RENÉE WATSON

WAYS TO MAKE SUNSHINE

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BLOOMSBURY

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1

THE GIRL WHO COULD BE KING

I AM A GIRL with a name that a lot of boys have. So when the substitute teacher takes roll and calls out, "Ryan?" she looks surprised when I answer. I wish Ms. Colby were here. Ms. Colby doesn't even need to take roll anymore because it is the first day of March and she's been teaching us for six months, so she can tell who is here and who is not just by looking across the room. Ms. Colby always starts the day off with our Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down/Somewhere-in-the-Middle Check-In. This substitute teacher doesn't do any of that and so I don't get to show my thumbs-up for making perfect scrambled eggs and toast this morning.

I wonder why Ms. Colby didn't leave a note for the sub with a list of do's and don'ts. Like *don't* call DeVonté, DeVonté—call him D. And *don't* look so shocked when a girl raises her hand when you call out for Ryan.

"Here," I say.

"Ryan Hart?" the substitute says. She looks at me like she is not sure I am who I say I am.

"Yes. My name is Ryan."

"Oh," she says, pushing up her too-big glasses.

Brandon, the boy sitting next to me, says, "She has a boy's name."

I roll my eyes at him because no one is talking to him and he needs to mind his own business. "I do not have a boy's name. I have *my* name. My name is Ryan and Ryan means 'king' and that means I am a leader—"

"Okay, ah, please settle down. Settle down," the substitute teacher says, mostly to me and not to Brandon, who thinks he knows it all. "Okay, Ryan Hart is here," she says to herself.

Then Brandon whispers, "And she spells her last name wrong." He laughs at his corny joke.

"I do not! My name is Ryan Hart and it's not heart like the muscle, it's H-A-R-T as in . . . as in *my* last name."

The substitute teacher walks over to my desk and says, "I need you to keep your voice down."

"I need Brandon to leave me alone!" I roll my eyes at Brandon again, extra roll this time, but then I remember what Mom always tells me, how she named me Ryan because she wanted me to feel powerful, to remember that I am a leader every time someone calls my name. Dad is always telling me our people come from royalty, that my ancestors lived in Africa and were kings and queens and inventors and hard workers. Mom tells me their strength is running through my veins.

I sit up straight, ignore Brandon, and try to be the leader I am supposed to be.

Mom and Dad tell me I will keep growing into my name. They say it to my brother, too. "Be who we

named you to be," they tell him whenever he is pulling my ponytail or grabbing food off my plate when I'm not looking.

My brother's name is Raymond. We call him Ray. His name means "protector" and Dad says he should be keeping me, his little sister, safe. But mostly he is just bossy and nosy and sometimes he treats me like I am a glass thing that could break. He is always telling me *you can't do this* and *you shouldn't be so that*. Maybe because I am two years younger than him, maybe because I am a girl. Maybe because he doesn't know the meaning of my name, how tough I really am.

Maybe he doesn't realize I can do and be anything.

When it's time to go outside for recess, Brandon, Marcus, and the boy with glasses who I never talk to are splashing around in the puddles and stomping in mud. Then they race each other up the monkey

bars. I walk over to join in on the climbing but before I can get there, the substitute teacher says to me, "Why don't you go over there, sweetheart?" and points to the swings and slide.

I'd rather stay here, pretending to climb a mountain, so I say, "No, thank you," and keep walking to the monkey bars. The substitute teacher follows me and that's when I realize that it wasn't a suggestion or question. It was a demand.

"I really think it'll be safer if you stay off the monkey bars. Besides, you and Brandon might need a break from each other."

"I'll stay out of Brandon's way," I say. "And I don't think it's dangerous. I play on them all the time. I bet I can even climb faster than those boys."

Just then, Brandon shouts out, "You can't beat me!" and he jumps down—showing off. "I bet you a pack of green apple Jolly Ranchers that you can't beat me. Let's race."

"Race?"

"Yeah, last one to that pole has to buy the winner

candy." He points to the tetherball pole across the playground.

I think about it. There's a small crowd forming and now I feel like I have to say yes, like I have to prove to the substitute teacher that I can play whatever I want, with whoever I want. "I don't like Jolly Ranchers," I tell Brandon. "When I win, you have to buy me a Twix."

I look over at KiKi, one of my best friends. She smiles and gives us our countdown. "On your mark . . . Get set . . . Go!"

I hear our friends all cheering but mostly I hear the sound of my breath huffing and puffing, in and out, in and out. My feet slap the pavement and I run as fast as I can. Brandon is beating me but not by much. I move my arms through the air, forcing myself to go faster. I catch up and then, just like I knew I could, I start running faster than Brandon. By a lot. I am winning. I am winning!

The pole is close and if I stretch my arm out far enough, I'll reach it. I run a few more steps and then,

when I go to put my right foot down, something happens. My right foot doesn't touch the pavement the way a running foot usually touches the pavement. Instead, it stumbles and hiccups its way to the cold ground.

I have fallen. Blood is trickling out of my knee and there's a stinging and pounding feeling all through my leg.

Instead of stopping the race and seeing if I am okay, Brandon runs right past me, tags the pole, and says, "Yes! Beat you. You owe me a pack of Jolly Ranchers."

"No fair," KiKi yells. "She was at the pole first. It's not her fault her shoe was untied."

