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Young Adult

Murder at the Magic Kingdom

As a modern-day Enola Holmes, Wilma Wallaby is an aspiring kick-ass 13-year-old detective who has grown up being physically abused by her older brother. When she overhears a real murder being planned, she must stand up against her brother in her own crafty way before she is the one who gets murdered.



By Sandra Cook Jerome
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Murder at the Magic Kingdom

It Could be Worse

Anytime I am in a frightful situation, I like to make a mental list of how it could be worse. Last week when I was caught in a rainstorm, I thought, *it could be worse; there could be thunder and lightning*. Today, I was trapped in a murderer's hotel closet. My hands were zip-tied behind me, and I was up against a wall. I could tap with my toe on the other side and lean each way to feel the back of the closet and door. My mouth was covered with duct tape, and I was claustrophobic.

Having a fear of small places triggers my panic attacks. It is hard for others to understand, but I explain that it is like body surfing in the ocean. You can see infinity along the horizon. The air is heavenly with sea salts, and each deep breath brings in billions of molecules of life. The water is translucent, and the sun makes my toes look like sparkling starfish.

Then something pulls me under. It might be a crushing wave, *but it could be worse*. If it is a saltwater crocodile that frequents our Florida coast, then I knew that sticking my fingers in its nostrils would force it to release me. A shark? Simple, hit it hard in the snout. My brother Winston? The best solution was to go limp. He only enjoys it when I put up a fight.

But today, *it couldn't be any worse*, I thought. People would die because of me. Peter had tossed me into this closet, and the last thing I saw was the baggie in his pocket with the poison. *Was that what I was smelling?* I wondered. My nose started to get stuffed up. I couldn't breathe. Panic set in. I kicked the closet wall. I had to get out!

Peter opened the door a crack and held up the baggie full of poison crystals.

“Hush! One more sound out of you, and I’ll put one of these in your mouth,” he said as he slammed the closet door shut. I froze. Getting poisoned wasn’t on the mental list of ways that I thought Peter would kill me after seeing all those terrible things on his bed.

It could get worse, I thought. Peter was going to kill Justin and maybe Ryan during the next hour, and I won’t be able to prevent it. Claire will never find out that her father was the ferry boy. I had failed as a detective. Peter was probably going to come back and kill me.

Thinking that I was going to be murdered wasn’t a problem. I was used to it, but other people dying was new to me.

It had all started in my own closet twenty-four hours ago.

Fifty Ways to Kill Your Sibling

This morning, my brother moved my dresser in front of my closet door after shoving me inside. I mean, he pushed me inside the closet and not the dresser. At thirteen, I'm way too big for him to stuff me into furniture drawers anymore. He usually left me locked in here for about an hour, but now it had been over three hours. That made me think that this time his murder plan was either starvation or lack of oxygen.

Preventing a murder can make you thirsty, so I rummaged around my closet until I found the backup hurricane water supply in the corner. For the first few hours, I didn't mind being trapped in my closet when I considered the alternatives of broken teeth, bruises, or a bloody nose.

To prevent being murdered by my tyrant of an older brother, I had spent a lot of time during the past few years speculating how Winston could kill me. I've even started writing a book, *Fifty Ways to Kill Your Sibling; Kill or be Killed*.

Each time my sixteen-year-old brother physically abused me, I wondered, *is this the day he'll go through with it?*

I probably wouldn't die of bruises or broken teeth, so those methods hadn't made it into my book. Only four people died each year from bleeding out from a bloody nose, so I couldn't really count that as a murder attempt by Winston. He was smart, but not that smart. Asphyxiation was undoubtedly high on my list, which was why I had trained to hold my breath for almost two minutes. That helped when he held me under water at the pool or beach. Two years ago, when I was only eleven, it was easier for him to snuff me out this way, but now I am almost a hundred pounds, but still about fifty pounds lighter. *I bet they price caskets based on size*, I thought. No, my parents wouldn't have to pay more; I'd be cremated. They are all about the environment.

My parents were older when they struggled to have a child. That was the story I heard, and they never said “children.” It was always in the singular, and then they talked about how delighted they were when Winston was born. I was a by-product of the process a few years later, like the sludge they made toilet paper from after lumber production. Since they went through so many fertility treatments to manufacture Winston, they thought they were done and referred to me over the years as an accident.

