

never
been Texted

LINDA JOY SINGLETON

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Chapter One

She had to do hard work from morning until evening. And because she always looked dusty and dirty, they called her Cinderella. (Grimm)

Sweet 16 and never been texted,” Rory teases me as she aims a plastic henna cone over my open palm. She presses her thumb to the top of the cone and greenish-brown paste oozes onto my skin. A henna tattoo doesn’t involve needles, so I have no fear of pain, but it’s hard to sit perfectly still when Rory’s in one of her wicked teasing moods.

“A supportive best friend says happy birthday – no insults allowed.” I grin so she doesn’t know how much her words sting.

“Happy, happy birthday to you, dear Ashlee,” she sings in her pitchy voice she freely admits is lethal enough to explode song birds. My tiny dog Toffee, curled up on the floor by my sneakers, whines in complaint.

We're in my kitchen, which smells of lemon juice, lavender, and sugar from the ingredients Rory mixed for her witchy henna brew. We always hang out at my place since Rory's mother is a borderline hoarder, and if she orders any more from shopping channels, someone will have to move out. (Rory is hoping it'll be one or both of her younger sisters.) We always have privacy at my house, especially with my stepdad, Blake, working longer hours than ever.

I glance uneasily at the dark concoction staining my palm. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Overhead lights glint off the tiny gold arrow piercing Rory's brow. "No worries. It's not like henna can kill or mutilate you. And if I mess up, it'll fade away in a few weeks."

"I'm so reassured. Not."

Rory has a habit of plunging into new projects only to grow bored and quit. To be fair, though, she's a brilliant artist. The henna lizard she stained like a bracelet around her wrist looks real enough to gulp down unsuspecting flies. And a henna tattoo is a much better birthday gift than I expected. All day at school, Rory taunted me with hints like "you can't wrap it" and "it'll vanish in a few weeks." I was seriously worried it was edible or alive.

I admire how steady Rory's hand is as she paints my palm. But I'm bristling inside like a cat rubbed the wrong way, annoyed by her "never been texted" comment, and I need to set things straight.

"You're wrong, you know," I blurt out.

"About what?" she asks without looking up.

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“I’ve sent and received lots and lots and *lots* of texts.”

“But never from your own phone.” Rory flips back her naturally blond hair, which shimmers with very unnatural red, purple, and black streaks she calls her Cleopatra-blond style. “You always borrow a phone – usually mine.”

Rory’s point made successfully, she returns to henna painting. I hunch slightly so my too curly brown hair tumbles over my face, hiding the blush I know is turning my skin a crimson shade of humiliated. I try to come up with an argument to prove Rory wrong. Yet what can I say? She knows me better than anyone else, only she doesn’t get how it feels to be a “have not” in a school of “haves.” She’s like most kids at Shoester High who charge through life with the best clothes, best cars, and best tech money can buy. Homeowners in our rural town of Castle Top, named for the hilltop house (well, mansion) where our mayor lives, are rich. And I mean RICH in caps – because of a weird smell that led to the discovery of underground gas and is now a pipeline to mega-riches for most of Castle Top.

Except me.

Not because my stepdad didn’t get a share of the gas money. He did. But he put it all into our family business, Bow-Wow Boutique, and he’s old-school about earning your own money, so instead of bestowing me with a generous allowance, I’m his low-paid kennel slave. Working for dogs. Literally.

“FYI, I won’t be tech deprived much longer,” I tell Rory, whose real name is Aurora, but try saying that three times without sounding like your mouth is full of peanut butter.

“Oh?” She glances up, a glob of henna hanging from the cone.

“I’m getting my own phone. Today.”

“Seriously?” She arches her pierced brow. “Cheap as dirt Blake is finally going to let you to join the twenty-first century?”

“Well, yeah.” I glance curiously at the greenish-brown design on my palm that’s shaping into some kind of animal. “Last time I asked him for a phone, he said to wait until my sixteenth birthday.”

“How long ago was this?” Her voice sharpens, doubts obvious.

“I don’t know exactly. A few weeks, maybe months. Still today is the big day, and he knows what I want. I hinted yesterday that I didn’t expect a party and I’d bake my own cake, that all I want is one special gift.” I don’t add that Blake rushed out of the house this morning without any mention of my birthday. But he’ll make up for it tonight. I’m sure.

“What brand of phone will you get?” Rory gestures to her smart phone she left on the counter, the neon-green cover shining beneath the glow of kitchen lights. Her phone dings with a text, which she ignores.

“Brand doesn’t matter. I just want the most amazing, gorgeous, wonderful phone ever.” I lift my free hand and wave it in the air like a magic wand. “My phone won’t be ordinary chrome or white or black, but a wicked blend of pink and purple — marvelous mauve.”

Rory laughs. “And where will you find this marvelous phone? Not in Castle Top, that’s for sure.”

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“Blake promised to take me to Empire Mall,” I say with some pride and a little fear, too, because my stepdad’s promises are made of holes and excuses and sorrys. We used to be close, but now we’re just strangers sharing the same space. Thank God for Rory who has been there for me even in my darkest moments.

“Ta da!” Rory exclaims, setting aside the henna cone. “You can look.”

So I look, and the image on my palm is a delicate bird in flight. I’m not sure what species, but its face has an ethereal almost-human quality so I mentally dub it my fairy-bird.

“I love it!” I say then start to rise to give Rory a hug, but she pushes me back in the chair and orders me to stay still so it can dry properly. She gives me a spray gel and instructions to keep my hand wrapped in gauze overnight so it will last for several weeks.

Rory’s cell dings with another text as I walk her to her car, and when she glances at it she gets this dreamy look, which means it’s from her latest boyfriend, Ian. I know she’ll wait ‘til she’s home to reply to her messages – that near magical connection of friends and family I envy, although I’m not swimming in that pity pool. Today isn’t a day for sinking like a rock dumped in a lake, but a day for strapping on wings and flying into dreams.

I’m finally getting my marvelous phone!

But first, I have chores.

I check my list:

1. Feed and water dogs.

2. Clean kennels.
3. Bake cake.

It'll take me about two hours – just enough time for Blake to come home from Bow-Wow Boutique and finish last minute gift wrapping. Only one gift matters, of course, and I can't wait to unwrap my precious phone. I won't even mind (much) if he's forgotten my request for mauve or if it's the cheapest model with a limited usage plan. My smart phone doesn't have to be Grade A smart. I'll be happy with a Grade C. As long as it's my own.

The house is quiet, but out back in the kennel the dogs await me. I go into the mud room and kick off my shoes, change into my overalls, tie back my curly hair, squeeze on latex gloves, and slip into my kennel boots. I head outside with Toffee wagging her tail behind me.

After years of cleaning up after dogs, you get used to urine and dog-poop smells. The kennel isn't large compared to major breeders; only fifteen cages but each is super-sized with cushions and chew toys to pamper our pedigreed, champion-bred beauties. We raise Queen Bee Terriers, a snow-white toy breed small enough to be carried in a purse. They look similar to West Highland White Terriers but with gold-tipped ears, amber-gold eyes, and golden curlicue tails. People come from around the world to buy Q-Bees because instead of barking like most terriers, they purr. Yeah, like cats.

And I love them – the bitches anyway. Not so much my stepdad's pampered champion sires, Brutus and Cretin. They aren't confined to cages and have plush carpeted canine

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condos in the house, freely roaming via doggie doors between the house and kennels. They strut around like kings, pooping wherever they please, which does *not* please me, the person who has to clean up after them.

Brutus and Cretin are waiting for me inside the kennel, teeth bared as if the kennel is a castle and they rule. If I don't feed them first, they'll nip at my ankles. My stepdad refuses to discipline them and says they don't obey me because I'm too tough on them. Me? Slave to a kennel of furry masters? Blake has to be joking, and not the knock-knock groaners he used to tell. If I'm tough, it's only because someone has to teach the stud tyrants discipline, and Blake sure won't. If I'm sandpaper tough with them, he's as soft as four-ply tissue.

I'm careful with my gauze-covered left hand as I scoop out precisely a cup of kibble blended with healthy herbs and vitamins for my dog bosses. While they eat, I kneel down to the newspapered floor and roll up the soiled papers from one end of the cage to the other. Once the soggy, stinky papers are tossed away, I spread out clean ones.

Cacophonies of purrs rumble as I turn my attention to the female Q-Bees. I cuddle and pet the darlings, pour kibble, and refill water dishes. Daisy gets extra helpings because she's going to have her first litter soon. Honey loves getting her neck scratched. Sugar is the proud mom of four, and I giggle as the furry pups wiggle around my ankles. I save Toffee for last; she's supposed to stay in her cage, but mostly she stays with me. She's almost a year old but will never be bred because her markings are inferior quality for a pedigreed Q-Bee. Only one of her eyes is gold; the other is dark brown,

almost the same shade as my hair. When she was born imperfect, my stepdad wanted to drown her (sounds shocking but it's more common than you'd think). But I begged and sobbed and promised to work extra hours if he'd let me keep her. She may not measure up to her breed in looks, but she's super smart, sweet, and quick to learn acrobatic tricks. And when Toffee licks my cheek, I whisper that I love her best.

Humming "happy birthday" to myself, I practically dance back to the house to start on my cake. Before Mom died, on every birthday, she'd bake me a carrot cake from scratch, with extra cream cheese frosting. I never knew my birth father, who died of a stroke before I was born, but Mom told me carrot cake was his favorite. So, it became my favorite, too. After the car crash one year and two months ago, I couldn't bear to look at Mom's recipe book. Today, though, I feel like she's close-by, celebrating my birthday with me, so I open the book and bake my own birthday cake.

I'm licking frosting from my fingers when I hear a car outside. Blake. We don't talk much, isolated in moats of silence since losing Mom, but I'm feeling hopeful, like we can start over – not as polite roommates but as a family. I'll fake surprise when he gives me my gift then immediately text Rory so she'll text back. My first text on my very own phone!

"Ashlee!" my stepdad shouts as the front door bangs behind him. "Ashlee, where are you?"

