



Appleblossom & the Possum

BY
HOLLY GOLDBERG SLOAN

ILLUSTRATED BY
GARY A. ROSEN



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Chapter 1

One moment she's calm and cozy with a knee in her nose and a tail around her neck.

And then push comes to shove and she's out!

But she doesn't have fur to keep her skin warm. And her eyes can't open, so there's nothing to see. She hears her brothers and sisters all take the gulp of new life and they don't sound happy. And then something speaks to her.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Her mother's beating heart tells her she should move.

Does a pounding beat *always* say that to a living thing?

The newborn possum babies need to get inside their mother's pouch. So she starts.

S l o w l y.

She is less than an inch long. The chill of the night air bites as she drags herself forward. (At her side, three other babies slip off the large belly and quiver in the mud below, so it's good that she can't see.) The wind rattles branches and shakes wet pine needles. A blue-eyed crow, on a perch in the distance, caws a warning.

But a dozen minutes later, when the tiny possum finally reaches the opening to her mother's pouch, she's out of energy. Her body trembles as her tiny hands and tiny feet, equipped with the tiniest of thumbs, grow numb.

Mama, I can't move.

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There is no answer. Just the *THUMP, THUMP, THUMP* to advance.

Mama, I'm stuck.

Mama . . .

Ma?

Then luck is on her side because Mama Possum suddenly sits up and her pouch opens and gravity does the rest. The baby tumbles down,

down,

down.

The *THUMP, THUMP, THUMP* is louder here. And it's joined by *WHUMPs*. Many of them. They are fast and so familiar.

Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump.

Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump.

Whump. Whump.

Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump.

Are her brothers and sisters congratulating

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her on making it inside? The heartbeats are like applause.

As she settles into the crowded, safe place, a tail wraps around her neck and a knee jabs her in the nose.

She understands they are all on this journey together.

Chapter 2

The babies of a first-time possum mother must have names that begin with the letter *A*. This explains to half sisters and half brothers, cousins and aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other relatives how they each fit into their own possum family.

Second-batch babies (according to possum tradition) use the letter *B*. Not many possum mothers reach *G*, but there's a clan on the edge of the city dump that claims enough litters for the babies to have *Z* names. There are rumors that they skipped ahead and no way of knowing for sure, but it's a fact that there is a group of possums at the dump named