Sometimes they were kind and said, “*a pleasant surprise,*” but everyone knew I was a mistake. When I had to write a one-page paper last year about myself, I described everything that was Winston: athletic wonder, football star, handsome, blond hair, blue eyes, confident, and powerful. Then at the end, I wrote, *I’m the opposite.*

Although we were both intelligent, I was brighter than my brother and an avid scientist. Winston did not know about the attic. When we moved into this house, Winston claimed the better bedroom with a lake water view. I got the smaller one towards the street, but it had a walk-in closet with a scuttle hole. This “hatch” was a removable part of the closet ceiling in the shape of a rectangle – and just my size.

After taking a few sips of water, I opened the hatch and crawled into the attic. A few years ago, I started sneaking old foam poster boards up here to make a path to my parent’s bedroom closet hatch on the other side of the house and testing out escape routes. A hot attic in Florida was not pleasant, especially since my dad sets off a bug bomb each month. But I only had to worry about inhaling insect poison and not dying of a spider bite. I knew that I could hold my breath for long enough to crawl over to the other hatch, but about halfway across the attic, I froze.

What was that noise? I thought.

The worst would be Winston in the hallway below me. I couldn't bear the thought of him discovering my secret passageway. I heard the noise again, but with a new audio focus, I realized it was only some mice or other rodents rustling in the insulation to my right. I made a mental note to bring my cats, Funny Face, Lilo, and Loki, up in the attic for a day to clean out the latest unwanted residents.

I quickly made it to the other side of the house and dropped down amidst the clothes and shoes in my parent's closet. As I slowly crept down the hallway, I was as quiet as a mouse, or hopefully even more silent. I stopped right before the stairs and stepped into the bathroom opening. I heard Winston below, watching TV in the family room. He was blocking my access to the kitchen and all its delights. I wanted to eat something, but I needed a diversion. Since I'm a multi-tasker and a budding scientist, I thought an experiment was in order.

After my parents bought a high-tech garage door that had an app to control it, I was the only one who followed the guy from Lowe's around when he installed it and helped him get it connected to the Wi-Fi. My parents were too busy to learn new stuff and grabbed the old-school remotes for their cars. I programmed the keypad for Winston to use and stored his birthday as the code.

My parents worked in technology and filled our house with the latest widgets that controlled the music, heat, air conditioning, and security. I started to be the go-to person to figure out things in our house when I was about seven. I thought that I could maybe earn a tiny teaspoon of that adoration that they bestowed on Winston. Technology was my secret weapon, but it was not a gift. I don't want to tell them, but I'm no genius when it comes to figuring out how all the devices in our house work. I had a deep dark secret. I read the manual.

They have a saying that the painters own the house with a bad paint job. Regarding security, my parents were probably great technical people at work but terrible at home. I was the only one who knew about the garage door app. I had been testing it a few times when nobody was paying attention. Today was a more considerable investigation.

Although I'm supposed to figure out what was Winston's plan for killing me with the whole "shoving in the closet" method, I also study Winston to learn more about him. For this experiment, I wanted to see how many times I could fool Winston into thinking mom and dad were home and get a snack from the kitchen undetected at the same time.

I pulled out my cell phone, clicked on the app, and he ran up the stairs and turned to the right into my bedroom. I heard him grunting as he moved the dresser across the room. I had been slowly moving it further and further away from the door.

Early this morning, I took four bricks from the backyard patio trim and put them in the bottom drawer. I realized that I should not have added another element to the experiment since I was trying to see how many times he would fall for the fake garage door opening.

I heard him out of breath as he went slowly down the stairs and into the downstairs bathroom. I waited for the flush and then closed the garage door with my app. Since I was officially free from the closet, it was time for a snack. I crept down the stairs and ran into Winston, glaring at me.

Busted, I thought. He hadn't washed his hands, and I made a mental note to document that and compare it to our history of childhood diseases.

"You tell mom or dad, and I'll kill you," Winston hissed as he returned to the family room. I quickly slipped into the kitchen and grabbed some food and drink to stuff in my pockets.

“Mom and dad aren’t home yet,” I corrected him. He got up and stared at the family room door to the garage. I had already trained him not to open that door needlessly.

“Open it!” he shouted.