"In the kitchen," I call.

"Well, come here," he snaps.

I toss the frosting spoon in the sink and hurry to the living room. Blake's wearing his Bow-Wow Boutique name

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badge and paw-print tie. He's tall, six-three, and not yet forty, although with his shoulders bowed and dark circles under his eyes he seems older, like he's aging in dog years. I want to tell him not to work so hard, and that I miss Mom, too. Instead, I glance at his hands, hoping for a phone-shaped gift box. He's only holding a pet carrier, which he thrusts at me.

"Take this and go fetch Brutus. He'll need food, water, and a blanket."

I take the carrier, frowning. "What's going on?"

"I have a rush stud job for him."

"Now? And why is Brutus going to a customer's house? Usually the bitch is brought here."

"Not for Mrs. Evanston," he says, and it takes me a minute to remember. Oh, yeah. The agoraphobic client who refuses to leave her home and spends the fortune her husband left her on her dogs.

"If I bring Brutus to her tonight, my fee is doubled," my stepfather adds in a rush. "It's a long drive so I have to hurry."

"But don't you remember what today is?"

"Tuesday." He shrugs.

"Yeah, but that's not all." I gnaw my lip, looking up at him. "Isn't there something else...I mean...you want to say to me?"

"Of course." He pats my head like I'm one of the dogs. "Don't forget to give Daisy her vitamins and check on Sugar's litter." He sniffs the air. "Something smells good. Is it dinner?"

"No. Dessert." I swallow hard. "Cake for my –"

“I’m sure it’s delicious,” he cuts me off and picks up a stack of mail piled on the table. Creases deepen in his brow as he studies an official-looking envelope. He doesn’t open it, folding it in half before slipping it into his pocket.

I look at him hopefully. “Blake, what time will you be home for dinner?”

“Too late,” he says in a foggy way like he isn’t listening. “It’ll be midnight before I’m back. Have dinner without me. Take care of things here while I’m gone.”

I stare at him, too hurt to do more than nod. Not one word about my birthday. Nothing.

“That’s a good girl, Ashlee,” he says. “I can always count on you.”

If only I could say the same about him.

Chapter Two

“I wish I could. I wish I could.” She was not able to speak the rest, being interrupted by her tears and sobbing. (Perrault)

I put off calling Rory, the lump in my throat so painful I’ll choke if I try to talk. Besides, she’ll only get mad at Blake, and spew swear words sharp enough to skin him alive, which will make me feel worse. I was stupid to expect my stepdad to care about my feelings. Maybe he did, once upon a time when Mom was alive, but that ended in a crash that took her life and their unborn baby.

When Blake leaves, off to pimp out Brutus for a ridiculous stud fee, I stomp into the kitchen and glare at the cake. It’s beautiful. I hate it. I dump it into the trash.

I need to move, not to think or feel. So I grab a leash and free Toffee from her cage. It’s too late for a walk, almost dark, but I leave anyway.

Toffee seems to sense my mood, and instead of heeling beside me as she’s been trained to do, she takes off running.

So I run, too, paying no mind to where I'm going. Although I know my neighborhood well, tonight everything takes on a shadowy strangeness. Buildings blur by as I run faster, dim lights shining from windows.

I don't slow to say hi to Mr. Baker even though he waves from his porch. *The Kabkee's must be barbequing again*, I think, as a delicious aroma of barbequed chicken makes my mouth water. I stop only when I reach Othello Road, where the Dunwilly family and Mr. Shakespeare live, because it's a dead-end street.

Clomping hooves startle me until I whirl around to Granny Dermott driving her goat cart. She's always so sweet to me and I love her goats, so I jog after her. She makes a right turn onto Second Street. The cart turns right again but when turn the corner, Granny Dermott and her goat cart are gone.

Toffee stops abruptly in front of a building I've never seen before. The tiny shop has a peaked roof and round windows glowing like spying eyes. An amber lamp over the doorway shines on a sign reading: W.I.S.H.

Hmmm, what kind of store is this? There's an "open" sign in the window, so I grasp the knob and step inside. Wow!

Walls sparkle with brilliant electronics. Tablets, computers, game devices, flat-screen TVs – everything tech imaginable. In the center of the room is a table with a sign announcing: Special Cell Phone Sale!

"May I help you?" a small voice asks, but when I turn toward the register, I don't see anyone. I only hear a throat-

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clearing sound.

“Is someone here?” I feel like I’m dream-walking. This can’t be real. There are no electronic stores in Castle Top. And I’ve never heard of any store called W.I.S.H.

A boy (or is he a short man?) steps out from behind the counter. His face is cherubic yet his eyes, the shade of twilight sky, are ageless. I shake my head, even more sure this can’t be real. Any moment a camera crew will jump out and announce this is a freaky reality show. But in the long seconds I stare at the boy-man, no one else appears.

“Welcome to W.I.S.H.,” he says in a child-like voice. “May I be of some usefulness? Please call me Farley.”

“Um, you work here?” I ask still trying to figure out how a store can suddenly appear in a neighborhood I thought I knew well.

“Assisting those who call upon me is too satisfying to be considered work. I prefer to call it play. Your dog has extraordinary eyes.” When he bends down to pet Toffee, I hear purring. Not just from Toffee, but from the boy-man, too. “I haven’t seen a Queen Bee in forever.”

“The breed is new,” I correct him.

“Nothing is ever truly new.” He smiles, showing off pearly teeth much too large for a child.

Old or young, this guy is weird, and I back away toward the door. “Uh, I should go.”

“Isn’t there something you wish to buy?” Farley gestures around the dazzling tech displays.

I slip my hand into my pocket, feeling a few coins and only two dollars. Blake pays me ten dollars a week, and most

of it is already gone. I shake my head. “Sorry, but I can’t afford – “

“No one can beat my prices,” he insists. “What are you wishing for?”

An odd question, and something in his child-like expression makes me want to be honest.

“A cell phone,” I admit in a whisper. “But I can’t – “

“Never say *can’t*. Everything is possible. I’ve lived here and there for quite a long time and know more than you’d think. You remind me of another young girl I met...how long ago?” He counts off on his fingers. “Over twenty years, it must be. I sold shoes back then and matched her with her heart’s desire—crystal sequin high heels. Her name was...let me think.” He taps his chin. “Oh yes, how could I forget? Leena.”

I jump back, startled. “That’s my mother’s name. Or was.” I brace myself for the usual words of sympathy that are always well-meaning but only deepen the ache.

“She had a Queen Bee with her, too,” Farley says in a surprisingly cheerful voice. “I never forget the ones who come with pets.”

“She loved animals. Like I do,” I add softly.

“You can never go wrong when you gain an animal’s trust – or take advantage of one of my special offers.” He makes a sweeping gesture toward the display. “Check out the magnificent phones. Do you see anything you like?”

I see plenty I like, but surely nothing I can afford. All shapes, colors, and styles of cell phones. They blink and flash, and a blue phone actually seems to float in the air. When I

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touch a rainbow-colored phone, my finger shines like a rainbow, too. One phone has no keyboard, only a screen where a famous movie star grins and invites me to touch his face.

Then I see mauve. Marvellous mauve. Attached to this phone is a sign that reads: *Bargain Price*.

I reach out tentatively, gently, longingly, and lift the phone. I look for a price. There is none.

When I glance up, Farley is watching me.

“Ah, so you found your phone.”

“There’s no price listed, but I’m sure I can’t afford it.” I shake my head. “I don’t have much money.”

“You don’t need much.” He grins. “Only \$2.47.”

Now I’m positive this is a trick or a scam or a reality show ambush, because when I pull out my money it adds up to exactly \$2.47. Is he a mind reader? Am I being punked?

Still, the phone, a perfect shimmering mauve, fits like it belongs in my hand. I’ve envied Rory sharing texts with her boyfriend and long to share messages with someone special, too. Crazy, I know, since a phone is an object and doesn’t come with an app for romance.

Before the clerk changes his mind or I wake up to find out this is a dream, I give him the money. His grin widens as he asks me to sign the service plan, which has tiny print, but he assures me it’s free for a month.

“In a month from now, at midnight, the contract expires,” he adds with warning. “But a lot can happen in a month, don’t you agree?”

I nod, calculating my weekly wages and hoping it’ll be

enough. *I'll worry about that later*, I think as I leave the shop holding Toffee's leash in one hand and my perfect mauve phone in the other.

As I walk away from the shop, I glance back and see only darkness where there were shop lights. Suspicion hits me, right in the gut like the flu. Nothing is ever free, and phones cost way more than two dollars. It's a scam. This phone must be a fake; just a shell made to look like a phone.

One way to find out.

I tap the keys for Rory's number and hear ringing.

"Who is this?" Rory answers cautiously, clearly not recognizing the caller ID.

"Me," I say.

"Ashlee!" She squeals loud enough to wake a corpse. "You got your new phone!"

"Well, sort of. I think so." I start to grin. "I don't even know my number."

"It's 555-1200." She giggles. "I can't wait to see it."

"You only have to wait 'til school tomorrow."

"It'll be torture."

"You'll survive," I tease, tugging on Toffee's leash so she'll slow her pace.

"Not without immense suffering. But this is a huge moment, and we have to mark this milestone right. You're going to get your first text. Hang up and I'll text you now."

"Already hanging up." And I do.

I've barely lifted my finger off the phone when there's a musical tone like wind chimes. I look down at the phone number. Then I look again.

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There's a text, all right.
But it isn't from Rory.

Chapter Three

The time came when the king announced a royal ball to which all maidens of noble birth were hereby summoned. (Jacobs)

Toffee squirms on her leash, twisting around my ankles as I stand on a corner of a dark street, staring down at the illuminated words on my new phone.

Where are you? Why won't you talk to me? Call.
Please. Prince

I don't recognize the phone number or know anyone named Prince. I've met dogs named Prince and remember hearing of a retro rock star with that name, but not anyone who lives in Castle Top. Still he (or she?) oozes sadness, and I'm tempted to text back. But what can I say? "Wrong number" is accurate but too harsh, dumping more on someone who is already hurting. I understand too well the sting of rejection.

