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Allegra Goodman

*A Novel*

SAM

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A Novel

Allegra Goodman



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I

Umbrella



# 1

There is a girl, and her name is Sam.

She has a mother named Courtney and a dad who is sort of around, sort of not. He lives ten minutes away, but he is not always home. Courtney says that's the whole point.

“What is?” Sam asks.

“He's never anywhere.”

“Yes, he is. He's *somewhere*.”

“Very funny,” Courtney says.

Sam is seven and she never stops. She never helps either. Courtney is exhausted all the time—but it's not just Sam. It's Noah!

Noah is two and he has a teddy named Bill. He got a plastic ark for his birthday, but he only has one lion and one zebra left. You can't teach Noah. You can't even scare him. He thinks no is his name. Sam climbs up inside the doorjambs to get away from him.

If you want to know how, just take off your shoes. And socks! You have to be barefoot.

Stand in the doorway to the kitchen and spread your feet as far apart as they can go.

Wedge your feet into the frame.

Inch one foot up. Then the other.

Inch up some more.

Stop, or you'll bang your head! Just stay there. Brace your feet against the wood.

Courtney says, You know what, Sam? This is getting old, because Sam likes to stay up there so long. It is not cute.

The day her dad comes over, Sam tackles him. “Where were you? Are you back? When did you get back?” Before he can answer, she wedges herself into the doorframe.

“Hey, monkey,” her dad says. “When did you learn to do that?”

Courtney frowns. “A long time ago.”

He just looks up at Sam. “Ready?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, let’s go!”

Sam jumps down on him. “Where?”

“I don’t know!” He’s teasing, but she doesn’t care. He’s a jet. He’s a plane. He’s a parachute. He holds Sam by the heels, and pennies start falling from her clothes. She is raining pennies that were never there before—but that’s what happens with her dad.

“Stop that!” says Courtney. “Come on. Mitchell.”

Noah lifts his arms, even though Mitchell is not his dad, and calls out, “Me!”

“Mitchell. Stop!”

Sam is wobbly when Mitchell sets her down, but she recovers fast. “Where? Where?”

“Topsfield.”

“Yes!” She picks up the pennies. Then she runs to get her purse, and Noah runs after her. Sam sits on her bed and counts out her dollars. When Noah tries to climb up, she explains, “Noah, when you get older, you can go to the fair.”

“Where’s your hoodie?” Courtney asks Sam. It’s going to be cold, and Sam will be sick if her dad stuffs her full of junk. Cotton candy is not dinner.

Sam races out to Mitchell’s car, which coughs a lot.

“What’s wrong?” Courtney asks from the doorway when Mitchell tries to start it.

“It’s fine,” says Mitchell. The car coughs again and then again. In the back seat, Sam shuts her eyes and prays silently, Please please come on I’ll be your best friend.

The car keeps wheezing and coughing. Courtney picks up Noah to prevent him from running off. There are leaves everywhere. Two oaks fill the front yard, and a beech tree spreads out on the side. One rake isn’t enough. It’s an ocean. It’s a tidal wave of leaves.

“You’ve got a dead battery,” Courtney says.

“No, it always does this.”

Before Courtney can say anything else, the engine catches.

“We’re outta here!” shouts Mitchell, and they are hurtling down the road. The day is faster. The trees are brighter, the road is twistier. Sam’s house is gone, along with Courtney holding Noah up above the leaves.

—

The fair is bigger than a hundred football fields. You have to park miles away and take shuttle buses. On the bus, Sam gets the window and Mitchell sits next to her. They are both wearing hoodies. Mitchell’s is Red Sox. Sam’s is gray but warm. The pockets in front are connected so you can tunnel your hands inside. She is holding her money in her pocket between her hands. Her money is \$9.26 folded into a calico change purse with the face of a cat. The clasp snaps shut between pointy ears.

Mitchell pays admission and then he buys tickets. He and Sam stay away from the games because that’s how they get you. They head straight for the rides. Not the Zipper because it makes you sick. Not the Ferris wheel, because it’s a waste. They ride the Pirate Ship, the Vertigo, and the Raptor twice. You fly over all the people and the arcades and the food trucks and the kiddie roller coaster. When Sam is a velociraptor, she doesn’t care about the cold.

