by Rachel Sarah

</The Girl Who Codes>

MY NAME IS Mae Foster and for as long as I can remember, I've loved to figure things out. I have thirty-four jigsaw puzzles stacked on my bedroom shelves and three Rubik's Cubes next to my lamp. I'm also the only one at this table in the module behind the library at Oakland Middle School who actually wants to be in Coding Club.

My friend Erin folds her arms across her chest. Her puffy down jacket is zipped up to her neck, and there's a frown pasted to her face. She's still mad she didn't get a part in the play and her parents made her join the club with me so she'd have somewhere to be after school.

Imani is here because I begged her. She wears a bright purple floral headband and says the world would be a better place if people had more style and wore colors that popped, which is why her head is buried in her sketchbook right now. It's filled with dazzling drawings of jewelry and clothing and shoes she's designing.

And then there's me.

I LOVE TO CODE, TOO!

I HAVE A CODE ID BY DOSE. (SNIFF)
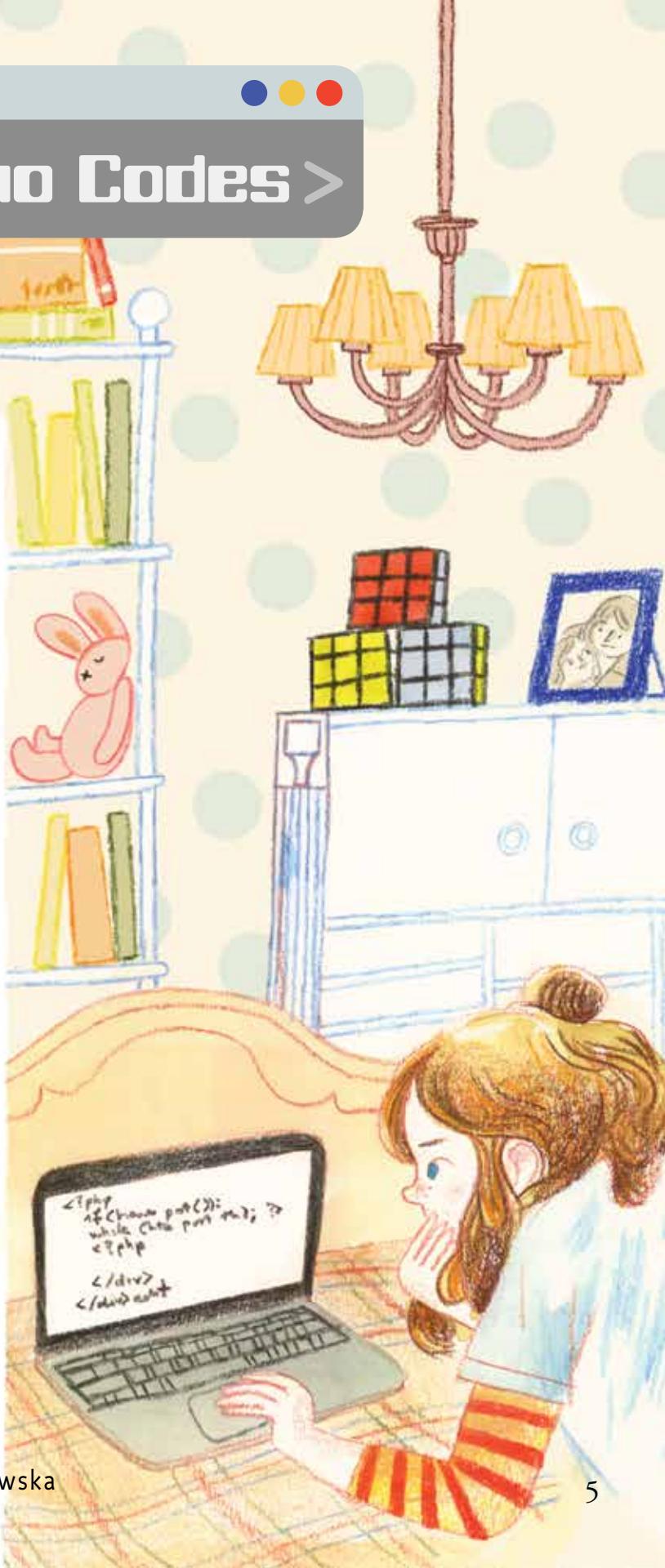
Illustrated by Zofia Dzierzawska-Bojanowska

My aunt, a computer programmer who lives in San Francisco, is the only one who gets why I love this stuff. She doesn't have kids, and according to Mom, she spoils me. She got me my own laptop last year when I was only eleven and taught me how to code a game. I've loved coding ever since.