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My fingers hover over the tiny keys, unsure what to do.

I jump when my phone rings its musical tone again. Rory's number. I quickly read the message:

I'm your #1 text. Yay me!

Smiling to myself, I delete the real first text from my thoughts and reply to Rory: *Thanks. See you tomorrow.*

Slipping my marvelous mauve phone into my pocket, I tug on Toffee's leash and turn onto our street.

Cretin greets me with the usual growls when I open the door. Although smaller than most Q-Bee's, he sounds fierce. I ignore him, but his growls intimidate Toffee, so I tell him to shut up then scoop my darling girl into my arms and carry her into my bedroom. I shut the wicked stud dog out.

With my stepdad gone, I don't have to return Toffee to her cage, and she lick-kisses my face before curling up on her favorite purple pillow.

My phone erupts in a wind chime tone, and when I check it's the wrong number. Prince again. Only one word this time. **Please.** And my heart breaks for the poor guy. My fingers hover over the keyboard, so very tempted to reply. But what can I say? I'm not the one Prince wants to hear from, and I have no idea who is. Sighing, I put the phone on my desk.

After making a ham sandwich, which I share with Toffee, I reach into the bottom drawer of my desk for the secret I've been hiding from my stepdad. College applications. I've aced advance placement classes and can graduate early, but Blake says money is tight so I can't ask

him to pay my college expenses. Besides, I have the suspicion he wants me to live with him forever, slaving in the kennels.

I've been applying for scholarships. Nothing yet, but Mom always had her own twists on famous quotes and used to say, "You only fail, if you fail to apply." I won't give up until my "apply" is an acceptance. My deepest ambition is to become an animal therapist – a profession Blake thinks is bogus. To him animals are only merchandise, but I know they have feelings *and* I understand them better than Blake ever will.

I like the look of the words "animal therapist" on my application. I imagine myself in a business suit, or maybe a cute dog-print smock, swiveling in my office chair to face my first client. A little dog with a large dog complex who yaps 24-7 or a timid mastiff who cringes at shadows. I already know a lot about training dogs, but not so much about dealing with people. Rory thinks I'm over sensitive and quick to anger. "Give the human species a chance," she says. Usually this lecture follows an unfortunate encounter with too-popular-to-live Beatrice Palmquist. Our mutual hatred began at the start of freshman year when she came to the kennels to buy a Queen Bee and found me rolling up urine-drenched newspapers. She plugged her nose and said she'd never buy a dog from a "stinking loser" then spread rumors all over school that I reeked of pee, nicknaming me P.U. Ashlee.

Now when most kids look at me, they only see a negative label. It sucks. Someday I'll prove to everyone that I can achieve great things. I just *have* to get a scholarship.

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I stay up late and wake up even later to the shrill beeps of my alarm clock. After tossing my clothes on, I go into the bathroom for the unveiling. Slowly, I unwind the gauze from my hand, brush away dried henna flakes, and then gently scrape off the excess paste and apply olive oil like Rory told me. The fairy-bird has lightened to a lovely maroon, and when I move my palm the wings seem to flutter. So love it!

I'm running late so I quickly feed and water the dogs then pop back into the kitchen to toast a bagel. I grab my backpack and race out of the house. Cretin seems more hostile than usual (is he jealous that Brutus is off doing mating-duty while he's left at home?) and he charges after me. While Q-Bees don't bark, their whining can be shrill and annoying. I order him to go back. He looks up at me and then *deliberately* pees on my left sneaker. Damn! My only clean pair of shoes. No time to wash it in the machine so I rinse off my shoe with a garden hose and run three blocks to school, my soggy shoe slapping on the sidewalk.

I burst into homeroom as the final bell rings. Rory raises her pierced brow in question. I roll my eyes, a gesture that translates to "Don't ask!" then slip into my desk and cross my right leg over my left to hide my soggy shoe. Rory covertly texts to me: Talk to U @ break.

At break, as I walk to the locker Rory and I share, I give a quick look at the kids buzzing excitedly around the communal bulletin board. *Another exclusive club starting up*, I guess with disinterest, turning away to spin my locker combination. I glance back and cringe when I hear the snarky voice of Beatrice Palmquist.

“...already entered,” Beatrice says all self-important, like she expects the entire school – make that the universe! – to stop and listen whenever she speaks.

“You deserve to win Talent-Mania,” her sidekick, Hannah, coos in the mindless way of a cult-follower.

“And I will,” Beatrice says with such certainty that I’m instantly suspicious. How can anyone be that sure of winning?

I peek over my shoulder, and it’s like seeing double, only Beatrice is a fierce lion to Hannah’s mouse. Both girls have inky black hair and wear identical jade-green shirts over short hip-hugging skirts that show lots of skin. They’ve left the bulletin board crowd to whisper behind a pillar only a few feet from me.

“I’m sure you’ll take first place. Well, almost sure.” Hannah’s voice falls so soft I have to strain to hear. “Katelyn Booker will be hard to beat.”

“Don’t be stupid, Hannah. Remember what I’ve told you – negativity equals self-defeat.”

“Have you heard Katelyn sing?”

“Haven’t and don’t care to.” Beatrice gives a sassy snap of her ruby-red polished nails.

“Katelyn had a role in an off-Broadway musical,” Hannah persists, twisting a strand of her black hair. “She could win.”

“First place is mine. I’ve been practicing affirmations since Ms. Farrow gave me this amazing library book, *Winners Always Win*. It’s like it was written just for me. Every morning I stare in the mirror, visualizing myself wearing a glittery

crown in the parade, and recite, ‘I will win because I am a winner.’”

“The winner gets a scholarship,” Hannah adds a bit wistfully, which surprises me because her parents own a big-deal car dealership in Empire and she waves her credit cards like fashion accessories.

“I don’t care about prizes. For me, winning is all about pride,” Beatrice says in this faux modest voice that makes me want to puke. “My music and voice instructors say they’ve never seen a more talented student. It’s a huge responsibility being a role model for other kids, and I take it seriously. Everyone expects me to win, and I won’t disappoint them.”

“It doesn’t hurt that you’re going out with the mayor’s son.” Hannah giggles. “Derrick will make sure his father picks you for the win.”

“You’d think so, but Derrick asked me not to enter.”

“No!” Hannah gasps. “He didn’t!”

“Oh, yes, he did. He says it wouldn’t be fair since I’m so tight with his family.” Her tone cuts to razor sharpness. “But I’ll teach him a lesson in fairness.”

Hmmm. This is getting interesting. I pretend to search my locker. Everyone knows Beatrice is practically engaged to Mayor King’s son, an agreement between their parents when Beatrice and Derrick were infants. It would be a romantic love story if Beatrice wasn’t such a bitch (no disrespect to female dogs).

“Derrick deserves to suffer for treating you so horribly. What are you going to do him?” Hannah asks like a vampire thirsty for a bloody battle.

“Nothing...much. But when I’m through, he’ll convince his father – ooh, what’s that hideous smell?” Beatrice sniffs the air.

“Something stinks all right.” Hannah sniffs, too. “Ewww! Like a sewer.”

I sense their gazes turning in my direction, and bury my head in my locker.

“Of course it’s *her*. P.U. Ashlee,” Beatrice mocks with a laugh that doubles as Hannah joins in. “Stinking up our school.”

I wish I could crawl inside my locker and slam the door.

“I know you can hear me. I can certainly *smell* you. What’s that perfume? Eu de urine?”

Don’t turn around. Don’t turn. Don’t.

But I do, and shame flames through me when Beatrice’s gaze zeroes in on my shoe – the left one with the faint yellow Cretin stain.

“Disgusting.” Hannah puckers her face.

“Some people have no concept of hygiene,” Beatrice says haughtily. “Peeing on your own shoe is pathetic.”

“Too long of a line in the ladies’ room?” Hannah jokes.

“Good one, Hannah.” Beatrice high-fives Hannah then whirls around like a jungle cat lunging for prey and yanks my arm so hard I’m forced to face her. “Well, aren’t you going to say something? It’s rude to eavesdrop, no matter how fascinating our conversation. Whatever you heard, you better not tell anyone.”

“You mean your plan to use your boyfriend to help you win the contest?” I blurt out, more pissed off than

intimidated.

“Spreading lies is dangerous,” Beatrice says with a predatory gleam narrowing in her black eyes.

“Like I care about your dumb competition.” I slam my locker as the warning bell rings, and I mentally curse Rory for not showing up. She can usually stop me from losing my temper when outrage boils to dangerous levels.

“And why should P.U. Ashlee care?” Hannah nudges Beatrice. “It’s not as if she can enter. That requires talent.”

“Which she lacks.” Beatrice nods. “Unless peeing on your own shoe is a talent.”

They burst into giggles, and my skin flames with quick-fire temper. *Don’t lose it*, I warn myself. *Don’t say anything. Don’t.*

“Maybe I *will* enter the contest.” The words spring from my mouth, and I want to shove them back in. But it’s too late.

“Really?” Beatrice draws the word out, narrowing her eyes. “Can you sing or dance or play a musical instrument?”

“My talent will be a-a surprise.” *To me, too*, I think miserably.

But I don’t back down. I stride over to the bulletin board where I write my name on the sign-up sheet.

I’m entered.



As I practically run to my next class, my text tone chimes. I’m

sure it's Rory apologizing for standing me up. She better have a good excuse. Only the caller ID isn't Rory's.

Pleeeeeze. Need to see U today. 4 @ Stone Face Fountain

Rory is waiting for me in our next class and explains she couldn't meet me during break because she got caught talking during a test.

"I wasn't cheating or anything, just showing Maria my lizard henna, which wowed her so much she's going to pay me to decorate her wrist. This could become a huge career move for me. We were discussing designs when Ms. Carson came over and accused me of cheating. Maria is an A student and I'm not. I tried to explain, but Cut-Throat Carson didn't believe me. So, guess who has detention tonight?"

"That's rough," I say.