I shrugged my shoulders and pulled it open a crack, and turned on the light.

“Nope, no car there.”

Winston came up behind me and took that opportunity to smack me on the back of my head. It was my fault that I stood that close to the door opening. I had made another fatal judgment error while gathering food. I hadn’t put the very cold bottle of Dr. Pepper in my pocket. Rookie mistake. This latest saga of me getting dragged into the closet this morning happened when I drank the last Dr. Pepper. I don’t even like Dr. Pepper very much, but when you’re three years younger and thirty pounds less than your older brother, you have to exert your power where you can. Sometimes I hid the remote and then would find it. Long ago, I put an Apple Air Tag on it and then covered it with black tape. Like a magician, I never revealed my tricks to Winston.

Although it looked like all the Dr. Pepper was gone this morning, I had actually hidden two bottles in the back of the freezer behind the frozen vegetables. It took a little planning since I had to open them and drink a sip to leave the expansion room for freezing, but it worked. It didn’t take Winston long to spot the 2nd bottle of Dr. Pepper and take it from me. Then he grabbed me by the back of my t-shirt and dragged me up the stairs. I wondered why he didn’t just command me back into the closet, but I think he considers this part of the routine as a workout for football season.

Winston had a “three-strike rule.” The first strike was what I was experiencing. It was either a smack, push, drag, or pull. The second involved either thrusting me into an object like a

wall or throwing something at me, like the time he got mad and threw a football into my face and broke my front tooth. The third strike was the worst. The “third strike” from Winston was when he balled up his fists and hit me. At first, it was always in the face, but after trying to explain too many times to our folks that I ran into something – he started hitting me in the stomach, back, or more hidden places. *Please don't let it be the third*, I said to myself over and over.

Flying Lessons for Cats

I had conflicting emotions during my ride up the stairs. The first was regret. A lot of regrets. I was a slow learner when it came to Winston's capacity for anger. I owned that. The next was fear. It was raw and started in my stomach. It was similar to the way I felt after he hit me there but squishier, like I had swallowed an octopus.

Today, I got lucky and merely got thrown back into the closet. No third strike. I pulled out my lab book to start making notes about the morning so far while I ate. I liked to figure things out. I consider myself both a scientist and a detective. With science, my true gift was with animals like Winston. I had trained Winston to be afraid of the garage and my darling trio of cats.

I listened to him grunt while he moved the dresser back. This experiment had tremendous results. I found that the first time that Winston moved the dresser, he was angry about me drinking what he thought was the last of the Dr. Pepper and didn't grunt very loudly. Probably due to adrenaline, and I had made a note to research this.

As soon as I heard Winston put the dresser into place and head down the stairs, it was time to eat the rest of my snack and record the results. I mostly wore shorts with big pockets and stuffed them with cheese, crackers, and fruit. Winston had taken my Dr. Pepper.

I then pulled out the laptop that was in my Mary Poppins backpack/detective toolkit that was stored at all times in my closet but hidden behind a large stuffed animal for protection. My backpack doesn't have Mary Poppins on it, which would be pretty juvenile for someone about to start high school, but it reminded me of her large bag that held everything. What a great movie about two siblings that actually liked each other. We had a saying in the Orlando area—there

was *real-real*, and then was Disney real, where nothing was believable. Disney had fake trees, rocks, and even fake cheese. Any type of affection that I had for Winston was fake. For me, he was a lab rat, and his fear of the garage was proof of that.

After I was born, my parents realized they were now a family and needed to live in a family house. They moved from their cool urban loft in downtown Orlando to the spacious fields of tiled roofs in Lake Nona, a master-planned gated community where people can work and play. Lake Nona was built on ten thousand acres of former orange groves and farmland. The mice, rats, squirrels, gophers, and snakes had to move somewhere—and that was our garage. After a few more unexpected surprises, like me being born, my mom decided we needed to get a cat.

We inherited a big fat cat from our neighbor Claire's mom, who had decided to move into assisted living. Winston later insisted she was trying to get away from the cat. Winston was terrified now of heights and cats—and for a good reason. I named my new cat Funny Face mainly because of Winston's face whenever he saw the cat.

