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Opening extract from

Counting by 7s

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Chapter 1

willow chance

A genius shoots at something no one else can see, and hits it.



We sit together outside the Fosters Freeze at a sea-green, metal picnic table.

All four of us.

We eat soft ice cream, which has been plunged into a vat of liquid chocolate (that then hardens into a crispy shell).

I don't tell anyone that what makes this work is wax. Or to be more accurate: edible, food-grade paraffin wax.

As the chocolate cools, it holds the vanilla goodness prisoner.

Our job is to set it free.

Ordinarily, I don't even eat ice-cream cones. And if I do, I obsess in such a precise way as to prevent even a drop of disorder.

But not today.

I'm in a public place.

I'm not even spying.

And my ice-cream cone is a big, drippy mess.

I'm right now someone that other people might find interesting to observe.

Why?

Well, first of all, I'm speaking Vietnamese, which is not my 'native tongue'.

I really like that expression because in general, I think people don't give this contracting muscle credit for how much work it does.

So thank you, tongue.

Sitting here, shaded from the afternoon sun, I'm using my Vietnamese whenever I can, which turns out to be often.

I'm talking to my new friend Mai, but even her always-surly and scary-because-he's-older big brother, Quang-ha, says a few words to me in their now only semi-secret language.

Dell Duke, who brought us here in his car, is quiet.

He does not speak Vietnamese.

I do not like to exclude people (I'm the one who is always excluded, so I know how *that* feels), but I'm okay with Mr Duke being an observer. He is a school counsellor and listening is a big part of counselling.

Or at least it should be.

Mai does the lion's share of the speaking and eating (I give her my cone once I've had enough), and all I know for certain, with the sun on our faces and the sweet ice

cream holding our attention, is that this is a day that I will never forget.

Seventeen minutes after our arrival, we are back in Dell Duke's car.

Mai wants to drive by Hagen Oaks, which is a park. Big geese live there year-round. She thinks I should see them.

Because she's two years older than me, she falls into that trap of thinking all little kids want to stare at something like fat ducks.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate waterfowl. But in the case of Hagen Oaks Park, I'm more interested in the city's decision to plant native plants than I am in the birds.

I think by the look on Dell's face (I can see his eyes in the rearview mirror) that he's not very excited about either thing, but he drives by the park anyway.

Quang-ha is slumped in the seat and I'm guessing is just happy that he didn't have to take a bus anywhere.

At Hagen Oaks, no one gets out of the car, because Dell says we need to go home.

When we first got to the Fosters Freeze, I called my mum to explain that I'd be late getting back from school. When she didn't answer, I left a message.

I did the same thing on my dad's mobile phone.

It's strange that I haven't heard from either of them.

If they can't answer the phone, they always quickly return my call.

Always.

There is a police car parked in the driveway of my house when Dell Duke turns onto my street.

The neighbours to the south of us moved out and their place is in foreclosure. A sign on the dead front lawn says *BANK OWNED*.

To the north are renters who I have only seen once, 7 months and four days ago, which was on the day that they arrived.

I stare at the police car and wonder if someone broke into the vacant house. Didn't Mum say it was trouble to have an empty place in the neighbourhood?

But that wouldn't explain why the police are in *our* driveway.

As we get closer I can see that there are two officers in the patrol car. And from the way they are slouched, it seems like they've been there a while.

I feel my whole body tense.

In the front seat, Quang-ha says, 'What are the cops doing in your driveway?'

Mai's eyes dart from her brother back to me. The expression on her face now looks to be a question.

I think she wonders if my dad steals things, or if I have a cousin who hits people. Maybe I come from a whole family of troublemakers?

We don't know each other very well, so these would all be possibilities.

I'm silent.

I'm late coming home. Did my mum or my dad get so worried that they called the police?

I left them messages.

I told them that I was okay.

I can't believe that they would do such a thing.

Dell Duke doesn't even have the car completely stopped before I open the door, which is of course dangerous.

I get out and head toward my house, not even bothering with my red rolling luggage that's packed with my schoolwork.

I've taken only two steps into the driveway before the door opens on the patrol car and a female officer appears.

The woman has a thick ponytail of orange-coloured hair. She doesn't say hello. She just lowers her sunglasses and says, 'Do you know Roberta and James Chance?'

I try to answer, but my voice won't come out any louder than a whisper. 'Yes.'

I want to add, 'But it's Jimmy Chance. No one calls my dad James.'

But I can't.

The officer fumbles with her sunglasses. Even though she is dressed the part, the woman seems to be losing all of her authority.

She mumbles, 'Okay . . . And you are . . . ?'

I swallow, but my mouth is suddenly dry and I feel a lump form in my throat.

'I'm their daughter . . .'

Dell Duke is out of the car now and he has my luggage with him as he starts across the pavement. Mai is right at his heels. Quang-ha stays put.

The second officer, a younger man, then comes around and stands next to his partner. But neither of them speaks.

