

CHAPTER SAMPLER

THE SECRET OFFICE



SARA CASSIDY

ILLUSTRATED BY Alyssa Hutchings

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

*For my sister Catherine, with whom
life is all joyous exploration. —S.C.*

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Summary: In this illustrated chapter book, twins Henry and Allie buy their mom a pair of headphones for her work-from-home meetings but soon discover something much better: an empty room in the basement that they can fix up just for her.

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“Jump!” Allie calls to Henry.

The two are running home from school in stormy weather, fall leaves swirling around them. Henry leaps, and the wind carries him for a full slab of sidewalk—he feels like a flying squirrel! When he touches down again, his heart is racing.

Allie and Henry reach the June Harriet Arms in record time and out of breath. They wipe their feet on all three of Mr. Jeff’s welcome mats. Mr. Jeff, the new building superintendent, does not like

dust, dirt or debris. As well as requiring people to wipe their feet three times before entering the building, he has put out a box with a sign that reads *If you've been to the beach, empty your pant cuffs into this box*. He has also hung a dog brush on a hook with a notice beside it: *Be sure to brush your canine before entering*.

Mr. Jeff is quiet, with lots of tattoos, and always has a paperback book tucked into his back pocket. When he isn't vacuuming, he is mopping. When he isn't mopping, he is raking.

"He's fastidious," the twins' mom, Sam, says. Henry found the word in the dictionary. It means "being careful that every detail is correct."

"He's too young to be married to a vacuum cleaner," their neighbor Makena says.

Allie leans close to the front door and slots the key on the string around her neck into the lock. She loves this moment of the day. Coming home! She and Henry have joked that their building is like a big hug, and that the sign maker made a mistake when they carved the words *June Harriet Arms* into the transom. It should be June Harriet's Arms. But who is June Harriet? They wonder about that a lot.

The twins pull the door open and enter the lobby. Mr. Jeff is on a rare break, his headphones off, reading his paperback in one of the lobby's plush red chairs.

"I love to read too," Allie says.

"I read to pass the time," Mr. Jeff answers, keeping his eyes on the page.

"You don't love books?" Allie asks.

Mr. Jeff thinks about this. "I don't think so," he says. "I loved a woman once, though."

“What was her name?” Allie asks.

“Allie.”

“That’s *my* name!”

Jeff looks at Allie and squints. “Well, you’re not her. For one thing, she has red hair. Plus she is twenty years older than you.”

“Henry and I are nine years old. Is she twenty-nine?” Allie says.

“Good math,” Mr. Jeff says. “And I’m three years older than her.”

Allie calculates. “Thirty-two.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Jeff says.

“Do you miss her?” Henry asks. He can’t imagine being apart from *his* Allie.

Mr. Jeff stares out the lobby window for a long time. Finally he stands and tucks his book into his pocket. He reaches for his vacuum cleaner, turns it on and starts vacuuming the hallway for the second time that day.

