

*THE
YEAR
WE
FELL
FROM
SPACE*

AMY SARIG KING



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Chapter 1 – Pretend Pie

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Mom’s scribbling numbers again. The kitchen table is full of papers. Bills, booklets, yellow legal tablets. She’s got the look of concentration, which can look like she’s angry, but she’s not.

Mom’s always been a great communicator. She talks to the bill people on the phone as if she’s known them for years—remembers their names, laughs, and cracks jokes. Jilly has picked up her signature closing—that part where the bill person asks if they can do anything else for you.

“Can you buy yourself a pie on the way home from work and pretend I made it for you?”

I’ve heard her say this a hundred times since I was little.

Jilly says it, too, but she doesn’t have to pay bills or talk on the phone. She just says it to people working behind fast food counters and that guy at the car wash once. They always laugh because Jilly is funny.

Was. Jilly *was* funny.

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I’m doing my usual thing for a Friday after school. No homework, I’m looking forward to a weekend of making new constellations. Since Mom’s been taking up the kitchen table

for two months with her divorce action station, I lay my newest star map out on the coffee table in the living room.

I have most of the stars drawn in, but no lines yet. I only connect the dots once the map is done. Making the new constellations is the most important part. The stars are always the same, but the lines and shapes change depending on how I'm feeling and what the sky is trying to tell me, which is why it's important for me to draw the maps. Sometimes I don't know how I'm feeling. The stars help me figure it out.

"I want to play a game or something," Jilly says. She's standing at the bottom of the stairs holding the stuffed tiger she hasn't let out of her sight for sixty-three days.

I look at my map and she stands there staring at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Are you going to play or what?"

I look at the clock on the wall. It's two hours until sundown. "Want to go outside?" I ask.

"No."

"Come on. It's finally spring. You can't stay cooped up in here forever," I say.

I look back at my map. Stars everywhere—big dots and little dots. I'm starting to see new shapes and I need time to figure out what they are.

Mom says, "Girls, I'm on the phone, okay?" Mom looks at me and crinkles her forehead. It's a signal. She moves her head toward the back door. Another signal.

As if it's my responsibility to get Jilly out of the house.

I roll up my map and put it on the top bookshelf.

“I’ll race you to the stream,” I whisper. “Put your shoes on.”

“No,” Jilly says. She’s clutching her tiger so hard now, I’m afraid his stuffing will bust out.

I know not to fight her on this. I know what happens.

I grab a deck of cards from the shelf and take her up to my room.

I live in the attic now. Biggest room in the house. A little cold in the winter and a little hot in the summer, but who cares because it’s the closest room to the stars.

Chapter 2 – Exciting Exceptions

Three hands of cards later, Jilly and I are at the kitchen table and Mom is dishing out Chinese food. Her paperwork is all stacked up on the windowsill where it will stay for the weekend.

The three of us share the lo mein and Mom and I share her spicy chicken because Jilly hates spicy things. She loves those thick noodles, though, and she slurps them up and makes us laugh. Or she used to. Now she just rolls them around her fork and eats them like this is some sort of business meeting.

Mom slurps her noodle and makes us laugh, but Jilly still won't slurp.

“How's your new map coming?” Mom asks.

“Good,” I say.

“Connecting anything yet?”

“I see a few things. A rocking horse. A basketball court. A tiger.” These aren't the things I see, but I say it anyway because weekends and take-out food are kinda sacred around here now.

“A tiger? Like mine?” Jilly points to her tiger, who is sitting on the windowsill guarding Mom's paperwork.

“Nah. I just said that so you'd look happy,” I say.

Jilly stops looking happy.

Mom makes that face with her lips tight in a half smile, like she's saying *shucks* or a more grown-up version of it.

"Jilly and I are going to watch *The Wizard of Oz* tonight," Mom says.

"I'm going up to the hill," I say.

It's been cloudy or raining for three days. Atmospheric interference. It's when clouds get between me and the most important project of the twenty-first century.

I'm not bragging. And I'm not being dramatic. I'm serious.

I'm Liberty Johansen and I'm going to change the way people look at the night sky. I'm going to free them of old-constellation rules and teach them how to draw their own maps because the sky is trying to tell them something . . . only they don't know it yet because I'm a sixth grader and nobody ever listens to sixth graders who say they're going to do big things. But I'm an exception.

We're a family of exceptions.

I'm going to change the way the world looks at the stars even though I'm a girl and I live in a time where people laugh at science and girls and anything else that makes sense.

Jilly is a girl who has stopped going outside and who, at age nine, carries a stuffed tiger with her everywhere even though she's too old to do that.

And Mom is happier since Dad moved out even though everyone thinks she should be sad and lonely.

Exceptions are a lot more exciting than rules.

When I look up at the stars, I don't try to find constellations or boring old stuff like that. I see patterns. I see pictures. I see possibilities.

For example, if you take the dots on my map and compare them to a map of our town, we live on Polaris. We always point north and we help sailors and adventurers and lost hikers find their way. That's our job as Polaris. The North Star. Always right. Always consistent. Always asking you to buy a pie and pretend we made it for you.

Dad lives on Porter Drive now, which is about two miles from here. There isn't a star marking his new house. It's just all black sky. No pretend pie. No helping anyone find their way.