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*Opportunity
Knocks*



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Chapter One

Lately it feels like everyone has found their *thing*. I guess I was absent the day I was supposed to do that.

I miss kindergarten. I was really good at being five. Was that my best year? I mean, is that when I reached my peak? Now that I'm in middle school, it seems to me that everyone has figured out who they're going to be and what they're going to be great at. I haven't found my *thing* yet, but whatever it is, I hope I find it soon.

I tried joining robotics club, but every time I got near a soldering iron . . . well, let's just say I'm glad the fire extinguisher was nearby.

I tried out for the school play, but I forgot my lines

during my audition. I was offered the role of a tree. But that would have meant I would be the only tree onstage—as everyone else who auditioned got a part with lines. I thought that wasn't the best use of my time. Chess club was a little too quiet. Debate club was a little too loud. I tried out for soccer because my best friend, Melanie Choi, is a star on the team, but it wasn't for me. There was a lot of running involved . . . while having to do other stuff at the same time as the running.

But there was one school activity that I knew everyone who wanted to participate in could. And that's where I find myself now.

“Lila?” Mr. Hernandez says from the front of the band room.

“Yes?” I ask. I glance at my fellow bandmates seated behind their instruments. It feels nice to be a part of a group, even if it is a small one.

“You're the big finish,” Mr. Hernandez reminds me.

“Oh! Right. Sorry,” I say. I do my part in band practice. I hit the triangle. Mr. Hernandez says I can work my way up to a more complicated instrument when I feel ready.

“Thank you. Please, don’t forget your cue next time,” he says warmly.

The other eight kids in band don’t laugh because they aren’t so hot at their instruments either. Well, except for Carolina. She’s really good at piano, but she plays outside school at fancy recitals. She’s very nice about it, but if I were as good at piano as she was, I’d play all the time and let everyone know it was me playing. *Did you hear that Chopin down the hall? The music that made your heart swell? Yeah, that was me! I know! I’m so good!*

“If there is a next time,” Jimmy says under his breath. I think he’s always in a gloomy mood because of what he plays. He sees himself as a drums guy, but his parents got him an oboe.

“What does that mean, if there’s a next time?” Carolina asks.

Mr. Hernandez lets out a sigh. It’s the kind of sigh teachers make when it’s the end of the week before spring vacation and nobody pays attention in class anymore.

“I was holding off on letting everyone know until later in the semester,” Mr. Hernandez says, “but band may be coming to an end.”

“What?” Veronica on flute says. “What about our concert?”

“The concert will still happen,” Mr. Hernandez says. “However, due to budget cuts and lack of interest, the school is considering dropping the music program next year.”

Just when I was finally getting the hang of the triangle! I feel like my dings are really making an impact!

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” I ask.

“We’ll figure something out,” Mr. Hernandez says, but he’s making that face grown-ups make when they don’t know what to do.



My best friend, Melanie, runs up to me from the soccer field sideline. Her face is sweaty and her black hair is up in a ponytail with a white ribbon in it. I don’t tell her, but I’m always envious she gets to wear it on game days with her teammates. I have black hair too, but I still haven’t figured out how to *embrace my curls* like my mom says I will.

“Great game,” I say.

“We lost,” she says with a disappointed chuckle.

“Yeah, but you scored two goals!” If I ever scored a goal, I wouldn’t be able to stop talking about it! “That’s a big deal! Everyone was cheering.”

She shrugs. “It takes a team to win,” Melanie says. “I should have passed more.” She’s always hard on herself when it comes to sports. I wish I could say something that would change that for her. “We’ll be ready next time. Thanks for coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say, and she smiles. We’ve been best friends since kindergarten. (As I said, my best year.) “You ready to walk home?”

She looks over her shoulder at her teammates. They’re eating orange slices and joking around with one another.

“We’re all going for pizza with Coach. Want to come? I bet you could!”

“Oh. No, that’s okay,” I say. I didn’t play a tough game. Pizza is for the team. I’m not on any team. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

“Definitely,” Melanie says, swooping in for a hug. “Sorry, I forgot I’m kind of sweaty.” She laughs as she backs away.

“It’s okay,” I say. I didn’t feel any sweat, but she did play

a hard game, and I can see sweat on the bridge of her nose and on her temples.

“See you tomorrow!” she says and then jogs back to her teammates. One of the players gives Melanie a distinct handshake with fist bumps and snaps involved. I walk home alone, thinking about how Melanie and I don’t have a secret handshake like that.



“Lila joon, you haven’t touched your dinner,” Mom says at our kitchen table.

“It’s delicious . . . if I do say so myself,” Dad adds. He always feels proud when he makes dolmeh. I put my fork into the grape leaf and bite into the rice so they don’t worry. Despite my lack of appetite, it’s still warm and tasty.

“Did something happen at school?” Mom asks. She can always tell when I’m upset. Mom tries to help, but sometimes she doesn’t know the right thing to say. At least she tries, and she always gives me a kiss on my cheek when I’m feeling down.

“Mr. Hernandez says the school might be cutting band,” I say.

“How can that be?” Mom asks.

“I bet it’s because of the construction of the new gym,” Dad says, shaking his head. “You know, it might not be a bad idea to try out for basketball next season.” I play for fun with my dad and our family watches a lot of basketball on TV, but I don’t know if I’m good enough to be on our school’s team.

“I like band,” I say. Which is partly true. I mean, I am happy to be there, but the group hasn’t really warmed up to me yet. We don’t have secret handshakes, like Melanie’s soccer crew. But it feels like it’s only a matter of time! I’ve wanted a *thing* to be a part of for so long. Now that I finally found one, it’s being taken away.

“Of course you like band,” my older sister, Parisa, says. “All you have to do is hit the triangle.”

“Parisa, I don’t care for your tone,” Mom says.

“I’m sorry but the triangle isn’t an instrument!” Parisa says, cutting up her food into tiny pieces. “It’s a tool to let people know when meals are ready on a ranch. Why don’t you try playing something cooler while you still can?”

That’s easy for her to say. My sister is a sophomore in

high school. She gets lots of trophies for all the things she's involved in. And they aren't even participation trophies! She wins stuff all the time and I'm reminded of it in every room of the house. We're running out of space for Parisa's accomplishments. The other day, I found a volleyball trophy in the bathroom medicine cabinet. I didn't even know she played volleyball.

"I could see you rocking out with an electric guitar," Dad says to me with a gleam in his eye. He had that same gleam when Parisa told him she wanted to study premed at college. I don't know how she's already found the *thing* she wants to do for the rest of her life. Maybe when you're great at everything, it's easier to choose.

"I don't know if I'd be any good at it," I say. Then I shove a whole stuffed grape leaf in my mouth.

"You'll never know unless you try," Parisa says. "Do you think I would have won those concert tickets if I didn't call into the radio station?"

A year ago, my sister won backstage passes to Pop Fest 3000 and didn't take me. I'm still upset about that, but she never noticed.

"You got lucky," I say in between chews.

“Winners don’t need luck,” Parisa says, leaning forward in her chair. “Winners take a chance on themselves because they believe in themselves. Your trouble is you don’t think like a winner.”

“Life isn’t all about *winning*,” Mom says. “I think what your sister is trying to say is that if you like music, we’ll help you figure out ways to keep the band going.”

I don’t know what *thinking like a winner* means, but maybe I could try to find a way to raise money to save the band. Then I could figure out what I’m meant to be great at.