We got Funny Face when Winston was about my age, and at the time, he started testing his strength. He would grab Funny Face and take her into the backyard for what he called flying lessons. Winston would test his explosive strength, speed, and balance by using Funny Face as a shot put. He'd do it whenever my parents left us with our elderly deaf and blind babysitter, who would not collaborate my story of Winston's cruelty. Funny Face was also silent on the matter, but I could tell she didn't enjoy these times with Winston.

After Funny Face ran out of the room and through her doggy door to the garage, Winston would search the garage until he found her for the next test of his god-like strength.

I used my meager allowance to buy Funny Face a cat tree. I saved and saved and finally came up with enough. Instead of sitting it on the ground, I got my dad to put a bicycle hook into

the garage ceiling next to the kitchen door and high above one of our many cluttered plastic shelves filled with all the things we used once, then condemned to “storage.”

The next time Funny Face ran out through the doggy door with Winston hot on her trail, she jumped up the shelves and shimmied up to her cat tree, far out of reach of Winston. I followed him to see what he would do. He got a few boxes and started up the plastic shelves. My parents might have been brilliant programmers at writing code to make servers more secure, but when it comes to their pupae’s safety, they are a little shoddy. The shelves came down on Winston. He then fell and cracked his head on the concrete. Funny Face poked her head out of one of the kitty portholes. I think I saw her smile.

Sometimes, Funny Face would leave the garage, and I was a familiar figure in the neighborhood looking for Funny Face. I don’t know why anyone looks for a lost cat. I knew that cats were never lost because their territory was unlimited. Of course, they eventually came home, but I was at an age when I didn’t understand that and was probably terrified that Winston had found her and killed her. But I usually found her being fed by one of the neighbors and scolded her all the way home, with the neighbors giving a fist pump that I had found Funny Face.

It was destiny that I became a detective. As I got older, my fame in finding neighborhood lost pets grew along with my technology skills. I was the go-to person to find anything on the Internet. I expanded that enterprise to finding long-lost relatives by tracing family roots. Later today, I had an appointment with our neighbor, Claire. I was hoping to get my first big case. I was excited because she said it had something to do with finding someone.

Someone, I thought. I remembered that word. Up until now, I had been finding pets, but this might be a real job for my new detective agency. I was ready for this. I was an expert at noticing even the smallest detail. I guess it came from observing Winston all these years.

One of my first scientific experiments involved Funny Face. I found that animals like Funny Face and Winston can be trained. After Funny Face got her cat tree, she got fatter and fatter. I had to coax her to come out of the cat tree, and I trained her with some catnip. Even though I was little, I've always been strong like Winston. I'd put a little catnip on my shoulder and then knocked on the door three times and went out into the garage. Funny Face would hear the knock, smell the catnip, and then jump on my shoulders. I'd give her a treat.

Cats did strange things when they were expecting kittens. They wanted to make sure their environment was safe and would attack or kill any threat to the place where they planned to drop those babies. Funny Face was no different. I noticed lately when my fat cat landed on me, she hissed and then scurried back up the shelves to her perch. She seemed annoyed at being disturbed. At the time, I thought she was getting old and cranky like our babysitter. I wondered how pissed she'd be if she jumped on Winston instead of me.

My experiment was all in the name of science. The next time we were left home alone with the old babysitter fast asleep in the family room, I smeared catnip on Winston's practice jersey and waited for him to open the garage, get on his bike, and ride off to practice. To heighten the stakes, I unscrewed the garage light. As he put his hand on the doorknob, I knocked three times and waited with my lab book ready.

It took about three weeks for the scratches to disappear from Winston's face and for the two darling kittens to appear. Funny Face was getting older, so I was able to talk my mom into letting us keep Lilo and Loki. Winston was now afraid of the dark, heights, and cats. I monitored him to figure out when he'll grow out of it.

I spent the next few hours working on my laptop in the closet and opening and closing the garage door. By the fifth "false alert" time, Winston's grunts and pants had significantly

increased. It took him over thirty seconds to get up the stairs instead of under ten. Then there was a seventy-three-minute pause after the sixth false alert.

He had figured it out, I thought.

I crossed the attic to investigate and dropped down into the folk's closet. I slowly tip-toed down the hallway to the stairs and spotted Winston in the living room. Since I've trained him not to go into the garage needlessly and be exposed to killer attack cats, he had figured out that something was wrong with the garage door and had turned into an anxious puppy on the couch peering out the window for mom and dad to get home.

