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Opening extract from

Finding A Voice

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CHAPTER ONE

One, two, three, four. I started counting the steps as soon as my feet left the drive. At first, walking so quickly I could barely keep count, but counting nonetheless. Pouring all of my consciousness into keeping count, blocking any other thought out. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Opening one finger at a time when I got into the two-syllable numbers to make sure I didn't lose track of how many steps I had taken.

Keeping count was a kind of habit for me now; each step took me further from my house, where I couldn't control the chaos, to my place of safety. On the days when I couldn't cope anymore, I could literally count on this measured trek to bring me to the place where I could let go – if only for a short while.

One hundred and sixty-five, one hundred and sixty-six. I knew that by the time I reached two hundred the path veering off the right shoulder of the lane would be in sight and the feeling of suffocation would start to give way to great gulping breaths as I started to breathe properly again, feeling the dizzying rush of air that followed depriving my body of oxygen. When I reached the path I knew I would be okay, and I slowed down, relieved that I was far enough from home to begin to let in feelings.

Two hundred and ninety, two hundred and ninety-one. Sometimes, when I entered the cool quiet of the trees it was enough to know that I was going to my safe place and I'd feel only relief, or maybe a little sadness. A few silent tears would be all that I needed to let go – here where I didn't need to be strong for anyone. I would feel the great spruce trees taking my sadness to their tips and as I walked I could stop counting, and let the trees slowly fill me up with the strength of their lifetimes of surety. On these days the walking was enough.

But today was not one of those days. Today was one of the especially bad ones. Today was one of the days that smashed every good day that had come before it and, just for good measure, stomped on all hope for any good days to come. Today I needed to keep counting; I didn't feel it was safe to let in any feelings yet.

Just for a couple of hours, I had let myself forget to worry. It had started with science class. We had started biology, and today was the first day of dissections. I shared a desk with a girl who had smiled warmly at me for the last six weeks that we had perched side by side on our lab stools. Sarah, her name was. And until today I had known little more about her. I knew she had to have come from either Cedarside Elementary or Blue River, or maybe even was new to the town. In fact, I suspected that she must be entirely new, because she didn't seem to know anyone else in the science class, and yet she seemed really nice, and, well, normal, even popular material. She had a pencil case that I quite envied, and a whole host of gel pens that she took tidy notes with in some sort of system of colour coding.

Even though she smiled at me each time we arrived to science class, we hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other before. Until now the class had consisted of review, which meant a whole lot of looking up at the white board, while the teacher wrote up facts and displayed diagrams, scattering questions in between that a few students keen to impress early in the year dutifully answered with raised hands. Both

Sarah and I had kept to the background, only answering questions if we had to, even though we usually got them right.

These review lessons had typically been followed by eyes-to-the-paper worksheets, again not offering much opportunity to chat at all. Not that I was used to idle chat with my classmates. I didn't expect anyone to want to talk to me anymore.

On the first day of middle school I'd walked into my first class early and sat in the middle row, ready to talk to the first kid who sat by me. Surely there would be new kids, ones who wouldn't know that most people had avoided me in elementary school. But it seemed everyone who came in after me came in a group. They sat together, talking about the fun things they'd done in the summer. Not one person had looked at me. After that I arrived to classes just before the last bell.

So I was sort of pleased with how comfortable Sarah seemed to be with me. It was okay that we didn't talk much.

But today had been the beginning of the dissection unit. Everyone in the science class seemed to be anticipating ghoulish autopsy, and so there was almost a carnival atmosphere in the grade 8, block H science class. Notebooks were away while pairs of stool-perchers jostled each other to collect the unfamiliar tools of dissection: tray filled with scarred black wax, silver scalpel, six chunky pins, a dentist-type probe. And then the teacher came around with a jar of medicinal-smelling eyeballs, plunking one into each wax tray, imploring everyone at the same time to '*please people, do not touch your eye until I have passed them all out and given further instructions.*'

Even I caught the spirit of the class when one of the boys' unheeding pokes to his eyeball sent it soaring into the right ear of the girl sitting ahead of him. The excitement in the class erupted, with everyone roaring with laughter. I had to hold my ribs to stop the stitch that developed from laughing so much.

Sarah's polite friendliness cracked open, revealing her talkative, witty interior. And I just got caught up in it.

'Where do you think they get these eyeballs from? Do you think there's a farm of blind sheep somewhere, all in the name of teaching us dissection?' Sarah questioned me.

'For sure!' I responded. 'But that's not all. They use the sheep to teach the guide dogs too.'

For the first time in a long time I felt like a normal kid, one who might look forward to what she was doing on the weekend rather than worrying about what she might have to face when she got home.

This was exactly what I had hoped for in starting middle school.

