the Fair you’re one whole year older, so nothing is the same at all.

Every year, it’s like the force field pulls you through a “next year” fold in space-time because the Fair feels different and you feel different, and the change happens all at once on Fair Friday, not little by little so you never notice it like all the rest of the growing you do.

The bus stops and goes, stops and goes along Main Street, where the houses are crooked and old but mostly not in a haunted house kind of way. They’re built right up to the road like they were three hundred years ago. I wonder if the new houses near the edges of Holmsbury are set way back from the street so no one can see what people are watching on



their big-screen TVs. Maybe people in colonial times were a lot nosier and they wanted to see into their neighbors' houses from the road even if there weren't big-screen TVs.

We turn off Main Street and rumble along a few more streets that are more like mine, with houses that aren't as old as the crooked ones, but are still close enough together for you to talk to your neighbors from the front porches. Which my mom likes. And my dad doesn't.

My dad is an electrician, but he always takes this whole Fair week off from his regular work and comes and goes at odd hours. When he's at the fairgrounds, he helps hook up electricity for the fundraiser booths. Whenever he's home, he bakes. Every day he bakes a different pie so he can decide which kind is the best to enter in the adult baking competition at the Fair. We kids get to be the taste-testers on all of the practice ones. Lewis always comes over a lot, but he comes over even more during Fair week because of the pies.

When we're getting off at my corner, Lewis turns on the steps and aims his camera back at the bus driver. "Are you going to the Fair?" he asks her. He presses the Record button with his thumb.

"Put that camera away and walk down facing forwards," the driver tells him. "Are you going to the Fair?" She repeats Lewis's question. "Do these kids think the parking lot shuttle bus drives itself?" she mutters as if we're not there anymore.



“And...cut,” Lewis says.

The driver closes the door and the bus rumbles away.

We walk along my street and I don't talk to Lewis because I can see that he's thinking about his movie. He's told me that this is going to be a Holmsbury Fair movie, but he doesn't have the story all worked out yet. Sometimes he just shoots a bunch of scenes and makes a story out of what he gets. He's really good at that.

After a minute he says, “Maybe I should go to Elmsville in the morning and get a shot of the sad kids who have to go to school tomorrow when we don't.”

“Fair Friday is the single best day of the whole year in Holmsbury and tomorrow is going to be our best one ever, and you want to go to Elmsville?” I take out my key and stick it in our kitchen door lock.

“Right. Never mind.” Lewis raises his camera. “Okay. Go.” He aims at my hand and then at the widening space next to the kitchen door as I push it open.

I don't know why Lewis does this because he already has about six hundred and seventy-three shots of Cooper the Wonderdog bounding closer and closer to the camera until his yellow face looks pulled back around the edges and stretched in the middle, so his nose turns into a big, fat, black hockey puck. Cooper always gets dog snot on the lens, which Lewis thinks is funny. Every time.

“Good boy, Coop,” Lewis says. He wipes the lens. “You are very camera friendly.”



The truth is our big, goofy Labrador doesn't embarrass easily, which is more than you can say for a lot of people Lewis videos.

I let Cooper out into the backyard. Lewis follows him with the camera.

"Beee-yoo-ti-ful," I hear him tell Coop.

Like I said, the Wonderdog is not easily embarrassed.

What is embarrassing is that I am eleven and a half and in sixth grade, and today is the first day in my entire life that my mom is letting me come home from school without her being here. Since my dad's working at the fairgrounds and my mom found out just before she left for work that she has to stay late for a meeting, I'm finally being allowed to stay home on my own. For thirty-five whole minutes.

Lately I've been trying to show how responsible and careful I am, so being home alone is a great opportunity. Although Cooper is here and Lewis is here, too, so technically I'm not even alone. Lewis is an expert at being left alone because he has two older brothers who are supposed to watch him and don't—which his mom and dad sort of know but also sort of don't do anything about because, as Lewis explains, he's the third boy and they're tired.

I empty Coop's water bowl and refill it with clean water from the kitchen tap. That is me being responsible. I close the front door and lock it from the inside. That is me being responsible *and* careful, even though I could walk right into almost every house on my street right now and jump on all

the beds because no one around here locks their doors, and even my parents don't when they're home. I realize that the jumping on the beds part would not be considered responsible. Or careful.