"Everyone's eyes up front," says Ms. Dennis, our coding teacher. She pulls at the hem of her T-shirt that says "CODE LIKE A GIRL" and looks at the nine kids who signed up for this club. I can't believe there aren't more of us. "The first thing every club needs is rules, and who doesn't love rules?"

Erin groans.

"Pssst," I say to Erin before she makes a fool of herself.

I tug my phone from my pocket and sneak a look, even though it's not supposed to be on. Ms. Dennis told us already, "No phones," but I'd texted Mom right after English, and she hasn't texted back. Ever since Mom got sick, I've hated to be away from her for long. Even when I went to coding camp half days in the summer, the counselors let me check my phone to stay in touch with her.

"We're going to be spending a lot of time together over the next few months." Ms. Dennis doesn't look old enough to drive. Or code well. She'd better know what she's doing. "It's important we work together as a team. The last thing we want is for someone to feel left out or criticized."
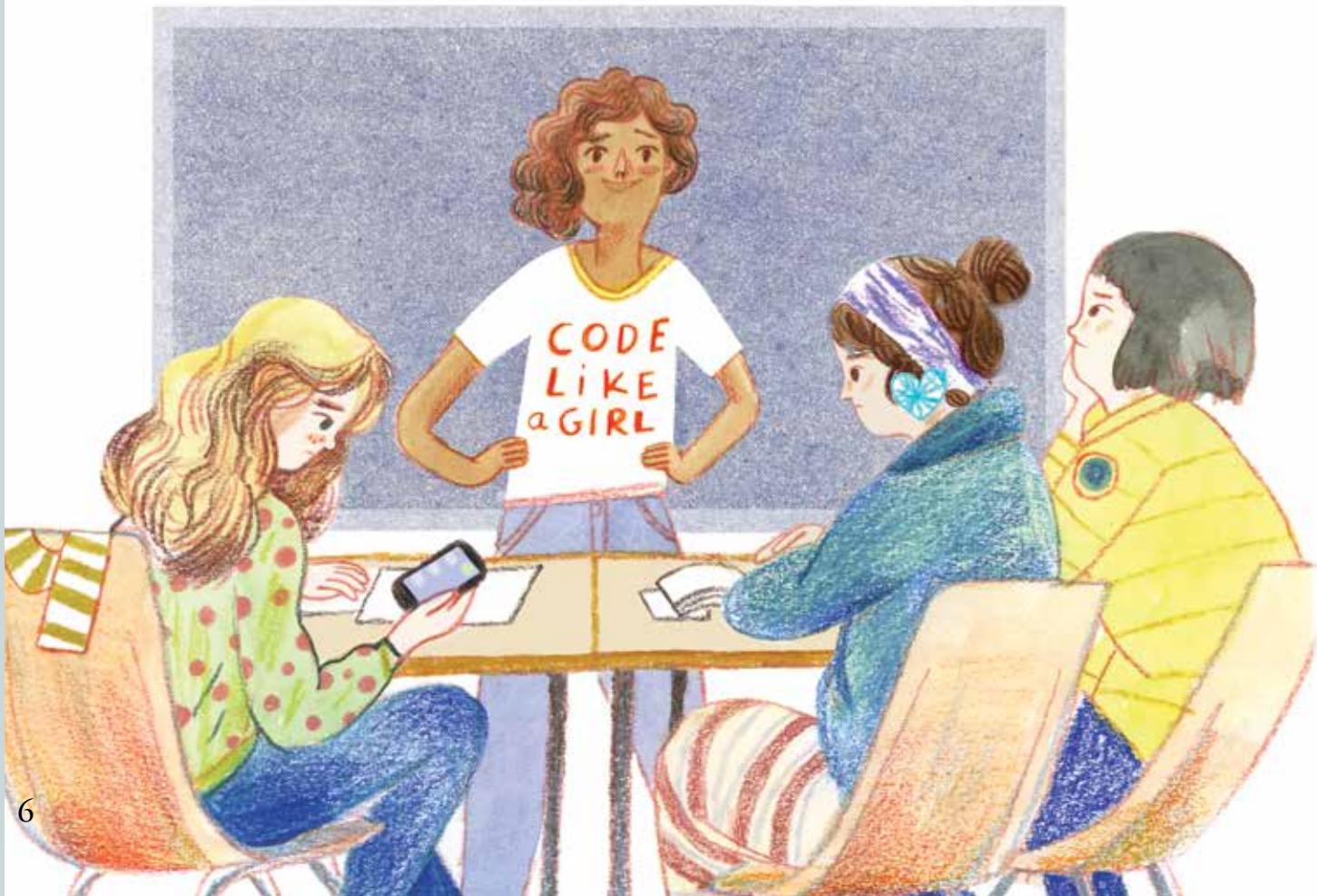
"This is so cheesy," Erin says under her breath.

