



TROUBLE
GIRL

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“Sophie—settle down.”

I’m sitting across from Nancy Mommy on the MAX train, next to a lady who was reading until a few seconds ago. Now they’re both looking at me.

I just made Princess Gloria tackle Prince Alvin, who went rolling across the back of the seat and landed on the open pages of the lady’s book. Gloria’s my hippo. Alvin’s my chipmunk.

“She has autism,” Mommy says to the lady. “Oh?” The lady looks at me with a wide, toothy smile. “Well ... she’s very sweet.” She hands Alvin to me and starts reading her book again.

Mommy’s face looks tired.

I go back to fixing the dress I made Gloria last night. It’s got pink fabric with blue and white flowers on top. A big hole for her head and two little slits for her arms. I tied a red ribbon around the middle. Princess Gloria. So pretty.

Autism. People say that word a lot when I’m around. They don’t say it to me, though.

I don’t know what it means. But I can tell that Autism makes Nancy Mommy and Michael Daddy a little sad.



The letters above the door say WASHINGTON PARK.

We’re at the zoo! I love the zoo. I’m running down the tunnel and almost at the elevator before Mommy catches my arm.

Wait for me. Hold hands. OK.

As the elevator doors are closing, Mommy and I crouch down. “Ready, set ... JUMP!” When we land with a thud, the room shakes and Mommy’s giggling just like me.

Mommy gives me the zoo card, and I slide it through the little window to the man inside. He hands me two tickets and says, “Have fun, sweetie.”

I put my fingers between Mommy’s and pull her toward the hot cocoa place. My favorite part is scooping out the whipped cream with the tip of my tongue.

After that first lick, Mommy and I trade sips—my turn, your turn—on our way to the penguins. We always go see them first, as soon as I’m done letting Princess Gloria and Prince Alvin sit on the shiny metal mountain goat.

I know just where I want to go. We take a quick look at penguins and polar bears on our way to the elephants. Hi, Samudra! He’s my favorite. Then monkeys, lions, hippos, giraffes.

Hmm. Where’s Mommy? It’s OK. She’ll find me.

Oh, there she is.

Nancy Mommy says it’s time to go home now.



Michael Daddy calls me lots of different things besides just Sophie.

I’m Punky Monkey when he wakes me up in the morning.

But when Michael Daddy gets mad? Like when I rip up my clothes or break a glass jar all over the driveway? Then I’m Trouble Girl.

He even made up a song about me:

You’ve got your fingers in the sugar bowl

Toys all over the kitchen floor

The second I clean up one mess

You’re making three more

You’re trouble, girl

Trouble must be your middle name

Well, I swear you’ll drive me crazy

But I love you just the same

Mommy laughed when he sang it for her last night.

Laughing. Ha!

We’re happy.

“Good job, Sophie!”



That's another way I know Daddy and Mommy are happy. Like when I load the dishwasher on my own. Or I get dressed before I come out for breakfast.

People tell me "Good job!" when I answer their questions too. Mommy and Daddy ask me a lot of questions. So do my teachers. They seem to like it when I use my words.

"How are you today?" *I'm doing fine.*

"Do you want toast or cereal?" *Toast.* "Please?" *Please.*

"Which two friends are coming to school with you?" *Gloria and Alvin, the chipmunk.*

"What's that you're drawing, Sophie?" *Please go away.*

Sometimes people get too close.

Other times when I try to use my words, I wonder if Mommy and Daddy even listen.

Play on the Angry Birds phone? "All done."

Close up the window, please? "Not right now."

Smashing his pumpkin on the ground? "Ohh, no, Sophie—that's not OK. Understand?"

I understand. That's what I'm supposed to say.

But I don't, not really.

I'm in the car with Mommy, and I'm crying. She is too. We were at our friends', Rustin and Joy's, house, but we had to go



because Mommy got really mad. She and Joy were talking in the kitchen. I followed the cat upstairs, and I saw a room with a bunch of pretty fabric inside.

So I started making Alvin a new outfit.

Rip, rip, ri—

"NO, Sophie!"

Mommy's got Alvin and Gloria in the front seat of the car. She's not yelling, but she still sounds mad.

You need to listen, I say.

"That's right, Sophie. You can't rip up other people's stuff!"

That's OK, Mommy. Keep smiling!

She doesn't answer.

That's OK.

That's OK.

That's OK.

"Just stop it!"

That's OK.

"Sophie! Enough."

Grrrrr.



Daddy comes out of the garage and meets us in the driveway. Mommy stops the car and then just sits there in the front seat. Daddy leans in through the window, gives her a hug around the neck. He looks over her shoulder at me.

"Are you OK?"

My hands shake. And clench.

Shake and clench.

"Come on, Punky Monkey." Michael Daddy opens the door and reaches toward me. My fingers dig into his palm, but he keeps holding on tight.

I'm angry that Gloria and Alvin aren't here with me. But I feel a little better now that I'm in the bathtub with some towels wrapped around me in the water. They feel heavy and clingy, like a hug.

Mommy comes in to help dry me off and put on my pajamas. I crawl onto the bed, and she brings me *Charlotte's Web*. We take turns reading while Mommy scratches my back.

"I love you, sweetheart." She kisses my forehead.

I love you too.

Smile, Mommy!

She looks back at me from the doorway, and she smiles.

That's OK.