Mom had even taken me shopping for new clothes the week before school started. I'd been a bit worried about spending the money, so I'd suggested going to the bargain shop, thinking I could at least find some generic t-shirts and jeans that would pass as cool enough.

'For middle school! They'll crucify you if you show up in the wrong gear!" she'd surprised me by saying. 'No, we have to go to the mall.'

What could I say? Sometimes Mom's impulsiveness was a good thing.

'Look, Jo! Perfect for the first disco!' she'd say, holding up something a granny would wear, just to make me laugh. Then she'd ask me to pick something and I would try to sneak a look at the price tags before taking something from the hanger. In the end she went down the racks tearing off the price tags so that I had to pick stuff I liked, no matter how much it cost. And even when she rolled her eyes at my choices, she let me buy what I wanted.

I looked down at the cool top and jeans I had on now. I liked them, but clothes hadn't been an instant fix. It had been nearly three weeks since school started and not much had changed from elementary. I was still mostly ignored, and occasionally whispered about.

Sarah nudged me with the end of her metallic silver pen.

'What do you think of James there?' she pointed to a boy two rows ahead of us. 'I think he is adorable in a sort of puppy-dog cute way. He's a bit short now, but give him half a year – he'll be gorgeous.'

'I suppose,' I said, surveying the room and picking out another boy before whispering to her, 'Don't you think he looks more interesting in a I-am-profound-and-mysterious sort of way?'

Sarah wrinkled her nose, and I was almost afraid I had ruined it by saying something weird until she grinned.

'There won't be any problem with us liking the same boys, Jo!'

Usually when someone was this nice to me I would be wondering if she was talking to me just to see if I mentioned something about what it was like to have a crazy mother. Or I would start to get worried that someone might mention a hangout in town or a band that I didn't know about, because outside of school, I never talked to anyone and sure never went anywhere. But with Sarah I didn't think to worry, for some reason.

By the time the bell rang, I was pretty sure we were starting to be friends. She might even wave to me if we passed each other in the halls.

And then, wonder of wonders, Sarah stopped me before I left with, 'Hey, why don't you come over to my house this afternoon?'

I didn't want to let go of this feeling of fitting in. I was afraid it might be gone tomorrow, so I said yes. This was middle school now. This was my new start. Before the school year began hadn't I fervently sent wishes and prayers on the wings of a few religions along this very theme? '*Please let my new haircut and definitely-in-style jeans make people forget they thought I was weird last year!' 'Please let me meet new kids who know nothing about me!*' And mostly, '*Please help me learn to be normal!'*

So I had gladly followed Sarah to her mother's silver four-door sedan when the final bell rang. It had seemed the most natural thing in the world to sink into the grey leather rear seat and click the seat belt into place; assuring Sarah's mother that I would of course ring my mom this instant to ask whether it was okay to go to Sarah's until five. And it had even felt almost normal to be ringing Mom on the cell phone that I hardly ever used, to ask just that. The twinge of relief when her phone went to voicemail should have given me the first reminder that there was a reason I never went to other people's houses. But it didn't.

And even two hours later, when I was walking up the steps to my house after being dropped off by Sarah's mom, I felt like skipping I was so happy. It had been a glorious afternoon of sampling Sarah's music, flipping through magazines and munching Doritos. The only conflict was when Sarah threw a shoe at her younger brother to chase him out of her room. All was lightness and smiles. Today it had seemed so easy to replace six years of craziness with one afternoon of normalness.

Until I walked in the door of course.

Five hundred and four, five hundred and five, five hundred and six. If I stopped counting I wouldn't make it. Fear and rage and the hint of something more sinister – losing control – coursed through me. And so I walked more quickly, shoving my closed fists into my coat pockets and shoving any feelings away with my metronome of counting.

Shove as I might, the reality of today was too raw to ignore. As soon as I opened the front door I knew that I had made a mistake in not coming straight home as I usually did. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table in the chair directly facing the side door that I always used to come in. We both used it; not only because our shoes and coats lined the wall beside the door, but because we somehow had lost the only front door key ages ago and hadn't bothered to change the lock.

So it was obvious that Mom had chosen that seat to have the most impact. And it worked.

Dominating her face was a wide smile, almost frozen in its rigidity. If her face was a snapshot framed and on the wall the smile might have been judged as warm or happy. In real life, her continuing to smile without altering one muscle in her face through the several seconds it took me to hang up my coat set warning bells ringing. She was sitting, legs crossed properly, dressed in an A-line skirt with red pumps and a matching red blouse. Her hair was neatly secured back. And she was flipping very casually through a recipe book.

'Hello, sweetie pie.' Not a pet name my mother ever used. She didn't tend to use pet names at all, but when she did they were always some esoteric comparison to a wild animal that she threw out without explanation, usually not more than once. The last one, some weeks ago, had been 'dog shark' when I got up from the sofa to head to bed – as in, 'Go on, my little dog shark. See you tomorrow.' While I wasn't usually sure what Mom's names made reference to, they were never sentimental – and never mainstream. So 'sweetie pie' was the second clue that this afternoon was not going to be an easy one.