I'm glad when Imani elbows Erin in the side. It serves her right.

Imani is the only one who knows how sick my mom is. In August, I had to sleep at Imani's house for a couple of nights when my aunt was at the hospital with Mom. It's cancer, and even if Mom says she's going to be fine, I can't stand to see her like this. All the medicine only seems to make her feel sicker.

Imani promised not to say a word to anyone at school, but I have this bad feeling my aunt already told the teachers, because Ms. Dennis keeps flashing me this little smile, like she feels sorry for me.

My fingers reach for my phone again. *Please, please, please say something*, I beg Mom in my mind. She knows she's supposed to text me after school to let me know she's fine, even if she just sends a smiley-face emoji.

Mom finished a new round of chemo yesterday, and she was still sleeping when I left for school. I rubbed her bald head before I left, and she didn't wake up. I feel guilty because my own hair is so long I can double-wrap it around my pencil. I told myself to remember Mom before the cancer, when her cheeks were rosy and her hair was curly, but a volcano of fear erupts inside me.

I push my phone back into my pocket and look up at Ms. Dennis, but all I'm thinking is *C'mon Mom, give me a sign.*

Ms. Dennis asks if anyone has a rule to share. We're supposed to come up with them on own because we're problem solvers.

I raise my hand, then lower my eyes at Erin and say, "Be magnanimous." That's a fancy way of saying be considerate of others.

Ms. Dennis writes the words on the board, and adds the hashtag, #bekind.

That's cool.

But when Ms. Dennis gets to number four on the list—"All personal electronics put away #notexting"—I hold my breath and take another peek. My screen is blank.

I almost raise my hand again to ask Ms. Dennis if there can ever be an exception to the rule, but then she'd want to know why. My knees bounce up and down under the table. I can't help it.

"You OK?" Imani whispers, and I nod. For a second, her shiny turquoise heart earrings make me feel better.

After Ms. Dennis feels like we've come up with enough rules, she puts down her chalk. "Now, let's talk about some of the things we might do in the club. How many of you have heard of Tweens Hack?"

My hand shoots up, but when I glance around the room, it's the only one in the air. That's impossible. Tweens Hack is only the biggest and best hackathon in the Bay Area. Hundreds of students meet for twenty-four hours at UC Berkeley to design apps. There are vats of hot chocolate.

AN APP MARATHON! OOOOOOO!

Ms. Dennis's eraser makes big circles on the board to remove some kid's doodles from last period's Spanish class. ADIOS DUDE! it says in all caps.

"It's a junior hackathon for middle schoolers," Ms. Dennis says as she writes Tweens

CHEMO IS SHORT FOR CHEMOTHERAPY, A REGIME OF DRUG TREATMENTS TO FIGHT CANCER. IT CAN TEMPORARILY MAKE PATIENTS FEEL SICK AND WEAK OR LOSE HAIR.

VATS OF HOT CHOCOLATE
SOUND GOOD TO ME.

MIT STANDS FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY IN BOSTON.

Hack on the board, "and I've already submitted our club. It's going to be the weekend before Halloween."

I bite my lower lip to keep from exploding. *A hackathon? Sign me up!* I thought I'd have to wait until high school, maybe even college, to go to a hackathon. It's right up there with going to summer camp at MIT or getting an internship with a tech startup.

Imani catches me grinning. "You're such a goofball."

I just hope Mom is feeling better before the hackathon weekend. I hate to think about leaving her alone for so long.