Why didn't he just let me out of the closet? I wondered. That would have been an easier solution, but Winston was not a multi-tasker and had the attention span of a 90-year-old. I realized that the more common saying was "attention span of a two-year-old," but a toddler can be easily distracted. Winston was more like an old man that could sit in front of the TV for hours watching the Weather Channel. He stayed focused on the issue until it was resolved.

I heard the garage door open and knew I hadn't triggered it. Winston had a good view of the driveway from the couch. He jumped up.

That had to be my mom or dad coming home, and I wasn't in the closet! I thought as I sprinted up the stairs as quietly as fleeing prey could run. I ducked around the corner and heard Winston on the stairs. *Did he see me?*

On the Case

I scurried back into my parent's bedroom closet and hoisted myself back into the attic. Winston's grunting as he dragged the dresser made me laugh as I did my mouse-like trek back to my own cell. It was a struggle not to giggle as he grunted one more time, having moved the heavy dresser back to the other side of the room.

I wondered if he had thought about moving furniture as a way to kill me. Ten percent of people die from an incarcerated hernia that cuts off blood flow resulting in intestinal strangulation. *Can girls get a hernia?* I wondered. I needed to look that up, but first, I had to get ready for my new detective agency appointment later with my neighbor, Claire.

After I heard Winston leave my bedroom, I got out of the closet and then went downstairs to get something to eat. All this behavior analysis and dodging Winston for hours this afternoon had made me hungry. I could hear my mom and dad coming in from the garage and greeting Winston in the family room.

They both lavished Winston with buckets of praise for taking good care of me all day. It was so sickening that I wanted to find a can of air freshener. Then they heard Winston's complaints about the "buggy" garage door and started testing the remotes and keypad. Nobody checked up on me, but I was used to it. They often got distracted by computer programming issues, and this was something that involved their precious Winston and technology. A doubleheader. I didn't exist.

I left a note on the refrigerator whiteboard that I'd be next door at Claire's and went out the front door, leaving it unlocked. We lived in a gated community, and most families only

locked up when they left for the day or at night. All the houses looked similar, and that was how I met Claire a few years ago.

I had been riding my bike in our cul-de-sac for a few hours, trying to set a land speed record for going in circles without throwing up. All of a sudden, I had to go pee really, really bad. I ran into the house and used the downstairs bathroom close to the front door. I flushed, and while washing my hands, I noticed that mom had gotten new hand towels and was admiring the sea shells on them when someone opened the bathroom door. I screamed. Claire screamed.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I looked around. This wasn't our bathroom. I had gone into the wrong house. A friendship with Claire was born. She was also a good customer. After Jade and Jasper were born three years ago, Claire paid me to babysit them. I'm not old enough to babysit on my own; rather, Claire employed me to play with them whenever she needed a break from hyper twin toddlers. I had also found their dog twice after he had escaped out of her yard. It didn't seem right to take Claire's money for chasing a dog around the neighborhood on my bike and putting him back after someone left the gate open, but Claire was nice. I thought I might put an Air Tag on her dog as my business starts to grow, and I'm no longer finding lost pets.

Today, I was feeling a quart low on human kindness, and Claire always had lots on her shelves. Claire didn't disappoint as she answered the door with a hug.

“How are you doing?” Claire asked after wrapping me in affection. When Claire asked that, it was almost like she wanted to know instead of a standard greeting. But today was my first official business meeting, and there was no need to be childish about it.

“You said someone is missing?” I asked while opening up my backpack and pulling out my detective notebook. It was black compared to my lab book, which was green. It looked serious when I ordered it online.

Jade and Jasper came running into the foyer. They must have heard my voice.

“Wilma Wallaby, Wilma Wallaby!” they shouted in unison. Somehow over the past year since they started talking, my name became a song or a taunt.

Busted, I thought. I had hoped Claire’s husband, Thomas, would be home by now and able to corral them, but no luck.

How was I going to get any work done with toddlers around? I wondered.

“Why don’t you set up your stuff on the dining room table, and I’ll get something to stream for them?” Claire asked as she guided them into the family room. Jade and Jasper were already shouting out requests. Her two-year-olds had a short attention span, but even someone named Wilma Wallaby couldn’t compete with *Daniel Tiger*, *Dog Man*, or *Beat Bugs*.