It starts drizzling, but Sam and her dad ignore it. They lick cotton candy and their tongues turn blue. They share a fried onion exploded like a flower. They gorge themselves on kettle corn. Mitchell holds the bag as they walk

through barns of fancy chickens and weird rabbits. There's a milking demonstration, but it's postponed, because the cow sits down and won't get up again.

Rain pings the metal roof of the exhibit hall, and Sam buys red whips and a miniature china sheep. She can eat the red whips now and have the sheep forever.

Mitchell and Sam sit in the competition barn and Sam knots the long thin strands of red whips together. Then she eats the knot. Her delicate sheep is wrapped in tissue in a brown paper bag. She's carrying him kangaroo style in her front pocket.

Outside, the grounds turn to mud. The competition barn smells like wet sawdust, but the horses in the ring are decked in braids and silver.

When the rain stops, it's cold and soggy, and mud sucks your shoes, but so what?

Sam and Mitchell watch men climb a sky-high ladder to dive into a tiny wading pool.

They go to a pig race with little white pigs, the cartoon kind with corkscrew tails. "It's Porkchop by a nose!"

"Can I get a pig?" Sam asks.

"What do you think?" Mitchell answers. He always does that, asking questions back at you. He never says no.

Courtney says no to everything. She is allergic to all animals, including fish.

"Can I go up there?" Sam asks. It's a giant trampoline, but the lines are long.

Mitchell says, "Do we have time?"

Then all at once, he sees the tower. They both see it. You have to tilt back your head to see the top. Handholds on the tower look like confetti. The idea is you strap on a rope and climb up any way you can, and if you get to the top, you ring a bell. "I want to do that," Sam says. "Can I do that?"

It's annoying because it costs extra. That's how they get you, even after you pay admission and buy tickets. Also, it looks wet.

“You really want to go up there?” asks Mitchell.

“Yeah!”

“You think you can get to the top?”

Sam catches the excitement in his voice. He wants her to try. He thinks she can get up there, even though he says it’s harder than it looks.

They wait a long time—almost as long as it would have been for the trampoline. Sam shivers in her rain-soaked clothes. Mitchell would give her his own hoodie, but it’s wet too.

He says, “Maybe we should try something else.”

Sam hands Mitchell her china sheep in its soggy paper bag. She isn’t trying something else. She’s got her eyes on the wall and the people trying to reach the bell. One guy makes it. Then there’s a kid who gets stuck. When you can’t climb anymore, the man with the other end of your rope starts bringing you down.

Huddled together in line, Sam and her dad inch forward until finally, finally one of the ropes people calls out, “Young lady!”

Sam runs up the stairs to the platform where they hand you a helmet and strap ropes onto you. She’s wearing a harness around her waist and between her legs. The rope is thick and long, and it will keep her safe if she slips and starts to fall, but that won’t happen. She is already climbing with her right foot on the lowest foothold. The holds are big and close together, so she can climb foot over foot and hand over hand. The hard part is her shoes. They’re wet and mushy. She wishes she could take them off, but its too late. She can’t get rid of them, even though they drag her down.

She doesn’t look. She’s concentrating, inching up, one hold at a time. Her shoes are heavy, and her hands are small, but she makes it up halfway, and then the holds start spreading out.

She keeps climbing, foot after hand and hand after foot. Her hands are freezing. Her fingers are so cold she has to stop. She’s balancing with foot and knee braced against a big hold, and she takes her right hand and rubs it on her shirt. Then she switches and rubs her left hand. Resting there, she hears the music of the fair, the carousel, the games. A prize for everybody.

Everybody wins! From far below, she hears her name. “Sam? Are you done, Sam?”

She’s not done; she’s just catching her breath. After a minute she feels better, but she’s stiff when she reaches for the next hold and slips, heart pounding. Without the rope, she would come crashing down—but that’s not what scares her. She’s afraid she’ll lose her turn. Then she would have to wait in line again.

She grabs a knobby yellow handhold, then a red.