"You could take out the garbage." Lewis comes in from the backyard with Cooper. "That shows you're responsible."

"Maybe," I say. "Or does taking out the garbage show I'm not careful, because someone could see me doing it and assume that I'm home alone?"

"Your mother is nice, Mill, but trying to think like she thinks gives me a headache," Lewis says.

"I *have* to think like her. I have to do everything right or she'll never let me be on my own at the Fair tomorrow."

"Maybe you can be so responsible and careful she'll let you come on Saturday, too," Lewis says hopefully.

"Forget Saturday," I say. "You know none of us ever goes on a Saturday. My mom says it's 'unmanageably crowded' and if anyone wanted to meet up with her there she'd never hear her phone ring and—" I snap my fingers. "I forgot to check our voice mail."

The little green light is blinking, so I push the button.

Beep!

"Hello, Milly?"

Eleven-and-a-half-year-old boys named Miller are not called "Milly." My mom is a very smart person with a graduate degree in social work, but this is something she can't seem to learn.

“My meeting is running late, so I’ll have to ask you to meet Penelope at the elementary bus at four twenty-five.”

I groan. The message keeps going.

“The bus driver will beep if you’re not there since she doesn’t let first-graders off alone, even though I’m always there and she’s never had to beep before. If no one’s there to walk Penny home, she’ll have to drive her along the rest of the route and back to school, so why don’t you go out at four-twenty, just to be safe?”

My mom talks faster.

“Check your watch with the kitchen clock to be sure you have the right time. Andrew’s mom is home. You and Penny are welcome to stay with her until I get there.”

I groan again. Her voice speeds up even more.

“Dad left a pie where he always does, up on top of the refrigerator—”

BEEP!

The rest of the message is cut off, which always happens because my mom’s instructions include many details. She tells my dad our voice mail should have more message time, but he smiles and says we all have our limits.

Lewis picks up his camera and aims it at the top of the refrigerator. “Should we do pie before your sister’s bus gets here?” he asks.

“I guess so.” I trudge across the kitchen. “I can’t believe I have to end my first time home alone by going over to a six-year-old’s house.”

“Yeah, but getting Penny off the bus shows you’re responsible.”

I stop in mid-trudge. “Wait!” I say. “I can be even more responsible than that. My mom said we are *welcome* to stay at Andrew’s—she didn’t say we *have* to. I’ll get my sister off of the bus, then I’ll bring her home and watch her myself!”

“Dun-dun-dun-duhhhhnn!” Lewis imitates scary movie music.

“Come on. How hard could it be?” I wave away his warning. “This is my chance to prove once and for all how responsible and careful I am. Then I won’t have to be the only Holmsbury sixth-grader in the entire history of the Fair who has to stay with his parents on Fair Friday!”

“Well,” Lewis says, “the Fair does start tomorrow. This might be your best shot.”

“I’m going to do everything right,” I tell him. “Until my mom gets home, I’ll be so nice to Penny it’ll be revolting!”

Lewis raises his eyebrows in my general direction.

“Okay, Penny. I’ll be nice to Penny. I’ll even be nice to Andrew or Lou-Ann, if they come over to play with her.” Now that I’ve said that, I’m hoping it won’t be Andrew because being nice probably includes staying in the same room with him for more than three minutes. Which I usually don’t, since he’s a complete hazard.

“I need to fortify myself,” I say. “Let’s test pie.”

I stand on tiptoe and reach way back to slide today’s practice pie from the top of the fridge. I have to be careful

because it's a mile-high lemon meringue baked in our big blue pie dish. I turn around with the heavy dish balanced in my hands and almost hit the camera as Lewis zooms in for a close-up. "Whoa," I say. The topping shivers.



"On looks, I'd call that one a masterpiece," Lewis declares. "White and shiny, with perfect swirls of tan."

When I slice through the meringue topping with the pie cutter, it stays in a firm but airy mound. Way to go, Dad, I think. I cut two huge wedges, leaving a big empty space in the pie dish.

"And...cut," Lewis says. He pours us milks.

I deliver each forkful to my mouth with my eyes closed because I don't want to mix any other senses in with the tasting. I am hugely happy that these molecules and atoms and electrons and quarks lined up to be this particular lemon meringue pie.