I didn't even realize that's what happened. My shoe is untied. I tripped over my shoelace.

"Don't be a sore loser," Brandon says.

"He's right," I tell KiKi. "I never touched the pole."

Dad picks us up from school and the first thing he asks me is, "What happened to your jeans?" He looks

at the hole, then back at me. “It’s a long story,” I tell him. He doesn’t press me but I’m sure Mom will.

On the way home, I ask if we can stop at the corner store. When Dad says yes, I ask Ray, “Do you have two dollars?”

He answers, “Why?” and this means he has two dollars, he’s just not sure if he wants to give them to me.

I hold my hand out. “I’ll pay you back.”

He gives me two dollars and when we get to the corner store, I go straight to the candy aisle and buy a pack of green apple Jolly Ranchers for Brandon. And a Twix for me.

2

The Thing About Ice Cream

When Ray and I get home, I go straight to my room to change my jeans before Mom asks any questions. When I come back downstairs, Dad and Mom are setting out bowls and spoons on the dining room table. "Hope you had a great day at school," Mom says. "We thought we'd have a little treat," she tells us.

Dad brings two pints of ice cream out of the freezer and asks, "Which flavor should I open?"

Usually Mom and Dad only let us have ice cream for dessert but never, ever before dinner. I know something is up.

I am sitting across from Ray at the dining room table. I look at Ray, a little surprised, a little worried. "What's wrong, Dad?" Ray asks.

"Nothing's wrong," Dad says. "Which flavor?"

Ray only likes plain things (like steamed broccoli with no melted cheese and cheese pizza with no pepperoni, or mushrooms, or crunchy bell peppers). He doesn't have adventurous taste buds like I do, so of course he picks vanilla.

I like vanilla and chocolate and strawberry. I like dulce de leche and peppermint and cookies and cream. But most of all I love Tillamook's Marionberry Pie ice cream. The rich vanilla ice cream is mixed with fresh Oregon marionberries and big chunks of piecrust. I always eat it slow so it can last and last.

Why are we breaking our no-dessert-before-dinner rule?

"Chocolate, please," I say.

Ray shouts out "Family vote!" because he knows that Dad likes vanilla better than chocolate.

It's a tie—Dad and Ray for vanilla, Mom and me for chocolate. We usually settle ties with a round of rock-paper-scissors but instead I tell them, "It doesn't matter. Vanilla is fine."

Mom holds her hand out toward Dad to stop him from opening the pint of vanilla ice cream. "Are you sure, Ryan?"

"Vanilla is fine," I repeat. I mean, it's not that I don't like vanilla. It's just not my favorite. And really, I just want to get to the reason why we're breaking our no-dessert-before-dinner rule.

Dad scoops out ice cream for each of us and then it happens. Mom says, "So we wanted to have a little treat to celebrate some good news." She looks at Dad, passing the announcement on to him like she's tagging him in a game of chase.

"We are going to be moving to a new house," Dad says.

Then Mom adds, "We found a nice place that's not too far from here."

My bowl of ice cream sits in front of me. I haven't taken one bite.

Ray is eating his, but slowly now. Most of the time, Ray's ice cream barely starts to melt, he gobbles it so fast. "Why are we moving?" he asks.

"The landlord is selling this house, so we needed to find another place to live."

I ask Mom, "But why is he selling the house when he already has us living here?"

Mom touches my hand. "It's his house, sweetheart. He can sell it whenever he wants to."

"Why don't you just buy it from him since he's selling it? Can't he sell it to us?" I ask.

Ray says, "Ryan, we can't afford to buy a house. Dad isn't working anymore. Stop asking so many questions. They told us things might change."

"But Dad is going to get a new job, isn't he?" Dad worked at the post office for fifteen years. Six

months ago, his post office closed and he's been out of work ever since.

"Well, actually," Dad says, "I do have a new job. Which is another reason why we're celebrating. It's just that this new job pays less than my old job—"

"A lot less," Mom says.

"So we have to make some adjustments," Dad tells us.

This is nothing to celebrate.

I am trying really hard not to cry but I can't help it. I must look so pitiful sitting here in front of melting vanilla ice cream with tears streaming down my face. Ray doesn't even call me a crybaby, so I know I must look extra pitiful. Mom squeezes my hand. "It's okay to be sad. Change is scary."

Dad tries to make me feel better. "I think you'll like our new home, Ryan. You both will have your own rooms."

That's a good thing, I guess. I would love to have my own space and not just one side of a room. But still. This is the only house I've ever lived in. I don't

want to leave. “Will we still go to the same school?” I ask.

“Yes, you will still go to Vernon but instead of Dad dropping you off in the morning you two will be able to walk together.”

“Walk?” Ray asks.

“Yes, your mom and I are selling the second car, and now that we’re moving closer to your school, you two can walk. It’s only three blocks away,” Dad says. “I’ll be working the midnight shift, so I won’t be home in the morning anymore when you leave for school.”

I really like Dad driving us to school, how he lets us pick the song we want to hear and how we sing loud the whole ride, how he kisses both of us on the forehead—even Ray—before we go inside, how he tells us “Be who we named you to be” as we get out of the car.

Who will ask “Got your homework?” before I walk out of the house and who will I wave goodbye to when I get to the school door?