She’s up so high she cannot stop. She’s beyond everybody but the lights. Gold Zipper lights, red striped lights from the Raptor. She is a cold monkey. Her teeth are chattering. Her arms are aching as she reaches higher and higher. She drags her feet up and each one weighs a hundred pounds.

She lives for every tiny resting place. She stops wherever she can balance. Her fingers are numb. But there it is, the metal bell. She lurches up and slams her palm across its face.

Ding!

In glory, she glides down to the platform where the ropes person unties her. Mitchell and a few people in line are clapping. “Look at you,” the ropes guy says.

Her face is streaked with dirt and rain and sweat. Her dad buys her hot mulled cider and a purple glow stick.

Suddenly, it’s pouring. Everyone is leaving all at once, but you can’t just jump in your car. You have to wait for the shuttle.

The buses are so crowded there aren’t any seats at all. Mitchell stands with his arms around Sam to protect her.

“Crazy kid,” he tells Sam, as he rubs her frozen hands, and she feels grateful, and powerful, and famous.

When the bus stops, he carries her through the parking lot, because she is too cold to walk. He has a plaid blanket in the car. He pulls off her soggy shirt and wraps her in the scratchy wool.

“Can I sit in front?”

He hesitates and she’s afraid he’ll ask, Does Mom let you? Then he says, “Sure.”

Blanket and all, she scrambles into the front seat. “Can we go back tomorrow?”

“Hold on.” He’s trying to start the car.

“Please?”

“What do you think?”

“Please?”

“Sh.” It’s dark, except for Sam’s glow stick, shining like a magic wand. It’s cold and the rain is pouring down and the car won’t start. Maybe they’ll just stay. They’ll sleep at the fair!

The car coughs and coughs. Mitchell waits a minute and Sam holds still. He is giving the battery a chance to rest.

“Oh, come on,” Mitchell says, because the car still won’t start. “Fuck.” He looks over at Sam and covers her ears. “Wait here.” He goes out into the night and finds a guy with jumper cables in his station wagon. Together Mitchell and the other guy hook up cables between the two cars.

When Mitchell gets the car started, he says, “See?”

Sam nods.

“People help you.”

“Do you know him?” she asks about the guy with the station wagon.

Her dad says nope—but a lot of strangers know her dad. They go to his magic shows or hear his one-man band. He says you have to know your audience. He also says if you don’t talk to strangers you won’t meet anyone.

“Dad?” she says, as they drive into the night.

“What?”

“Are you famous?”

“Not yet.”

“But you’re going to be.”

“Oh sure. Probably.”

“Me too.” She is remembering how people clapped when she came gliding down.

## 2

Climbing is hard. It's not just a sport; it's an art. It requires your whole body and your whole mind. Humility. Perseverance. Respect! You respect the wall; you learn from the wall, and you know that nine times out of ten you fail. That's the main thing. You will fail. You will fall. Climbing is mostly falling. Mitchell explains all this, and Sam has no idea what he's talking about.

He says, "I'm telling you, so you'll have the mindset."

"Tell me about when you were little," Sam says. They are eating Sunday lunch at Freeda's Pizza where her dad likes the music because it's oldies, like "Singin' in the Rain" and "Fly Me to the Moon."

He tries to remember when he was little. "I got nothing."

"Okay, tell me about when you were seven."

"Seven?"

"Yeah. When you were as old as me."

"Hmm." While he's thinking, the lady at the counter calls fifty-six, and Sam slides out of her chair to retrieve their slices on white paper plates. Her dad starts eating, but she looks at him expectantly.

"I remember my mom wouldn't let me get a dog."

She waits, but he just eats his pizza. "That's all?"

"Red Rocks."

"What's that?"

"Where we went climbing."

"Can I go?"

"Maybe when you're older."



“How old? How old were you?”

“Fifteen, sixteen.”

“Fifteen!” She can’t wait that long.

He says, “The boulders are like houses; they’re so big. And there’s no admission.”

“What is there?”

“Lichen. All kinds of moss—like velvet—and it’s dark. The rocks are granite from the ice age, dropped by glaciers—and there are ferns. Did you know ferns are as old as dinosaurs?”

“How far is it?” Sam asks.

“Gloucester.”