Just silence.

Horrible silence.

And then the two police officers turn their attention to Dell. They both look anxious. The female officer manages to say, 'And where do you fit in?'

Dell clears his throat. He suddenly looks like he's sweating from every gland in his body. He is barely able to speak. 'I'm Dell D-D-Duke. I work as a c-c-counsellor for the school district. I see two of these k-k-kids for counselling. I'm just d-d-driving them home.'

I can see that both officers are instantly relieved.

The female officer begins nodding, showing support and almost enthusiasm as she says, 'A counsellor? So she heard?'

I find enough of a voice to ask, 'Heard what?'

But neither of the police officers will look at me. They are all about Dell now.

'Can we have a word with you, sir?'

I watch Dell's sweaty wet hand release from the black vinyl luggage handle, and he follows the officers as they move away from me, away from the patrol car, and out to the still-hot street.

Standing there, they huddle together with their backs turned so that as I watch, they look, lit by the low, end-of-the-day sun, like an evil, three-headed monster.

And that's what they are because their voices, while muffled, are still capable of being understood.

I clearly hear four words: 'There's been an accident.'

And after that in whispers comes the news that the two people I love most in the world are gone forever.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

I need to rewind.

I want to go back.

Will anyone go with me?

Chapter 2

two months ago



I'm about to start a new school.

I'm an only child.

I'm adopted.

And I'm different.

As in strange.

But I know it and that takes the edge off. At least for me.

Is it possible to be loved too much?

My

Two

Parents

Really

Truly

L-O-V-E

Me.

I think waiting a long time for something makes it more gratifying. The correlation between expectation and delivery of desire could no doubt be quantified into some kind of mathematical formula. But that's off the point, which is one of my problems and why, despite the

fact that I'm a thinker, I'm never the teacher's pet.

Ever.

Right now I'm going to stick to the facts.

For 7 years my mum tried to get pregnant.

That seems like a long time of working at something, since the medical definition of infertility is twelve months of well-timed physical union without any results.

And while I have a passion for all things medical, the idea of them doing that, especially with any kind of regularity and enthusiasm, makes me feel nauseated (as medically defined, an unpleasant sensation in the abdomen).

Twice in those years my mum peed on a plastic wand, and turned the diagnostic instrument blue. But twice she couldn't keep the fetus. (How onomatopoetic is that word? *Fetus.* Insane.)

Her cake failed to bake.

And that's how I came into the mix.

On the 7th day of the 7th month (is it any wonder I love the number?) my new parents drove north to a hospital 257 miles from their home, where they named me after a cold-climate tree and changed the world.

Or at least our world.

Time out. It probably wasn't 257 miles, but that's how I need to think of it. (2 + 5 = 7. And 257 is a prime number. Super-special. There is order in my universe.)

Back to adoption day. As my dad explains it, I never

once cried, but my mum did all the way down Interstate Five South until exit 17B.

My mum weeps when she's happy. When she's sad, she's just quiet. I believe that her emotional wiring got crossed in this area. We deal with it because most of the time she's smiling. Very wide.

When my two new parents finally made it to our single-storey, stucco house in a development at the end of the San Joaquin Valley, their nerves were both shot.

And our family adventure had just begun.

I think it's important to get pictures of things in your head. Even if they are wrong. And they pretty much always are.

If you could see me, you would say that I don't fit into an easily identifiable ethnic category. I'm what's called 'a person of colour'.

And my parents are not.

They are two of the whitest white people in the world (no exaggeration).

They are so white, they are almost blue. They don't have circulation problems, they just don't have much pigment.

My mum has fine, red hair and eyes that are pale, pale, pale blue. So pale they look grey. Which they are not.

My dad is tall and pretty much bald. He has seborrheic

dermatitis, which means that his skin appears to be constantly in a state of rash.

This has led to a great deal of observation and research on my part, but for him it is no picnic.

If you are now picturing this trio and considering us together, I want you to know that while I don't in any way resemble my parents, somehow we just naturally look like a family.

At least I think so.

And that's all that really matters.

Besides the number 7, I have two other major obsessions. Medical conditions. And plants.

By medical conditions, I mean human disease.

I study myself, of course. But *my* illnesses have been minor and not life-threatening.

I do observe and chronicle my mum and dad, but they will not let me do much diagnostic work on their behalf.

The only reason that I regularly leave the house (not counting going to the forced-prison-camp also known as middle school and my weekly trip to the central library) is to observe sickness in the general population.

It would always be my first choice to sit for several hours every day in a hospital, but it turns out that nursing staff have a problem with that. Even if you're just camped out in a waiting room pretending to read a book.

So I visit the local shopping mall, which fortunately has its share of disease. But I don't buy things. Since I was little, I've kept field notes and made diagnostic flashcards.

I am particularly drawn to skin disorders, which I photograph only if the subject (and one of my parents) isn't looking.

My second interest: plants.