"This one is the winner," Lewis says reverently. "Your dad is the king of pie."

"You said that after you tasted the triple-berry pie, the apple crumb pie, and the chocolate pecan pie."

"I know."

"And you said it after the sour cherry pie and the pumpkin cream pie, too," I remind him.

“All true,” he says. “But this time I mean it even more.”

“Ung gno,” I say, which is “I know” with my mouth full. Lewis is right. This pie is absolutely the best.

I hear a rumbling sound coming from up the street. The kitchen clock says four twenty-five.

“The bus!”

I launch myself away from the table and scabble at the kitchen door lock, then blast outside. Cooper dives through my legs and I trip down our front steps on top of him. As I’m untangling myself, four kids fan down the steps of the bus in a mathematically impossible number of directions. None of them is my sister. The driver leans on the horn. I brush my hands on my pants and sprint up the street. Things are still basically under control. As I run by, Andrew’s mother waves from her front door.

“I’m all set!” I shout to her. “We’ll be at home.”

When I get to the bus, Penelope whips a flat purple and green cardboard ring out of the open door so it hits me square between the eyes.

“We made Frisbees in art,” she says, marching down the steps. “Mine flies perfectly straight.” She looks behind me at Lewis. “Did you get that on the movie? Want me to do it again?”

“No, he doesn’t,” I say.

Cooper, who is not supposed to be out on the street without a leash, picks that moment to chase a squirrel under the bus.

“Get your dog, kid,” the driver says.

“C’mon, Coop, c’mon boy,” I coax. I can see his yellow tail but he’s sensitive about it so I don’t pull him out that way. So far, things are not going quite as smoothly as I’d hoped.

“Hey, Coop,” Lewis calls. He leans down and points his camera under the bus.

When Cooper turns around to lick the camera, I grab him by the collar and haul him out.

“Where’s Mom?” Penny asks. She’s standing on the sidewalk, too close to the open bus door. The driver wants to get going and my sister is sort of in the way, so I nudge her away from the bus.

“Mom’s at a meeting,” I say. “She’s going to be late, so she left me in charge.” I present this information in a no-big-deal kind of voice.

“You can’t be in charge,” Penny says in her louder-than-necessary six-year-old voice. “You’re not allowed to be in charge because you’re not old enough. You’re not very much older than me.”

“YES I AM,” I say in an even louder, getting-exasperated voice. “Right now I’m almost twice as old as you.”

Lewis, who is trying to look out for my best interest, gives me a shove.

I take a deep breath. “I mean,” I say, starting again, “Mom called and asked me to get you at the bus because she is going to be a little late.”

“You are late,” Penny tells me.

“Dad left us pie,” I say, changing the subject.

“What kind?”

“Lemon meringue.”

“I love lemon meringue pie.” Andrew appears out of nowhere, giving me a heart attack as usual. He’s home-schooled, so he doesn’t keep regular hours.

“Want to come over?” Penny asks Andrew.

“Yes.” He bobs his head up and down.

Penny looks at me. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Mom always holds my hand on the way back from the bus.” She sticks her Frisbee flinger out and waits.

Holmsbury Fair Friday has always been the best day of the year. If I prove to my parents I’m responsible enough to be on my own, tomorrow will be the best day of my entire life. But if I’m the only sixth-grader in town who still has to stay with his parents, tomorrow will be the worst Fair Friday ever. So I take Penny’s hand and Lewis takes Cooper’s collar and Andrew continues to move in his little parallel universe and we walk home.

I cut pieces of pie for Penny and Andrew and Lewis pours them milks. I have to give a clean fork to Andrew after he drops his on the floor. Then the other member of the six-year-old Pest Pack shows up, so I give Lou-Ann her piece of pie, and Andrew slips his plate in there and mixes me up, so he gets seconds.

“That’s it,” I say when Andrew holds up his plate for the third time. “This last piece is for my mom.”

“She’s gonna love it,” Lewis says. His camera lingers on the last slice of pie.

I make a big tent of foil over the whole pie dish so my mom will get the full effect of the mile-high meringue and I put it back on top of the refrigerator. I notice Lou-Ann craning her neck to try and see.

“Off limits,” I tell her.