"Outrageously unfair. Still, sorry for not meeting you at our locker."

"No prob." I shrug, not wanting to talk about Beatrice and Talent-Mania. I've already decided to go back to the sign-up list to cross off my name. I mean, seriously, me perform in a talent show? I've never had even one music lesson, and the Q-Bees howl in protest when I sing in the kennel.

Beatrice is right. I'm talentless.

"Where's your new phone? I'm dying to see it." Rory leans across her desk and holds out her hand. "Just how marvelous is mauve?"

I give her my phone, and I swear she has an internal GSP for drama because she immediately clicks on the texts.

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Her eyes widen as she reads all three texts from Prince.

“Who’s this Prince guy?” she asks.

“Don’t know. I’m not even sure it’s a guy.”

“Oh, it’s a guy, and he’s got it bad for you.”

“Not me!” I lower my voice when other kids glance at us. “He’s got the wrong girl. I think my phone number belonged to his girlfriend.”

“Poor guy. His heart is breaking.”

“Yeah, and I’m getting the messages instead of the girl he loves.”

“So? He needs to forget about her and find a new girl.”

Rory grins wickedly. “Maybe you.”

I swat her arm. “Don’t be stupid. If his girlfriend knew how much he misses her, she’d forgive him and they’d get back together.”

“So, do something about it.”

“Like what?” I spread out my hands helplessly.

Rory twists her lips, a gesture I know to mean she’s scheming, and before I can stop her, she taps a message on my phone. “That should do it.”

“Noooooo! Rory!” I cry, grabbing for my phone. “You didn’t!”

“Oh yes, I did,” she admits proudly.

I stare in horror at the text she’s sent to Prince.

See you there.

Chapter Four

There was a young prince who was hunting and coming past her, and he saw how pretty she was, and he asked, "Who's she?" (J.F. Campbell)

I refuse to speak to Rory and ignore her texts. Her reply to Prince will only result in more heartbreak for the poor guy when no one shows up. What did Rory hope to accomplish? That I'd meet Prince, he'd take one look at me, fall crazy in love, and forget about his girlfriend? As if I'm going to meet with a stranger who could be a pervert, stalker, or OMG...*old!*

Rory is a hopeless romantic, always trying to hook me up. She believes in happy endings and dreams come true. But I'm dealing with homework, mean girls, forgotten birthdays, and a pee-stained shoe. Some guy isn't going to make my dreams come true. That's *my* job.

Prince doesn't text back. I compose several texts to him, trying to explain he has the wrong number and the wrong

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girl, but the words come out stupid and I delete them.

After school, I listen to music as I do my chores. I do *not* think about texts. When I finish with the dogs, I toss my stinky clothes (and shoe) in the washing machine and take a shower. As I towel off, I glance at the clock. 3:42. Prince will be arriving at Stone Face Fountain soon. He'll wait and wait and wait. *I didn't send the text, so why do I feel so guilty?* I know why. I don't want to be that girl who hurts a guy, even if I don't know the guy and I'm the wrong girl.

I grab my phone, fully intending to text Prince the truth.

A tap of my finger powers the phone, flashing from black to light. But instead of the usual apps, an image appears of a huge carved stone spouting water into a cement fountain. I recognize the fountain, a gift to our town from the mayor upon his re-election, commissioned by a famous sculptor for mega-bucks. It's supposed to be an artistic representation of Mayor King's face. But when I look closely, I only see squiggly lines carved into an ugly chunk of stone.

What's Stone Face Fountain doing on my phone? I didn't click a link or an app. *Rory!* I think angrily. She did it! Interfering again like a misguided matchmaker. But how'd she send this photo without an email or text? As I stare at the palm-sized screen, the photo transforms into a video – trees blowing, birds flitting from branches, and fountain water rippling. A shadowed figure walks toward the Stone Face Fountain and...

My fricking phone goes black!

Seriously, it shuts off now? I tap on the power, but the video has vanished.

I don't actually make a decision to leave home, so I'm surprised when my mind clears and I'm holding Toffee's leash. We're on Castle Street sidewalk heading toward the Stone Face Fountain monument.

As I near the monument, I see a figure sitting on a cement bench by the fountain. OMG, it's him! He's half-hidden by shadows, but I'm certain it's the same guy from the strange video. He's holding a bouquet of daisies that seem to droop as he waits.

I dive behind a huge oak tree, whispering to Toffee to be quiet. The flowers and sense of sadness add to my certainty that I'm staring at Prince. From the back, he looks my age with athletic shoulders and wavy sandy-blond hair. What should I do? Go up to him and explain about the texts? Confess that his girlfriend isn't coming?

The thought of talking to him, face to face, squeezes my heart. I have little experience talking to guys. When I was on the Brain Bowl, there was this really hot guy I liked, but I couldn't find the courage to tell him. With the nickname P.U. Ashlee, it's no shocker I've never had a serious boyfriend. And I have no idea what to say to some other girl's boyfriend.

So, I hide behind a tree, watching. Maybe if I see his face, he'll be more real to me and I'll find the courage to talk to him.

Toffee wiggles, her golden tail smacking against the tree trunk. Prince lifts his head at the sound, looking around. He gets up from the bench, tall and handsome in snug black slacks and a navy-blue buttoned-down shirt, the sort of clothes a guy wears to impress a girl. A guy thoughtful

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enough to bring flowers. A guy whose heart breaks because the girl he loves won't talk to him.

When he steps from the shadows into the sun, I see him clearly.

He's tall with sandy-brown hair curly around his ears and arms ripped with muscles like he works out, but it's his face that steals my breath away. Not because he's heart-thumping hot (he is) or because he goes to my school (he doesn't), but because he's famous (at least in Castle Top).

Derrick King.

The mayor's son.

And Beatrice Palmquist's boyfriend.



I may not have any special talents, but I'm smart enough to know when to run the hell away from trouble. I pull Toffee away from the tree, but when I jerk to the right she jerks to the left. Her leash flies from my fingers, flinging me off balance. I topple backward and land smack on my butt.

Toffee runs toward the fountain. When I hear a shout and a splash, I cover my eyes. I can *not* look.

Of course, I do look and die a few gruesome deaths right there on the grass. Toffee has jumped into the shallow fountain surrounding Stone Face, splashing water all over Prince. I mean, Derrick.

"I'm so sorry!" I rush forward. "Toffee! Come here right now!"

Toffee is having too much fun to obey, nipping at water and prancing in circles like a doggie ballerina, pirouetting sprays of fountain water. She is such a show-off.

When I reach the fountain, I lunge for her leash. But Toffee sashays around the fountain and the leash dances along with her. I chase after the leash, stretching my arm over the fountain...almost touching...a fingertip away...

I grasp the leash just as Toffee jumps sideways.

Screaming, I tumble into the fountain.

“Here!” Derrick cries, holding out his arm. “Grab my hand.”

As his fingers touch mine, Toffee jerks the leash, and me. My feet fly out from beneath me. I’m in the water again. Derrick loses his balance, too. His arms flail and he topples with a splash. Bright yellow and white flowers fling high into the air, petals fluttering to the fountain like fairy sailboats.

“Um, are you okay?” Derrick sits in two feet of water, shaking his head like he’s confused.

Soggy hair drips in my eyes as I nod. No cuts or broken bones and my fairy-bird henna survived, too. Still there are no words for my utter humiliation. If I say “I’m sorry” for the rest of my life, that won’t come close to the apology he deserves.

Still, it’s not like I purposely pushed him in the water. I lift my chin high as I face him, bracing myself for his anger. He blinks fountain water and pushes sopping hair from his eyes. He frowns down at his drenched clothes then back at me. I cringe, sure he’s going to start shouting. Instead, he does something that shocks me. He bursts out laughing.

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And I find myself laughing, too.

Until I remember that cell phones don't mix well with water.

"Oh!" I cry, jumping to my feet. "My phone!"

I let go of Toffee's leash and dig into my pocket, holding my breath as I grasp my mauve phone. Not a drop of water on it. My mauve phone is not only marvelous, but it's miraculous, too. I spit out a daisy petal that slopped into my mouth and sigh with relief.

"You'd better check your phone," I tell Derrick.

"How'd you know I have a phone?" he asks, his dark-blond brows arching.

"Uh, doesn't everyone?" I climb out of the fountain and bend over to pick up Toffee's leash. We both shake ourselves to dry.

Derrick checks his black phone, biting his lip nervously until the power lights up the tiny screen. He blows out a sad sigh. "Damn."

"But your phone is working," I point out, puzzled by his misery.

"Yeah. Only no new messages," he says in a heavy tone, like the tiny phone in his hand weighs more than the Stone Face Fountain.

"I'm so sorry for everything. You're all wet and your flowers – such pretty daises – are ruined."

"I don't need them." He scowls down at the ground, stomping on a soggy daisy. "She's not coming."

I know who "she" is and why she isn't coming. Beatrice hasn't been getting his texts. She must have changed her cell

number to punish him for not wanting her in Talent-Mania. Once he “learns his lesson” and agrees to influence his father’s vote, they’ll get back together. She’ll win the contest, scholarship, and crowning title of Miss Castle Top.

And I’m standing here, dripping wet.

“I-I have to go,” I say, tugging on Toffee’s leash.

“Wait.” He stares into my face. “What’s your name?”

I almost answer until a horrible thought jolts me. What if Beatrice has talked trash about P.U. Ashlee? I imagine her laughing about the “pathetic loser with pee on her shoe,” twisting truth into outrageous lies. And who wouldn’t believe her? While she isn’t model-pretty (her nose is pointy and her mouth is too thin), her sophistication and confidence dazzles everyone. Compared to Beatrice, I’m a boring plain Jane.

“Jane,” I blurt out. “Um, that’s my name.”

His grin flashes white teeth that are perfect except for a gap between the top two. “I’m Derrick.”

“I know,” I say then wish I hadn’t when I see the dark flush on his face.

“Of course you know who I am. Everyone does.” He scowls, raking his hand through his soggy hair. “My father doesn’t exactly keep a low profile.”