'Hi, Mom.'

One mode of survival was to simply pretend everything was normal. In fact, it would look pretty normal to someone who didn't know my mom.

'Where's your new friend, Jo? I thought you might bring her for dinner?' The smile had not wavered. Her tone was unnervingly light. 'I'm just looking through this recipe book now. I'm sorry that dinner isn't in the oven yet, but usually I don't cook. Accidents can happen to me!' Laughing slightly, Mom held up both her wrists that were crisscrossed with raised, curved scars.

I took a deep breath and came to sit beside her, taking one of her hands as I did so. I could do this; I could bring this afternoon back to manageable. Over the years I had learned the tricks that could calm Mom's anxieties and make the world just right enough for her to cope. I only had to stay calm and pick the right trick.

'Can I make us some pancakes? And those good sausages that are in the freezer.'

If she would take this lifeline, this assurance that all was still well in our small world, then I was sure that we could manoeuvre through the evening.

'But I've found this recipe for Asian chicken. Here, see, page 173, look, see? A proper mother cooks dinners like Asian chicken.' She was up and in the kitchen, opening cupboards, taking out pans, assembling various ingredients, as if she did this on a regular basis. And my heart sank; literally it felt as if my heart was falling into my stomach. Because this was new, and I didn't know how to counter it, to bring Mom back to apathetic depression where we both knew how to interact and get through each day. This meant that I had crossed some imaginary line of 'what sent Mom over the edge'. All that I could do now was to play along with it, irrationally hoping that she truly was trying to be a 'normal' mother, but knowing at my core that this was going nowhere good.

'I have some English homework,' I tried desperately. 'It's an essay on *The Lord of the Flies*. After dinner can you help me pick which topic to write on?' There was no response to this and now Mom was humming some indecipherable song. So I did indeed take some homework out of my backpack and begin to

half-heartedly finish off the math assignment I had started in class earlier in the day. I tried to ignore the fact that frozen chicken, straight from the freezer, had been covered in oil and been left to somehow cook in the fry pan while Mom went about attacking a pepper on the chopping block. Despite the unorthodoxy of her cooking methods, it did seem that she had a plan, and so maybe this might be a good thing. I couldn't remember the last time Mom had cooked anything more complicated than beans on toast. *Maybe this was both of our new starts,* I tried to tell myself, fervently willing myself to believe it. I put my head down and settled into completing my math in all seriousness.

The song Mom hummed became progressively louder, until I knew the song and she began to sing short refrains of *Sweet Child o' Mine* at the top of her voice. There was more chopping and more cupboards opening, but unfortunately no chicken-turning. The chicken, frozen as it was, began to burn, but I didn't know whether to intervene or let her continue to play her adopted part of domestic parent. I felt the familiar tension creep up my spine, the tension that sent my body into flight mode when I no longer could predict what would happen next.

That was the worst. The depression was comfortable at this point. The crying and imagined illnesses were exhausting, but familiar. The curses and hurled put-downs hurt my soul, but I was tough enough to heal. Even the euphoric happiness that inevitably led to a sudden plummet into darkness was bearable. But this, this knife-edge of control that Mom occasionally found – whether it was in silence, or feigned camaraderie – could only be devastating.

The chicken began to burn in earnest, and still she focused on chopping and humming.

'Mom?' I tried hesitantly. 'I think the chicken is ready.'

Wham!!! The frying pan, chicken first, flew across the room with such velocity it seemed someone twice Mom's size had thrown it. I jumped up, even before the pan hit the wall opposite me, and instinctively edged to the door.

'Where were you!!' she hurled the words as an accusation, definitely not a question. 'I can't handle the worry! You *know* I can't handle the worry!'

And I was out the side door. Out the door, counting the steps. Mom could survive this fleeing. She would know that I would be back, calm enough for both of us. But though I couldn't process much in my flight mode, I did understand that she couldn't survive a normal adolescent after-school visit to a friend's house. What had I been thinking? Who knows what she was up to now, and it was all my fault.

Eight hundred and ten, eight hundred and eleven. I reached the river, high with the recent rains. And now I stopped counting, skirting the river bank, making my way up the kilometre or so until I reached the sandbank that was my front garden when the weather was good. Behind this was a little glen, enclosed with dense cedar trees, but open in the middle. A little oasis that nobody else seemed to know about. But the best part of all was the little log cabin on the far side of the opening. It was barely big enough to even count as more than a shed, and it was mostly falling down. But it was my haven. And there, entering the door and not even making it to one of the ancient chairs, I collapsed, letting out great heaving sobs in the only place in the world where I could.