"Today I want everyone to brainstorm," Ms. Dennis says. "That means I want you to come up with at least three ideas we might work on during the hackathon."

My pencil hovers over my notebook. I'm buzzing.

"If you need an idea to get started, think about a problem, maybe in your own life, or in your community. Then imagine how you might change it."

Imani taps my elbow. "Does a hackathon mean we're going to break into people's computers?"

I shake my head. "No, silly." I explain to her that it's a marathon where everyone gets together to code all day and night. *Hack, eat, and forget to sleep!*

She shakes her head and goes back to her sketchbook.

Ms. Dennis said to come up with at least three ideas, but I start a numbered list in the margin of my notebook that goes up to ten.

My biggest problem right now is . . . Mom. The chemo makes her so tired, and she keeps forgetting things, like when she last fed the dog or what time her next doctor appointment is. I bet Mom isn't the only one who has trouble keeping track of everything when she's sick.

My mind wanders to why Mom didn't text me. Maybe she forgot to tell me about a doctor's appointment today. Or maybe she's taking a bath and will text me later. In my head I can hear those ambulance sirens blaring all over again, the last time she felt light-headed and she called a neighbor, who called 9-1-1.

Focus, Mae!

I push my hands into my pocket and look down at my list of numbers.

Maybe I can make an app to help sick people remember all of their doctor appointments, or the questions they want to ask their doctor, or who's dropping by tonight with dinner.

I jot down a bunch of ideas that fill up half a page. When Ms. Dennis tells us to wrap it up, I can't believe how time flew by.

I glance at the screen on my phone. Still blank.

"I have to get home!" I say over my shoulder to Imani, who's ten steps behind me as I fly out of class.

Imani shoves her sketchpad into her pack and catches up to me. "Wait up, Mae!" She walks so closely to me, our elbows touch. "Everything OK?"

I hope Imani can't hear me sniffle.

ALL RIGHT! WE NEED AN
IDEA FOR A KILLER APP!

OH, DEAR! THAT
SOUNDS DANGEROUS.

Imani points to the huge magnolia tree in the park outside the school, its pink petals open to the sun. "It's so beautiful." She stops to pick up a handful of fallen petals. "This color is perfect for a dress I'm working on."

I nod and keep walking.

But a moment later, her hand touches my shoulder. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I pull away. I don't want her or anyone feeling sorry for me. I just want to get home.

"Did your mom text you today?"

"Not yet."

Imani looks right at me. "I'm sure she's fine."

"I hope so." Suddenly, the sun feels too bright. My chest is so tight it's hard to breathe.

Imani touches my arms again. "I'll come over today if you want. We can do our homework together."

I tug at my scarf. "Maybe tomorrow?"

We hug goodbye on the corner at the end of my street. By the time I reach our apartment, my brain is exploding. Even if there are no fire trucks, no sirens, I can't stop worrying.

I unlock the door, push it open, and call out, "Mom?"

Our big dog, Luna, barrels down the hallway and jumps on my legs. I stumble backward.

"Mom?" I try again.

The house is totally quiet except for Luna's panting. I suck in my breath and hold my arms at my sides. Warm air rustles the curtain next to the heating vent.

