

“Sprig, please,” her mother says, peering out the window. “Can you keep it under wraps until — oh, darn! Larry, did I miss the turn? We’re already running late.”

“Easy, Lucie, it’s the next one,” her father says. He’s always calm.

Dakota leans across the seat and prods Sprig in the arm. “See what you did with all your chatter? You made Mom almost miss the turn.”

“You poked me!”

“Darling, I just touched you.”

“Poked me!”

“I repeat,” Dakota says, “I only touched you. And another thing, every time Dad goes away, you ask him the exact same questions.”

“I don’t, Dakota. I don’t do that,” Sprig says. Wondering if she does.

“The exact same questions,” Dakota drones in her I-am-your-master voice. “You repeat yourself. Do you realize that’s boring to people? Really *boring*.”

“Mom,” Sprig begins, but then, looking at her mother’s hands clamped on the steering wheel and the way she’s hunching her shoulders,

Sprig closes her mouth and stares out the window, thinking how great and wonderful and amazing and perfect and just plain *good* her life would be, if only two little — well, two big — things changed.

If only Dad didn't go away, *ever*.

And if only Dakota did, *forever*.

Say Dakota changes places with Dad. He stays home and she flies away. Say the plane flies to the Antarctic. Sprig can see it all: the plane landing, Dakota stepping out onto an ice floe, the beautiful white world, the amazing blue sky, and then . . . the wind . . . and Dakota floating gently, gently, oh so gently *away*. . . .