They are living, growing, reproducing, pushing and pulling in the ground all around us at all times.

We accept that without even noticing.

Open your eyes, people.

This is amazing.

If plants made sounds, it would all be different. But they communicate with colour and shape and size and texture. They don't meow or bark or tweet.

We think they don't have eyes, but they see the angle of the sun and the rise of the moon. They don't just *feel* the wind, they change directions because of it.

Before you think I'm crazy (which is always a possibility), look outside.

Right now.

I'm hoping that your view isn't of a car park or the side of a building.

I'm imagining you see a tall tree with delicate leaves. You catch sight of swaying grass in a wide field. Weeds pushing up through a crack in the pavement are in the

distance somewhere. We are surrounded.

I'm asking you to pay attention in a new way and view it all as being Alive.

With a capital *A*.

My hometown, like a lot of the central valley of California, has a desert climate and is flat and dry and very hot for over half of the year.

Since I've never lived anywhere else, whole months of days where it's forty degrees outside seems normal.

We call it summer.

Despite the heat, there is no escaping the fact that the bright sun and rich soil make the area ideal for growing things once you add water to the equation.

And I did.

So where once our house had a rectangle of grass, there is now a twelve-metre-high stand of timber bamboo.

I have citrus trees (orange, grapefruit and lime) next to my year-round vegetable garden.

I grow grapes, a variety of vines, annual and perennial flowers, and, in one small area, tropical plants.

To know me is to know my garden.

It is my sanctuary.

It's sort of tragic that we can't remember the earliest of the early years.

I feel as if these memories could be the key to the whole 'Who am I?' question.

What was my first nightmare about?

How did the first step really feel?

What was the decision-making process when it came time to ditch the nappies?

I've got some toddler memories, but my first sequence recall is nursery school; no matter how hard I've tried to forget the experience.

My parents said the place was going to be all kinds of fun.

It wasn't.

The school was only blocks from our house, and it was here that I first committed the crime of questioning the system.

The instructor, Mrs King, had just ploughed her way through a popular picture book. It featured the hallmarks of most pre-school literature: repetition, some kind of annoying rhyming, and bold-faced scientific lies.

I remember Mrs King asking the class, 'How does this book make you feel?'

The appropriate answer, as far as she was concerned, was 'tired', because the overly cheery instructor forced us to lie down on sticky rubber mats for twenty minutes after 'lunchtime picture book'.

Half of the class usually fell deeply asleep.

I remember distinctly a boy named Miles twice wetting himself, and, with the exception of a kid named Garrison (who I'm certain had some sort of restless leg syndrome), everyone else in the room seemed to actually enjoy the horizontal break.

What were these kids thinking?

That first week while my classmates dozed off, I obsessively worried about the hygiene of the linoleum floor.

I can still hear Mrs King, spine straight and shrill voice booming, 'How does this book make you *feel*?'

She then made a few exaggerated yawns.

I recall looking around at my fellow inmates, thinking, *Would someone, anyone, just shout out the word* tired*?*

I had not uttered a single syllable in my five sessions as a student, and I had no intention of doing so.

But after days of hearing more lies from an adult than I'd been exposed to in my whole lifetime – everything from how fairies cleaned up the classroom at night to insane explanations for earthquake preparedness kits – I was at some kind of breaking point.

So when the teacher specifically said, 'Willow, how does this book make *you* feel?', I had to tell the truth.

'It makes me feel really bad. The moon can't hear someone say good night; it is two hundred thirty-five thousand miles away. And bunnies don't live in houses.

Also, I don't think that the artwork is very interesting.'

I bit my lower lip and experienced the metallic taste of blood.

'But really, hearing you read the book makes me feel bad mostly because I know it means you are going to make us lie down on the floor – and germs there could make us sick. There's a thing called salmonella and it is very dangerous. Especially to kids.'

That afternoon, I learned the word *weirdo* because that's what I was called by the other kids.

When my mum came to pick me up, she found me crying behind the bins in the playground.

I was taken to see an educational consultant that autumn and the woman did an evaluation. She sent my parents a letter.

I read it.

It said I was 'highly gifted'.

Are people 'lowly gifted'? Or 'medium gifted'? Or just 'gifted'?

It's possible that all labels are curses. Unless they are on cleaning products.

Because in my opinion it's not really a great idea to see people as one thing. Every person has lots of ingredients to make them into what is always a one-of-a-kind creation. We are all imperfect genetic stews.

According to the consultant, Mrs Grace V Mirman, the challenge for the parents of someone 'highly gifted' was to find ways to keep the child engaged and stimulated.

But I think she was wrong. Almost everything interests me. I can be engaged by the arc of the water in a sprinkler system. I can look through a microscope for a shockingly long period of time.

The challenge for my parents was going to be to find friends who could put up with such a person.

All of this leads to our garden.

Mum and Dad said that they were looking to enrich my life. But I think one thing was obvious from the beginning. Plants can't talk back.