



Holly Goldberg Sloan

counting by 7s

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[CIP tk]



For Chuck Sloan

&

Lisa Gaiser Vrick

2 of the 7 . . .



chapter 1

willow chance

*A gen-ius 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 some 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 by 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, 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 counselor and listening is a big part of counseling.

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 with 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 mom 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 cell 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 neighbors 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 Mom say it was trouble to have an empty place in the neighborhood?

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 mom 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-colored 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 sidewalk. 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-counselor for the school district. I see two of these k-k-kids for counseling. 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 counselor? So she heard?”

I find enough of a voice to ask:

“Heard what?”

But neither of the police 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 pavement of the 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?