I twist a corner of my shirt to wring out water. “He *is* the mayor.”

“But I’m not – although Dad expects me to follow in his footsteps.”

“You say that like it’s a death sentence.”

“It is. To me.”

“He can’t make you do anything you don’t want to. Tell

him how you feel.”

“I wish it was that easy.” He gestures to Stone Face, crafted in an abstract image of his father. “Even here, I can’t get away from my father.”

I nod, sensing he needs to vent and not knowing what to say anyway.

“Everyone expects me to be just like him, but I’m not.” Sitting on the edge of the fountain, he hangs his head as if he’s drowning in dark thoughts. “I hate all the lying in politics. My father talks about helping the ‘little people’ but the only people I see him helping are his big-shot political cronies. I can’t be fake like that. Besides I only got a C minus in public speaking and get nervous giving speeches.”

“Nice speech,” I say, applauding.

He glares. “You don’t understand.”

“I do. If there was a class for coping with unrealistic parental expectations, I’d sign up for sure,” I say, thinking of my stepdad and how we both disappoint each other. “And really, I liked what you said. You didn’t come off as nervous.”

“You’re easy to talk to.”

“Well, thanks.” I can’t take my gaze from his lips, watching as they curve into a smile that carves adorable dimples in his cheeks. “I like hearing what you have to say. If you wanted to be in politics, you’d be really good at it – the best mayor ever.”

“Never happening,” he says with a firm headshake.

I sit beside him on the rim of the fountain, my focus now on a curl of hair waving across his forehead. I have to force my hand to stay by my side and not reach up to brush

the curl from his eyes. When I realize I've been staring without saying anything, I ask, "So, what kind of career *do* you want?"

"That's the problem. I don't know. I'm good at some things but great at nothing. All I know for sure is I want to do work that helps people." His eyes, deep brown with sweeping lashes, gaze off to the treetops for long seconds before he turns back to me. "What about you?"

"Me?" I suddenly remember I'm talking to a guy – a famous, hot-looking guy who has a girlfriend – and my cheeks burn.

"Yeah, you. I wasn't talking to your dog. What sort of career do you want?"

I shake my head. "You'll think it's weird."

"I saw a news segment on weird jobs. You want to be a taxidermist, submarine cook, or shark tank cleaner?"

"Nothing that weird," I say, laughing.

"Come on. Spit it out."

"Okay, but don't laugh." I glance over at Toffee who is chasing a floating leaf in the fountain. "I want to work with dogs...and other animals, too. I feel a strong connection with animals and know they have emotions just like people. I'm going to be an animal therapist."

"Cool. I'm a big fan of animals. My dog Pete is more like my best bud than a pet. You should see him, nearly as huge as this fountain. He's a mastiff. This tiny pup of yours is a Queen Bee, isn't she?" He reaches out to pat Toffee's wet head.

"Yeah." I will *not* mention working in the kennels.

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He flashes his adorable gap-toothed smile again. “Our chef has a Queen Bee, and she raves about how clever and well-behaved it is.”

“Toffee is too clever sometimes,” I say with a stern look at my dripping dog. “And she’s usually better behaved.”

“She’s better behaved than my Pete. I think you’ll make a great animal therapist. If Dad has his way, I’ll never leave this boring town.”

“There are worse things than living here.” *Like not being able to afford the education you want.* “And FYI, Castle Top is *not* boring.”

“Seriously?” He snorts. “Castle Top isn’t much of a city. No theater, sports arena, or mall. There’s nothing to do.”

“There’s a lot going on if you know where to look.”

“And you know?” he asks skeptically.

“I don’t live high on a hill behind locked gates. I take Toffee walking a lot and know what’s going on in my neighborhood.” I gesture beyond the park then quote something Mom used to say whenever I complained about being bored, “Boring is a state of mind, not a location.”

“Ouch. I think I’ve just been insulted.”

I meet his gaze, press my lips knowingly, and nod.

“Prove it to me,” he challenges. “Show me the real Castle Top.”

I think of his girlfriend (who doesn’t deserve him) and the texts he doesn’t know I received. But those are minor things when presented with a challenge. There’s a reason I’m at the top of my honors classes; no matter how tough the assignment, I never give up.

“You’re on,” I tell him, gripping tight to Toffee’s leash. “But it’ll have to wait ‘til the weekend since I have homework and chores. Can you meet me back here at noon on Saturday?”

“I’ll be here.” He shines that amazing grin on me. “See you then, Jane.”

Chapter Five

She was taken to the young prince, dressed as she was. He thought she was more charming than all others maidens in the land. (Serbian tale, author unknown)

I check my phone on my walk home and find a zillion – or to be exact – eleven messages from Rory saying “I’m sorry” with lots of promises never to send a text from my phone without permission again.

You are forgiven, I text her.

She replies: Thx. Where are you?

Walking home. I grin as I jump over an overgrown root cracking through the sidewalk. Guess who I met?

Do tell.

Him.

I swear I can hear her squeal from the four blocks away. When my phone rings, it’s Rory calling for details. This is a

role reversal since I'm usually the one calling her for news about her latest boyfriend. Of course, Prince isn't my boyfriend or anything, but it's fun being the one to dish about a guy.

Rory seems genuinely surprised when I tell her about the Stone Face Fountain video playing on my phone. If Rory didn't send it to my phone, who did? She's so excited, though, that I shrug this off and launch into the story of meeting Derrick. I tell her every soggy detail.

"Prince Derrick likes you!" she squeals.

"He's not really a prince. Want to bet Beatrice gave him that ridiculous nickname? And he doesn't know anything about me."

"You're going out with him!"

"We're only going to walk around town. Not a date."

"Exactly like a date."

"Not anything like a date."

"You're soul mates fated to meet," she insists with a romantic sigh. "He must have already broken up with bitchy Beatrice – or she stupidly dumped him – so he's free to fall in love with you."

I should tell her that Beatrice is punishing Derrick, not breaking up with him. But I never told her about being bullied by Beatrice because she'd go into angry BFF mode and try to fight my battles for me. It's not like Derrick is interested in me anyway, especially after I was responsible for him falling into the fountain. He laughed it off, but he was just being kind. I can't even think about how I must have looked without makeup and my hair kinking into tangles –

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even more of a loser than usual. *He's already forgotten me*, I tell myself. Yet my heart jumps when I remember his teasing eyes and nice laugh. Rory's phone beeps with call waiting, and she squeals that it's another "client" for her henna designs and clicks off. I'm relieved to stop talking about a relationship between me and Derrick that isn't going to happen. Sighing, I slip my phone into my pocket and head on home with Toffee.

No lights on at my house plus an empty driveway equals no Blake. Another late night for him. I'm not speaking to him anyway because of the whole birthday-forgetting thing.

I defrost a pizza and start on my homework. Chewing spicy pepperoni, I can't focus on calculus equations. My thoughts drift to. Even dripping wet from the fountain, he looked amazing. Could Rory be right? Does Derrick like me? Talking to him was so easy, natural, like we'd been friends for years. And he's the one who asked me to show him Castle Top. Not a date. Well, maybe a little like a date. But seriously? How can I even be thinking this? I'm really losing it. Or gaining something... someone. Is it possible? I definitely felt energy sizzling between us. Did Derrick feel it, too?

My phone chimes with a text. I glance down at Derrick's number. My heart soars and then plummets.

Need to see you. ASAP

I'm not the girl he's messaging.



My life sucks. School mornings suck. I wake up in a beastly mood and just want to crawl beneath my covers and never come out. But I didn't achieve a 4.0 by skipping school, especially when there's a quiz in French. Besides, I need to cross my name off the Talent-Mania sign-up sheet. And I'd rather be at school anyway since home is full of silence and awkward glances. My stepdad finally remembered my birthday. He apologized and handed me a twenty-dollar bill, generous for him but a bitter consolation. Then he hurried off to work.

At school I have a hard time focusing on lectures, and when teachers aren't looking, I sneak texts to Rory. I wish I'd never told her about my Saturday non-date with Derrick. Now she's determined to help me impress him, advising me on how to flirt and selecting date-wear from my pathetic closet. I tried to diffuse her enthusiasm by showing her the last text Derrick sent to Beatrice, the one begging to see her and signed *Prince*. He belongs to Beatrice and doesn't even know my real name.

There are no more texts from Derrick, and I assume he and Beatrice are back together. I hope they live happily ever after. Not really. But in my thoughts I'm more generous than in my heart.

As the day drags on, my mood darkens. Things get worse when I try to cross my name off the Talent-Mania sign-up list. The paper is gone. I ask around and find out the

maximum number of entrants was reached, so the list was sent on to the contest organizers. To withdraw my entry, I'll have to go to Mayor King's office, where I might run into Derrick and his girlfriend. No, thank you.

The rest of the week blurs by in sameness, until Saturday morning. I'm too stressed to eat breakfast. I stir my spoon in my cinnamon oat-flakes until the flakes go limp and remind me of soggy daisy petals sailing in a fountain. I dump my cereal down the garbage disposal. *Derrick won't show up*, I tell myself very firmly. *He's into Beatrice and has completely forgotten me.*

Still, I can't not go. I have to see for myself, to make sure. Besides, Toffee and I have a special walking routine on Saturdays.

He's there.

At the fountain.

My heart does that jumpy thing, and I forget how to speak.

"And here she is!" Derrick waves from his seat on the rim of Stone Face Fountain. "Hey, Jane."

Toffee breaks from her leash, flings herself in his arms, and licks his face. I envy my dog. Pathetic.

"Down. Down, Toffee. I'm happy to see you, too," Derrick says as he bends down for Toffee's leash and hands it to me. "Lead on, tour guide. No leash required."

I know I'm blushing as his fingers brush mine. Why does he have to be so nice and funny? I remind myself sternly that he has a girlfriend.

"Let's get this tour started," I say, giving Toffee's leash a

tug.

“What will it take? Ten, maybe fifteen minutes to see all the hot spots in the metropolis of Castle Top?”