It was horrible having a name like Wilma Wallaby. Thankfully an average fifth grader didn’t know what a wallaby looked like; otherwise, there would be all sorts of kangaroo hopping gestures when they mocked my name. Most kids in school thought I was named after Wilma Flintstone, a cartoon from the 1950s, and amazingly they hummed that old theme song and made fun of my name. Thank goodness they didn’t know why I was named Wilma Wallaby. I hope nobody ever finds that out. *The real reason I’m called Wilma Wallaby was much worse.*

Wilma Wallaby

I got the name Wilma after Wilma Mankiller, my mother's fourth cousin. Chief Mankiller was the first woman to be named as the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. I'm not sure what "principal chief" means, but it probably has something to do with big chiefs and little chiefs and not the ever-popular barbecue smokers used here in the South by my dad's relatives. My brother was named after Winston Churchill, my father's sixth cousin. If you add our last name, Wallaby, you get a toddler tongue twister: Winston Wallaby or Wilma Wallaby.

Not many people have the last name of Wallaby. It isn't our real last name. My dad's great-grandfather changed his name to Wallaby after visiting Australia during World War II. His original name was David Jones, but he was nicknamed Davy. Not very good to be named Davy Jones on a seagoing ship. Welsh sailors said that the legend of Davy Jones came from their patron saint St. Davis, who protected the good sailors while the bad seamen were sent to Davy Jones' locker at the bottom of the sea. Thus, being named Davy Jones on a submarine target named the *USS Growler* probably compelled him to change his name. His submarine was named for a wide-mouth bass and sank a few months after he was transferred to Hawaii after contracting a nasty case of shingles. That ended up keeping him alive to make many more Wallabies after he was quarantined in the hospital until the end of the war. Shingles were very contagious and one of the most painful things anyone could live through.

Great-great-grandpa's name change from Jones to Wallaby was easy. This was all before the electronic passport surveillance and the NSA snooping. When Grandpa Davy Jones separated from the Navy, he asked the clerk to change his paperwork to David Wallaby, and a sympathetic fellow mariner understood his need. He went home to Miami and worked on a fishing boat until

he died from a hernia. This reminded me that I hadn't researched yet for my *Fifty Ways* book if Winston could kill me by giving me a hernia. I opened my laptop, added that note, and then got on Ancestry.com to prepare for my search for Claire.

She probably is looking for her great-great-grandfather, I thought. The last time we worked on her Ancestry family chart, we had researched her mom's side back to the early 1700s.

My mother gave me a subscription to Ancestry.com last Christmas to help my clients find long-lost relatives. So far, I've figured out that the rest of dad's Wallaby side of the family were white-trash mutts. Mom's side was easy. She was mostly Cherokee, and our ancestors didn't exist in Western records until they were rounded up in the late nineteenth century and put on reservations. I liked finding out roots and everything that made me Wilma Wallaby.

I have dark skin and black hair like my mom and look Native American. I am only a quarter Cherokee, so it really didn't earn you an entrance into any particular ethnic group at school. Most Native Americans in our area of Florida were either Seminole or Miccosukee, but most said they were Seminole because that was the mascot of the ever-popular and "cool" Florida State University team.

I found a Seminole jacket at a garage sale last month and thought I could wear it on one of the half-dozen colder days in Orlando. I was thinking of changing from Cherokee to Seminole as my heritage if it helped me up the social ladder in middle school. Being a brainiac didn't seem to get me a better status in elementary school, but I didn't need that because I had a best friend, and that was enough. Then Amaya's family moved to New York after Christmas, and I was alone.

I missed her so much, I thought as I studied Claire's family chart. It did get easier after those first few weeks. I would sit at a table and pretend to read a book. I wandered around school

by myself and tried to find a replacement, but it had always been “Wilma and Amaya; Amaya and Wilma,” and everyone else had their own besties. I waited for a “new kid” to arrive, and nobody ever did. Eighty percent of people in Central Florida are from somewhere else, so it was only a matter of time before I’d find a new best friend.

But I was wrong. Winston ruined any chance for that.

NOTE: This is being rewritten into YA after I got coverage and peer review. There are elements that are too difficult for middle-grade; the bullying by her sibling, etc.