"MOM!"
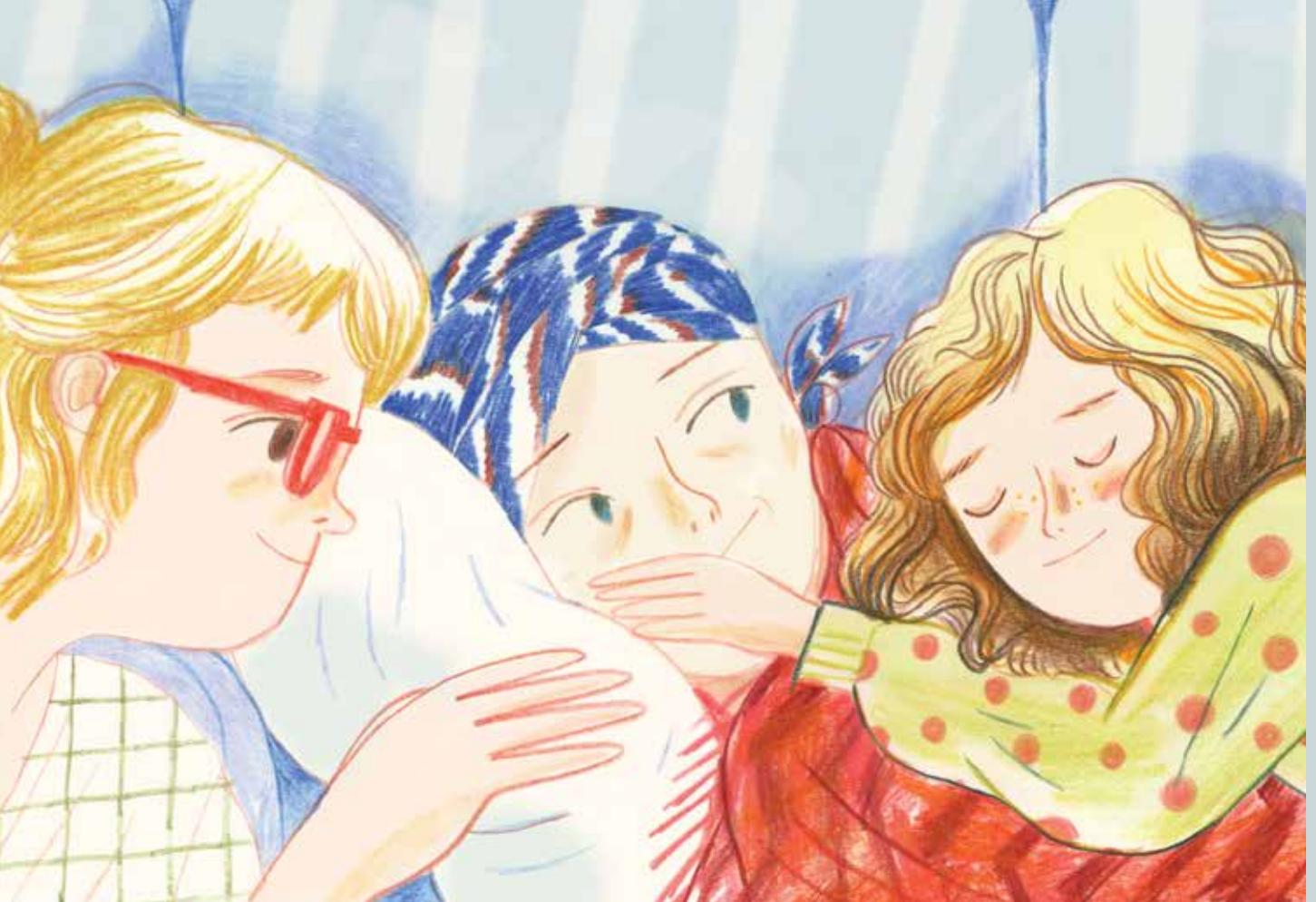
I let my backpack drop on the floor and fly into the living room.

"Mae? Is that you?" My aunt is sitting on our sofa in her work clothes. She's still wearing her heels. Her hand is making circles on Mom's back.

"Mom? Are you OK?" My breath is coming in short puffs. "She didn't answer her phone."

"She's fine," my aunt says. "Only tired, that's all. I just talked to the doctor. She says that your mom is doing really well. The medicine is working. It just makes your mom really sleepy."

Yeah, I know.

"How was Coding Club?" Mom lifts her head and smiles at me.

"We got invited to a hackathon next month!" I blurt out. I bite down on my bottom lip and tell myself not to get too excited. "I mean, maybe it's not the best idea. I don't want to be away for a whole weekend—"

"Of course, it's the best idea," Mom says.

My aunt pulls me into a hug. "Don't worry. You'll be there."

"I want to make an app," I say in a whisper. "to help Mom remember things when she's tired." I get down on my knees next to the sofa and rest my head on Mom's shoulder.

I can't wait to get started.

HOW ABOUT AN APP TO PLOT CROP ROTATIONS, AND MULCHING, AND COMPOSTING IN THE GARDEN?

COULD BE FASCINATING!

COULD BE **BORING!** UNLESS YOU INCLUDE PIZZA DELIVERY.

WE COULD DO ONE THAT LOCATES THE BEST CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES...

YOU NEED AN **APP** TO TELL YOU MY CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES ARE THE VERY BEST, EVER, ANYWHERE!? THAT'S JUST SAD.