“Right in Gloucester?” He made it sound like another planet. “Do you still go now?”

“No, I stopped a while ago.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“Dad!”

“What?”

“When I grow up, I’m going to remember everything.”

“Okay, remember this.”

Gray counters, chrome napkin holders, jars of chili pepper flakes, stacks of pizza boxes piled to the ceiling. She looks all around, and then she looks at her dad, even though she knows him by heart.

His eyes are dark brown. His hair is long. His face is scratchy. His arms are hard. He can run faster than anybody, except he smokes. He shouldn’t do that.

He plays every instrument and the harmonica. He can read your palm and, also, he knows magic. He can pull a rabbit from a hat and cards out of your clothes. He can juggle anything you like—for example, a cantaloupe, a whiffle ball, a knife. He is an artist. That’s why he travels.

He can write Poems While U Wait. He sits at a little table with a typewriter and Sam draws chalk pictures on the sidewalk.

Each poem is one of a kind and they will have a metaphor like you are my piece of toast. Sam already knows how to make her own metaphors. You just take two things that don't match and put them together. Her best one is my dad is my umbrella.

Her dad taught her like this. He said you are my sun moon stars. She said you are my planet.

He taught her how to ride a two-wheel bike, and he's going to teach her how to ride a unicycle.

Now her dad says, "I'm going to teach you climbing."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Today?"

"Sure!"

She jumps up and throws away her paper plate, but her dad is still eating. "It's hard," he says. "It takes dedication. You have to be very, very patient."

"I *am* patient." She is sitting there with her chin in her hand, waiting and waiting for him to finish his pizza.

—

Since the fair is over, her dad drives her to the YMCA to see Kevin instead. Kevin has a beard. He is older and taller than Sam's dad, and he smells like cigarettes. Kevin shows them into the gym so they can check out the climbing wall.

"That's *it*?" Sam says.

Compared to Topsfield, this wall is short, but it's got the same kind of handholds—pink, orange, green, red, yellow—all the same colors. Kevin straps Sam into the harness and she sees a letter tattooed on each knuckle. *L.O.V.E.* She can read his hand!

Kevin stands on the ground holding his end of the rope.

"All set," Mitchell says.

She doesn't even glance over her shoulder.

“Careful now,” Kevin warns, but Sam is climbing lightly, foot by hand by foot. It’s easy without wet shoes and rain and frozen fingers. It’s like a toy climbing wall. It feels plastic.

The problem is the middle. You can’t climb straight through the middle. Sam stretches above her head to the next handhold, but her arms aren’t long enough, and she can’t reach.

“You can do it,” Mitchell calls out. She’s hanging on with one foot resting on a green ledge. “If you can’t go straight, just try moving to the side. Go lateral!”

“What’s lateral?” she calls down.

He shifts his weight to the right and to the left. “Just be gradual. Come on, monkey. Be a monkey, Sam!”

She gets it now—swing like a monkey—side to side. You have to zigzag to climb higher.

“Smart kid,” says Kevin.

Where’s the bell? Sam wonders. There is no bell, but she’s a sport. She’s a queen as she glides down.

Kevin says she’s got it. She’s a natural.

Her dad is going to be her coach, but she will have to practice for real. She’ll need strong fingers. You have to clench and flex your hands to strengthen them, so they walk to Family Dollar to look for putty and a squeezezy rubber ball.

Together they walk through all the aisles, but they can’t find what they are looking for—only plastic pumpkin candy buckets, and purple glitter bouncy balls, and costumes.

“Hey, do you want one of these?” Mitchell holds up Belle’s yellow gown and Ariel’s mermaid dress—but Sam’s hair is short and brown, so she can’t be one of those princesses. “Cinderella?” her dad suggests, but Sam shakes her head, and he keeps searching. “Aren’t there any ghosts?”

The Statue of Liberty is a good deal—robe, crown, and torch—but the torch doesn’t light up, so Sam says no.

“Never settle,” Mitchell says. “I respect that.”

They leave the store with just one purple bouncy ball, and Mitchell says he will find putty somewhere else. In the meantime, Sam will swing like a monkey on the playground. She'll practice pull-ups on the climbing structure.