She watches everything but never talks, which is a little eerie. The phone rings.

“Phone!” Andrew calls out helpfully.

Mom has told me to let the call go to voice mail and listen first if I’m ever home alone, so I don’t answer yet.

“Miller has to listen to the message so he knows who it is,” Penelope informs the other first-graders at our kitchen table. “He’s not much older than we are.”

I grit my teeth and glare at the wall.

“He’s just being careful,” Lewis explains. “Careful and responsible.”

The phone rings again.

“How old are you, exactly?” Andrew wants to know.

I take a deep breath. Or four. “Why don’t you all go out in the backyard,” I tell them. “Play tag with Coop or something.”

Cooper’s a great chase dog, so the Pest Pack tumbles out the back door, leaving their dishes and forks all over the

table. Lewis films them on the way out, and I clean up while the phone rings a third and a fourth time and finally goes to voice mail. I wait while the caller listens to the outgoing message and I hear silence. Then I hear, “Miller? Miller? It’s Mom. Are you there?”

There is a hint of worry in her voice, which is no surprise since my mom has perfected worrying into its own branch of science. I pick up the phone. I’ll be happy to reassure her that there is nothing for her to worry about. Nothing at all. I didn’t go to Andrew’s house, but I have done everything else that needs to be done. I am being super-responsible and trustworthy, too.

“Hi, Mom. Everything’s great. I got Pain—um—Penny off the bus, and Lewis is here with me and everyone had a snack and now they’re playing in the backyard.”

“I called Andrew’s mother first,” Mom says. “She told me you were at our house. Are you sure you’re doing okay with all of the kids over there?”

“Yes, Mom. Everything’s fine.” I nod at Lewis to show him my plan is working.

I hear other people’s voices in the background. Mom says something I don’t understand.

“What did you say, Mom?” I ask.

I hear mumbling and realize that she’s got her hand over the phone and is talking to someone in her office, not to me. She works with teenagers who need all kinds of help, which keeps her pretty busy. The teenagers give her many

ideas for things to worry about, but she's really good at it. Her job, I mean. *And* worrying.

I want to show her she doesn't have to worry about things here. "Mom? I filled Cooper's water bowl and now I'm cleaning up the snack dishes."

"Yes, okay, honey. Please be sure to call Andrew's mom if you need anything. I'm just about to head home. We'll need to make a new plan for tomorrow."

My heart does a flutter flip. I motion frantically to Lewis, hit speakerphone, and hold the receiver out between us.

"Great!" I say. "I have an idea for the plan—"

"Did you get my message about the pie?" Mom interrupts me. Which she usually doesn't.

"Yeah, and I saved—"

"So you saw Dad's note?"

Note? "I didn't—"

"We'll take care of it at the fairgrounds," Mom says. "I'm on my way. Thanks for being so responsible, Miller."

Click.

"Take care of what?" I hang up the phone.

"What note?" Lewis asks.

"I didn't see any note." I look around the kitchen. "Maybe it's up here." I pat around on top of the refrigerator, but I don't feel anything. I pull a chair over and climb up. "There it is." I see a piece of paper with a line of tape dangling from it, and I reach way back behind the blue dish to get it. "It must have fallen off of the pie. Hey, did you hear my mom call me *responsible*?"

I climb down and read my Dad's note out loud to Lewis's camera:

DEAR MILLER,

NO TIME TO COME HOME LATER AND
BAKE ANOTHER ONE LIKE I PLANNED,
SO THIS PIE'S GOT TO BE THE WINNER!
PLEASE PUT FOIL OVER IT AND BRING IT
TO THE BAKING BOOTH TONIGHT WHEN
YOU GUYS COME OVER. AND GRAB THE
ENTRY FORM TOO. THANKS!

LOVE, DAD

The generous slice of pie I ate is now a chunk of lead in my stomach. I drag my eyes over to the side of the refrigerator where my dad's Fair entry form has been all week, stuck on with a magnet. On the line that says "Variety"—the line that has been blank all week—he has written in "Lemon Meringue."

"And...cut." Lewis lowers the camera.

I stare at the foil-covered dish on top of the refrigerator. I gulp. "I'll probably have to stay with my parents at the Fair until I'm a hundred," I tell Lewis.