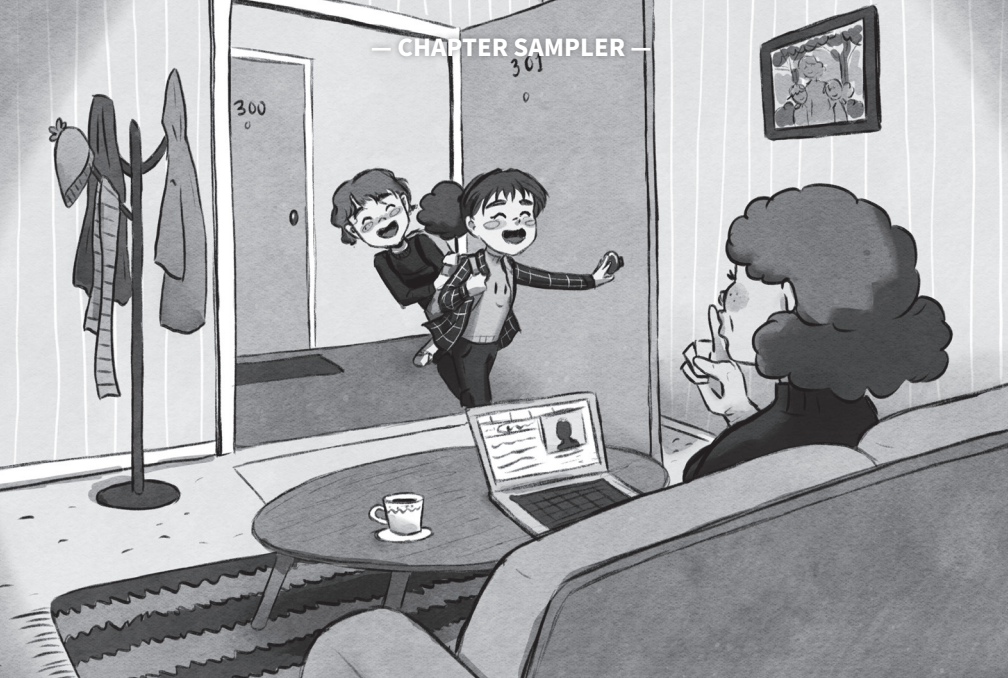
Allie and Henry push the elevator *Up* button. As soon as the elevator doors open, Allie yells, “Race!” She ducks into the stairwell while Henry jumps into the elevator and frantically pushes the button for the third floor and then the one that makes the doors close. As the old elevator shudders and heaves upward like an ancient rocket ship, Henry bends his knees and pumps his arms, preparing to run as soon as the doors open.

Ding! The elevator stops. Henry squeezes through the gap before the doors are fully parted. This is a great time-saver that he hasn’t shared with Allie yet. As he sprints down the long hallway, Allie bursts out of the stairwell, just ahead of him. They fight for the lead, then crash into the apartment door at the same time, out of breath and each laughing that the other cheated.

As they tumble into their apartment, Sam scowls at them, finger on her lips. *Quiet*, she mouths. She is at her computer in the living room, on Zoom. It is clearly an important meeting. They can hear her director, Mr. Kahlil, going on in his squeaky voice about plans that need to be prepared and preparations that need to be planned.

Allie and Henry know all the people their mom works with, even though they have never met them. Ever since Sam started working from home, their voices fill the apartment. Some are high, some low, some quick, some slow. Some are warm, others seem angry.

Allie and Henry used to have the apartment to themselves after school (with check-ins from their neighbor Olive). They could watch TV, run the blender to make



anything-goes smoothies, build LEGO cities on the living room carpet—whatever they wanted. Now they can't do any of this. Instead they silently get their snacks from the kitchen, tiptoe to their bedroom, close the door tight and do their homework.

Today they get out their worksheets as soon as they close the door. It's Friday,

and they want to get their homework done quickly so they can play all of Saturday and Sunday.

“Darn,” Allie whispers, lifting her pencil from her math sheet. “I left my eraser at school.”

Henry searches his pencil case. “Mine is gone. I used it all up, since I make so many mistakes.”

“My teacher says that if you aren’t making mistakes, you aren’t learning anything,” Allie says. She quietly opens the bedroom door. “I will have to brave it.” She tiptoes into the living room. Then she gets down on her stomach and wriggles along the floor like a worm, out of view of the Zoom camera.

“Let’s create a road map,” Mr. Kahlil is saying, “of the strategic steps we’ll take to reach our goal.”

Allie wriggles to Sam's desk, then reaches up and blindly feels for the pencil jar. Sam shoots her a warning look. Allie lowers the cup and plucks out a rubbery white cube. Clutching it tightly, she slithers back to the bedroom.

"I'm so tired of Mom taking up the living room," she complains to Henry as she brushes dust off her shirt and pants. "I'm sick of crawling around and being quiet. I'm sick of Mr. Kahlil and his plans and strategies. I'm sick of the strange voices. It's like people have moved in, but they don't eat with us or help with the chores. It's like living with a bunch of ghosts."

"She needs headphones," Henry says. "Like Mr. Jeff wears to listen to music. Then we wouldn't have to hear everyone's voices."

“That’s a great idea,” Allie says.

For the next hour the two whisper together—not only to keep quiet but to plan a surprise.