“Do not mock my town.” I lift my chin and repeat one of Mom’s misquotes, “True wisdom is knowing that others know more than you.”

“Actually the quote is from Socrates and it’s ‘The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing.’”

Damn. Not only nice and funny, but smart, too. I harden my heart and say crisply, “You have a lot to learn about Castle Top.”

He arches a skeptical brow, but I hold my head high with confidence. I know the real Castle Top from the ground up – a dog’s point of view. Nothing boring about *my* town, and I’ll prove it to Derrick. He’s been living on the hill far too long.

I take the “Prince” to see his kingdom.

“First stop, Shakespeare’s Theater,” I say.

“Castle Top doesn’t have a theater.”

“You think?” I smile mysteriously, turning on Othello Road which winds along a creek and only has two homes. We pass the newly remodeled two-story belonging to the large Dunwilly Family and turn into the driveway of an off-kilter one-and-a-half story shack owned by Samuel “Shakespeare” Bottoms.

“We’re going to this dump?” Derrick frowns at the weathered shack, the boarded-up front window, and the front porch sagging into riotous weeds.

“Not the house.” I point to the high backyard fence made of shiny new redwood. Through a polished wrought-

iron gate, I glimpse small figures and hear the crackling sound of electric speakers. “Hurry or we’ll miss the show!”

Derrick purses his lips with reluctance but follows me through the gate, and I turn to see his eyes widen as he takes in the rocked yard with colorful planted pots and a roped path leading up bleachers where tiered seats are crowded with mostly children.

“How could all this have been here yet I never knew?” he asks as we climb to the third row and sit on the hardwood seats.

“People from the hill communities hardly ever come down to the valley. Around here kids skate, walk, or bike to Shakespeare’s shows.”

Derrick looks curiously at the raised stage with elaborate lighting, cables, speakers, and high-tech devices. “What’s all the equipment for?”

“You’ll see,” I whisper, putting my finger to my lips as overhead stage lights flicker. Toffee, who knows the routine, has already jumped onto my lap. “Any minute now.”

Overhead lights spark like fireworks on the stage, and a rumble shakes the seats like thunder. Shakespeare loves drama and has spared no expense to create a high-tech outdoor theater. Rather than remodel his house, he put all his gas money into theatrical effects, living for art.

An explosion of smoke puffs a cloud of grayness over the stage, and when it disperses, a hunched, withered man, draped in a black cape leans on a hawk-head wooden cane. A real hawk squawks from overhead, fluttering to a wooden pedestal off to the side of the stage.

“Welcome to my humble production,” Samuel, AKA Shakespeare, announces, dramatically tossing aside his cane and standing tall. His cape flaps with a Dracula-like flourish, and his eyes seem to flame with dark fire.

The audience explodes in applause, and I spot the Dunwilly children in the front row with their parents. I recognize many of the other kids, too, who always rush out to pet Toffee when we’re walking.

“Our play is *The Shoemaker and the Birds*,” the aged thespian declares in a booming British accent. Shakespeare’s accent changes with each role, and I have no idea what his real voice sounds like. “I will perform a retelling of a familiar olden tale with themes of generosity and greed. Settle in your seats and travel back in time to a humble village in the 1800s, when kings and lords ruled in glittering wealth while poor peasants drudged through life in poverty, except for those rich with kind hearts. The show begins forthwith!”

Shakespeare claps his hands, and a bulky square box rises from the floor then expands into a gigantic screen stretching across the stage. The screen comes alive in high definition with a scene of a cobbler’s shop from “Once Upon a Time,” where scraps of leather and tools are scattered on an old-fashioned wood countertop. Shelves span a wall behind the counter, clearly meant to display shoes, but empty.

“Cool,” Derrick murmurs beside me.

“It’ll get even better,” I tell him in a hush because the show is starting.

“Once there was a poor shoemaker who had no wife or children or money.” Shakespeare tosses aside his cape to

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reveal peasant clothes like a shoemaker would have worn centuries ago. “The shoemaker had barely enough leather to craft one last pair of shoes, but he was weak with hunger and struggled to lift his hands to grasp his tools. Still, he was a kind man, and when a stranger came to his door begging for food, he gave away his last stale slice of bread. When the stranger left, the shoemaker retired to sleep, sure he was not long for this world – but that night something remarkable happened.”

Shakespeare snaps his fingers, and bright-colored birds fly from their tower atop Shakespeare’s roof. A spotlight shines onto a round pedestal ascending from a corner of the stage. The birds flutter to the pedestal and tap their beaks on leather pieces, as if actually making shoes. I always feel like I’m watching real magic (rather than fancy Hollywood-type effects), and I can tell by the way Derrick is leaning forward that he’s caught up in the story, too. We both gasp when holographic shoes appear; not flat images but multi-dimensional shining leather shoes. Wings flap as birds soar into the sky, leaving their gift of shoes while the shoemaker acts like he’s sleeping.

I glance down at the fairy-bird on my palm then reach out to show it to Derrick. He smiles as if impressed, and I whisper, “It’s henna. Like a temporary tattoo.”

“Nice,” he whispers back.

When he leans closer, my heart flutters and I think maybe he’s going to touch the bird on my palm, clasp my fingers in his, and pull me close. But reality slaps me, and I realize I’m being stupid. I jerk my hand back before I

embarrass myself by making a move on a guy who already has a girlfriend.

Derrick gives me a puzzled look then turns back to the stage where the cobbler is once again waking to find newly-made leather shoes. Derrick's caught up in Shakespeare's storytelling spell, unaware of the drama playing out in my head. I hug Toffee to my chest and focus on the stage.

The performance continues with the shoemaker selling his shoes and sharing the money with his poor neighbors, gaining fame and fortune as the birds craft fine shoes while he sleeps. He achieves great wealth but fears the birds will leave him, so one night he waits for them with an exquisite gilded cage. That night, the birds don't come, and they are never seen again.

When the screen folds up and lights fade from the stage, Shakespeare claps his hands and his winged performers flutter down to the stage, each bird lifting a wing, bowing alongside Shakespeare. There's a flash of smoke and when it clears, the birds and Shakespeare have vanished.

The audience goes wild with foot stomping, whistling, and applause.

"Wow," Derrick murmurs. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Better than a cinema, huh?" I grin.

"A thousand times better. Those birds were amazing! Like they were really making shoes. And that ending, how did they all just vanish? I can't figure it out."

"Don't even try. That's part of Shakespeare's mystique."

"He could charge lots of money for such a phenomenal

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show. Shouldn't we pay him?"

"Only if you want to insult him. Besides he never comes back to the stage. When he vanishes, he's gone until the next Saturday. Come on." I stand, gesturing for Derrick to follow. Around us, kids swarm like bees on the scent of honey, hurrying out of the yard. "We don't want to miss the next show."

"More birds?" he jokes.

"No." I smile. "This time? Frogs."



We walk about a mile down a country road to a grassy hill overlooking a field normally used for baseball, soccer, and other neighborhood sports. The well-used playing field is ringed by sloping grassy hills. We don't have folding chairs like the groups of families and friends sitting closer to the field, so I lead Derrick to a shady area under a pine tree and we sit cross-legged on the grass with a clear view of the action down on the field.

Over a dozen kids with their frogs line up in the center at painted white lines in the dirt. When I was a kid, Mom and Blake (I called him Dad back then) always came to watch when I raced a frog. I'd treat my frog like royalty, searching for the biggest flies for snacks and keeping my frog athlete comfy in a plastic wading pool. I never did win a first place trophy, but I sure had fun trying.

"Frogs have to leap three consecutive times, each

cumulative distance added for their score. Then the jumps are measured by a panel of parent judges,” I explain to Derrick as I cuddle Toffee on my lap. “Anthony Dunwilly’s frog, Torpedo, won the last seven races. “He’s massively huge.”

“Anthony or the frog?” Derrick says, shading his eyes with his hand as he looks down at the field.

“Definitely not Anthony. He’s the skinny kid with the Mohawk.” I point to Anthony as he struggles to hold a frog that probably weighs more than he does.

Derrick whistles low. “You weren’t kidding. That’s some monster frog.”

Even though Anthony is a great kid, I’m rooting for his little sister, Tabitha. She’s so shy she won’t talk to me, but she loves to hug Toffee.

Mr. Dunwilly, a chubby teddy bear of a dad, lifts his hand to silence the audience. “The frog that jumps the farthest wins the authentic fake gold frog-on-a-stick trophy. Hand it over, Anthony. The trophy has to go to a new winner.” He gestures to his boy, who reluctantly gives the trophy to his father.

“They share the same trophy?” Derrick asks.

“It’s a huge honor. Each winner gets their name engraved on the plastic-fake-gold frog’s butt.”

“Now that’s something to aspire to – amphibian austerity,” he says, and I glance suspiciously at him to make sure he’s not being sarcastic. His smile is genuine as he watches the first contender, Anthony, gets his frog ready.

Mr. Dunwilly raises his arm and shouts, “GO!”

No shock that Anthony scores an impressive seventeen

feet. But the audience gasps when Raymond Smith (his family lives on Second Street and has three Siamese cats) scores eighteen feet. His parents jump up and high-five each other.

“I was sure Anthony’s Torpedo had it.” Derrick sounds disappointed.

“They usually win,” I admit. “If Raymond does it’ll be his first time.”

“So you’re rooting for him?”

“Not him—Anthony’s sister, Tabitha. She’s only six and last in line.” I glance down at the littlest contender whose long brown braid wiggles as she fidgets. When she first got her frog, he was so little she called him Tiny. Even though Tiny has doubled in size, he’s still the smallest in the competition. I cross my fingers and wish, wish, wish.

Around me, shouts erupt and I look up just in time to see Tabitha’s Tiny leap so high and far that people are standing up, screaming, and applauding like crazy. When I hear Tiny’s score, my mouth falls open. Twenty-two feet!

No frog has ever gone farther than twenty feet, yet the tiniest frog owned by the tiniest girl goes twenty-two. Unbelievable!

I hear a musical beep. My phone.

Slipping it from my pocket, I check for messages. But there aren’t any. Why is my phone glowing? An image of a frog flickers on the screen, and I’m sure I’m hallucinating. The frog’s face shimmers into human features that look oddly like Farley from the phone store. He winks at me, and then the phone goes black.

Shivers crawl on my skin.

Linda Joy Singleton

Either I really am hallucinating or my marvelous mauve
phone is magic.

Chapter Six

As for the prince, he fell so deep in love with her, he didn't take his eyes off her for a single moment. (Asbjørnsen and Moe)

Down on the playing field everyone mobs Tabitha and Tiny like they're celebrities, with cameras flashing and lots of hugging. I'd usually join in the fun, but I can't stop staring at my phone. No further signs of freakiness, the screen lifeless and ordinary again.

Did I imagine the strange images? A frog morphing into the face of the phone store man? Ridiculous! Yet when I looked into his face, he winked at me like we shared a secret. And how could a store I've never seen suddenly appear on a street that shouldn't exist? I searched online, too, for the street and the W.I.S.H. store but found nothing. I wished for a mauve phone and was offered one for the exact amount of money in my pocket. How does that happen?

When I glance up, I find Derrick studying me, his expression puzzled. "Something wrong with your phone?"

“No.” I quickly shove it back into my pocket.

“You had the strangest look on your face,” he says.

“Things have been weird lately.” I meet his gaze. “Do you believe in magic?”

“Is that a trick question? Or part of the tour?”

“No trick.” I glance up at the gray-blue sky where clouds ripple like ocean waves, as if the world has flipped upside-down.

“Seriously, magic?” Derrick laughs but not in a mocking way, more like he’s really considering what I’ve asked. “Have to say no. Turn on the news and all you see is violence and tragedies. My tutors are big on world history, so I know more than I want to about wars that destroyed civilizations. If there really was magic, people wouldn’t be so cruel to each other.”

“Cynical much?”

“I’m a realist.” He shrugs, his tone matter-of-fact. “Still it would be cool if I could believe in something like magic.”

“Stick around,” I say, thinking of the phone in my pocket. “You never know what might happen.”

With a gesture for him to follow me, we move away from the playing field and back to the street. I lead Derrick up the block to a weather-worn playground. When I was little I loved playing here, but a few years ago it was nearly swept away in a flood. All that’s left is a sagging slide and only two of four swings hanging on chains. I sit in a swing, lean back, and kick my shoe on the dirt to propel upward.

Derrick slips into the swing beside me, kicking off into the air. “You don’t really believe in magic, do you?” he asks, his words rising and falling with the rhythm of his swing.

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“Um, no.” I hesitate, not wanting to sound crazy. “I just wonder about things that can’t be explained. Haven’t you heard stories of a mother who miraculously saves her child by lifting a car a zillion times her weight? How does something like that happen?”

“Adrenaline. A scientific phenomenon,” he says.

“Can science explain the lottery winner who has a sudden impulse to buy a ticket when he’s never bought one before and that ticket saves his whole family from being evicted and homeless?”

“Someone has to win, so why not him?”

“Or this news story I saw about twin brothers who died on the same day, killed along the same road just two hours apart.”

“Coincidence.”

I lean back in the swing, and wind whooshes across my face like a sigh. “I guess you’re right.”

“Being right isn’t easy, but someone’s got to do it.”

“That sounds like politician talk.”

Abruptly, he stops the swing with a foot dig in the dirt. “I’m nothing like a politician. Bite your tongue.”

“I get bit enough by dogs,” I tease. “I am *not* biting myself.”

He tosses his head back, laughing. “*Bite your tongue* is something Nana used to say.” Derrick grips the metal swing chains, his voice softening. “You talk about magic, well, that was my nana. She could make flowers grow just by singing to them, and when I was little and she’d visit, we’d sneak out at night to hunt for faeries in the moonlight.”

“Did you ever find any?”

“Faeries?” He snorts. “Not likely. But we had fun looking – until she died.” I can tell by his soft, wistful tone that he loved her very much, like I loved my mom.

“I lost someone, too. My mom,” I admit, surprising myself since I don’t often talk about her.

“I’m sorry. That’s rough.”

“Yeah.” My throat tightens. “But I feel like she’s close sometimes, especially when I’m around animals. Mom had a special way with all creatures. Even wild ones. Once a deer came right up to sniff her hair.”

“Was her hair curly dark-brown like yours?”

“Darker.” I reach up self-consciously, always embarrassed about having hair wild enough to be a species of animal. “She wore it in a braid so it wasn’t stupid like mine.”

“Stupid hair? I didn’t know hair ranked on the IQ scale.”

“Mine does, and it has a sub-par score.” I tug on one of my curls, which springs back into place. “See what I mean?”

“I like your hair.”

“Well, thanks.” I’m suddenly warm even though the sun has slipped behind a cloud.

“You know, usually I don’t talk so much...at least not to girls.” He looks down as he digs a sneaker into the dirt, then glances shyly up at me.

“But you brought flowers for a girl, so you must talk to her lots,” I point out, careful not to admit I know and hate Beatrice.

“She does most of the talking, and I hear all about her friends, school, and the historical biographies she likes to

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read. But with you it's different."

"Because I'm not as well-read on history?" I tease. When I was on the Brain Bowl, history was my worst topic.

"Nah, because you don't just talk. You listen like you're really interested."

"I *am* interested." My sneakers lightly brush the dirt as I slow to stay in sync with him. "You're the most interesting guy I've ever met."

His ears redden brighter than his blushing cheeks, which is totally adorable. Here he is, the most famous kid in Castle Top and he's shy with girls. He reminds me of Newton, a pup from a few litters ago, who was sired by a grand champion and born with such exceptional markings buyers lined up to buy him, but he shied away from his own litter-mates and stumbled when he chased to catch up with them. I loved him for his faults, not his perfection, and wished I could keep him.

Derrick is looking at me, smiling with his gap-toothed grin, and I wish I could keep him, too.

"There you go, getting quiet again," he says. "It makes me wonder what you're thinking. You know plenty about me but haven't said much about yourself. Tell me about you."

"Not much to tell." I hope my ears don't turn red when I blush. "I'm just a typical high-school girl."

"Ha! Nowhere near typical. You take me to the most unusual, amazing places where watching frogs seems more thrilling than front row seats at the Super Bowl. And I like when you laugh like that, not a full laugh but half smile and giggle."

“Do not,” I say with a half-smile and giggle.

“There’s more to you than you’re telling.” He tilts his head, studying me as he sways lightly on his swing. “I have a feeling you’re keeping secrets.”

“All girls have secrets,” I say. “If I revealed mine to you, the Exalted Superior Guild of Girls would send their top assassin after me.”

“Brutal.” He grins.

“You have no idea. I can’t reveal any more for security reasons,” I say in mock seriousness, glad for an excuse – even a crazy one – to avoid admitting I’m his girlfriend’s worst enemy. As we stare at each other (is this flirting?) I’m fascinated by how much can be said without words--a lift of a brow, curve of full lips, and the soundless connections of souls.

He’s laughing again, a sound that’s music to me. I long to bottle his laughter so I can hear it after he returns to Beatrice and I’m back to my real life. I allow myself to look, *really* look, at him the way a dieter drools over a hot fudge sundae. What I wouldn’t give for a taste.

“Hungry?” I ask, abruptly jumping off the swing as if distance between us can save me from my dangerous thoughts. I hope he doesn’t notice my burning face. “There’s a great place I know nearby.”

“I don’t see any restaurants.” He gestures around the neighborhood of modest homes with shady trees, porches with toys and potted plants, and secondhand cars in the driveway.

“We’re not going to a restaurant.”

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“No sign of a food truck either,” he says, peering up and down the street. “And I know there isn’t a mall with a food court in Castle Top.”

“Malls are for big cities. We do it better here. The food is amazing.”

“So amaze me.” He bounds up from the swing and turns to me with a twinkle in his dark chocolate eyes.

“Anything you say, Pr – “I slap my hand over my mouth horrified at what I started to say.

I almost called him Prince.

Chapter Seven

A fine meal was served up, but the young prince ate not a morsel, so intently was he busied in gazing on her. (Perrault)

Derrick arches his brows. “What did you say?”
“Um, priceless and unique food. You’ll be impressed,” I say, sure I sound like an idiot.

“What will you do with her while we eat?” He points to Toffee. “Food places don’t allow dogs.”

“This one is super dog friendly. Not only dogs but other animals, too. Look at Toffee tugging on her leash. She knows where we’re going and will race all the way if I don’t slow her down.”

“Now I’m more curious than hungry.” Derrick falls into step beside me. “Lead on, tour guide.”

We leave the residential neighborhood for empty fields and twisted remains of trees on Desolation Road, a low-lying area of the valley where an entire housing development was washed away by the flood. Only brick-bones of devastation

remain. Glancing beside me, Derrick's expression grows somber as he looks around. We turn a corner, and suddenly there are cars jammed along the street, bikes chained to trees, and a din of voices. On cracked cement ruins of what used to be a grocery store, crowds swarm around tents, tables, and booths.

"What is this place?" Derrick asks with a furrowed brow.

"Swap Market," I say with some pride. "First stop is the Pet Corral for swap-its. Then we'll grab something to eat."

"Pet Corral? Swap-its? Why haven't I ever heard of this before?"

"It's kind of a neighborhood thing," I tug on his arm, and we join the crowd. "You'll see."

Derrick sniffs the air. "Something smells good and spicy."

"Tastes even better," I say.

I push past a group of people waiting for kabobs made from eggplants grown by the Dermott Family, who live on Cascade Street. We circle around a fiery pit where Mrs. Baker, who runs Castle Laundromat, bakes foil-wrapped corn grown in her garden. We stop at a wire-fenced area full of people and animals.

"The Pet Corral," I tell Derrick as we step in through the gate and metal rattles shut behind us.

"Oh," he says, nodding as if relieved something finally makes sense. "When we travel out of the country we leave Pete in dog daycare."

"It's not like that." I shake my head. "Sit on that bench, and watch."

Toffee isn't the only Queen Bee among the many dogs in the Corral. I count Q-Bees. One is on a leash and the other is curled in its owner's owners' arms. I know their names since my stepdad is the only Q-Bee breeder in our state. There are other pets, too: three cats, a pot-bellied pig, goats, a monkey, and a pony. Some are pampered pets, but most are here to work. The pony gives rides to little kids, and the four goats pull Granny Dermott's cart. The pig paws the ground, creating mud art. The monkey gives back rubs. Only the cats don't do anything, except preen in the sunlight, because, well, they're cats.

Everything is about swapping here, and I'm no exception.

I walk up to a raised concrete foundation and address the crowd. "Gather around for my amazing dancing dog!"

Kids come running, adults hurrying after them, and I have an eager audience. I can't sing or play an instrument, but my humming works for background music for Toffee as she jumps up on her tiny back legs and dances. She spins, somersaults, and wags her tail. I spent weeks teaching her this dance routine, and the audience adores her. For a finale, I announce she's going to do her final trick. I call for an assistant from the audience, and Jemmilly, a chubby little girl with freckles, runs forward. She's volunteered before and knows to stand perfectly still with her arms reaching up over her head to form a circle. I give a hand signal to Toffee and she takes a running leap, jumping high as if she had wings and soaring through Jemmilly's arms.

Thunderous applause, but even better, people line up to

offer me swap-its. I thank everyone and let the little kids pet Toffee, a bounty of paper tickets piling in my hand. When the crowd disperses for other activities, there's only Derrick, Toffee, and me. Proudly, I hold out my bounty of tickets to Derrick.

"Nine swap-its! That's two more than last time." I wave the paper slips near his face. "Look. I scored four from Mr. Baker!"

Derrick stares at me blankly. "And this is good because...?"

"A swap-it is like gold here! It means we can have fire-pit baked corn, sugar scones, kabobs, and lots more."

"I have money." Derrick pats his pocket. "I'll buy anything you want."

"Not at Swap Market." I bend over to clip Toffee back on her leash or else she might be tempted to chase after the goat cart. Again. "Everything is about swapping here. No money allowed."

"That's crazy."

"It's the economy." I lower my voice. "Swap Market started because money was tight so people met to trade what they had to offer. Most people have some kind of skill or craft or homegrown food to share. Luckily, I have Toffee."

"I don't understand. Why is money tight? Everyone in Castle Top got rich through hydrofracking."

"Only property owners. Renters got nothing. And former home-owners who lost their homes in the flood are renters now after selling their property before they knew about the possible gas money." I don't add that there were

rumors Mayor King knew the land was valuable but only shared this knowledge with his friends who swooped in after the flood to buy the land cheap.

Derrick frowns, and I wonder if he's heard the rumors, too. We walk in silence, his expression thoughtful until we near an area where smoke rises from a fire pit. "Hmmm, something smells excellent," he says, sniffing the air.

I lead him over to Mrs. Baker and offer two swap-its for her fire-pit-cooked corn. She pets Toffee and tucks the swap-its in a tin can.

"Mmmmm," Derrick says through chews as we sit in the shade on a bench (a board over two crates). "This is so good." He licks butter from his lips.

"The best ever." I pat Toffee on the head. "I'm glad Mr. Baker appreciates Toffee's dancing."

We finish and toss our napkins in a bucket used for a garbage can. I take him to Mr. Carter's for delicious foaming root beer, then to the Kabkee family table for honey barbequed chicken fingers.

After eating, I have a few swap-its left, so I lead Derrick up and down rows of tables offering hand-stitched quilts, woven baskets, floral arrangements, and a plethora of knitted and crocheted crafts.

Derrick stops at a table with handmade pet wear and picks up a black cloth pirate hat sewn for a dog. "Think Pete would look good as a pirate? Yo ho ho and a bowl of dog food."

"Too cute." I chuckle. "You should get it."

"I would but I only have money."

“Lucky for Pete, I have a swap-it.” Chuckling, I offer the paper in trade for the swashbuckling hat. Derrick tries to object, but I insist and can tell by his grin he’s pleased with the doggie hat.

I use my last swap-it for a puppy vest perfect for my dancing dog-erina. Toffee sniffs the velvety emerald green cloth, unimpressed. But I assure her she’ll look adorable in it.

“Best tour ever,” Derrick says, “but I have to get back.”

Back to Beatrice, I think sadly. If I could wave a magic wand, I’d stop time and stay here with Derrick forever. We’d talk and tease and laugh and never grow bored. I slow my steps, not in a hurry to reach Stone Face Fountain, where the tour and the best day of my life ends.

We’ve left the happy sounds from Swap Market, turning a corner so there’s only the clip-clap of our shoes on pavement. A few more blocks and we’re back at the fountain.

“Can we do this again?” Derrick’s gaze on me is sweeter than sugar scones. “How about next Saturday?”

When he reaches for my hand, I want so much to hold tight. Instead, I pull away with a regretful headshake. “I’d like to but – “

“But what?” He frowns. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No. You’ve been great.”

“Don’t you want to hang out again?”

“I do...too much,” I admit with honesty that squeezes my heart.

He rubs his chin. “I don’t get it. Is this some sort of girl code that guys never understand? I don’t have much practice talking to girls, and I’m out of touch with things since I don’t

go to public school. If you want to hang out again, why is that a problem? It'll be cool to explore more streets. But lunch is on me next time, even if I have to sing for a swap-it. You're a great tour guide and you've given me a lot to think about."

"You want me to be your tour guide?" I ask carefully. "That's all?"

"Not all. I mean..." His face reddens. "You're smart, funny, and say unexpected things. I like being with you."

"I like being with you, too," I admit then shake my head to banish images of Derrick touching my skin, caressing my hair, kissing...

"So what's the problem?" he asks.

"If we spend more time together I might...um..." I'm blushing so much if a match were to strike my face it would burst into flames. How do I say this without sounding like an idiot? I take a deep breath then speak quickly. "The problem is I might like you *too* much."

"And that's a bad thing?"

I press my lips together so they won't tremble, and nod.

"Because I'm such a horrible guy with no swap-its?" he jokes.

"No." I meet his gaze so he knows I'm dead serious. "Because you have a girlfriend."

"That's what this is about." His brown eyes darken like a fierce storm brewing. "Of course everyone knows everything about the mayor's son and you've heard all about my girlfriend."

"She goes to my school."

He flinches. "You know Beatrice?"

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“Know Beatrice and hate her guts.” I take a deep breath so I don’t say anything worse. “I know she’s your girlfriend and all, but that’s how I feel.”

“Beatrice can be blunt, but when you get to know her she’s not that bad.”

“Only if your definition of ‘not that bad’ includes black widow spiders, blood-sucking vampires, and mass murderers.”

“Whoa!” He whistles low, which causes Toffee’s ears to perk up. “That’s some serious dislike. What’d she ever do to you?”

Turned my name into a bad joke at school, I almost say, but don’t because he might feel sorry for me – or worse, take Beatrice’s side.

“The point is,” I say with a sigh. “You have a girlfriend.”

He glances down at his sneakers, kicking a rock into the street. “She’s not my girlfriend anymore. She’s angry about something she wants me to help her with, and she won’t talk to me.”

I know. Oh, how I know. This would be a good moment to admit I’ve been getting his texts. All I have to do is power up my phone to show him the truth. I reach for my phone, fingers clasping the smooth plastic case.

“Beatrice and I have been close since we were babies and were even cared for by the same nanny when our parents traveled, but you probably heard that, too,” he adds, scowling.

My finger hovers over the power button as I nod.

With a snort he turns from me to stare into the shallow

fountain water. “Then you know my parents planned our future. Her father and mine drew up a contract for our marriage when we were only in diapers.”

“Don’t they know it’s the twenty-first century?” I clutch my phone a little tighter. “You can’t let them force you into a marriage.”

“I don’t plan to, and Mom knows not to push me, but Dad just assumes I’ll follow his orders.” Derrick flicks his finger into his watery reflection, distorting his face. “Doesn’t matter now anyway. Beatrice will probably never speak to me again. She’s really hurt by...uh, something I said. I never know how to say the right thing. I should have tried harder to understand her.”

“Not your fault. She’s playing you.”

“You don’t know her like I do,” he argues.

“I know her better than I want to. She’s selfish and manipulative.” I glance at my phone, remembering Beatrice’s smug voice as she bragged about punishing Derrick. Suddenly, I’m glad I’ve been getting Derrick’s texts instead of her, and I slide my phone back into my pocket. “She’s just using you. You deserve someone better.”

He looks at me as if I’ve told him dogs are really cats in disguise. But someone had to tell him the truth. The choke leash Beatrice has on him is ridiculous, and his father doesn’t sound any better.

“Maybe Beatrice isn’t perfect, but my father isn’t either, and I still care about them.” Derrick runs his hand through his hair, scowling. “Today has been great. But I asked to see you again because I could use a friend. I’m not looking for a

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new girlfriend. Thanks for the tour.”

His words rip at my flesh, and I’m bleeding humiliation. Did I just tell a hot guy that I like him *too* much? Seriously! How pathetic is that? I want to yank out my tongue and grind it through a garbage disposal so I’ll never say another stupid thing. Why didn’t I think before I spoke? Of course he’s going to defend the girl he’s loved his whole life. I blew my only chance to be his friend.

He jumps to his feet without even looking at me. Clutching the doggie pirate hat in his hand, he walks away.

I want to run after him so badly my muscles ache from holding back. But I’m just a random girl he’ll never see again, and it’s stupid to hope for more. Beatrice broke his heart, and only she can mend it.

But there is something I can do for Derrick, as a friend.

I power up my phone and click on one of Derrick’s messages. The screen blurs as I blink back tears. I won’t cry. I won’t. I’m going to do this, even if it kills me. And it might.

I write my first and last text to Derrick, a parting gift that hurts worse than watching him walk away:

Miss you lots.

Come see me. Don’t text back. Getting new #

I click on Send.

Chapter Eight

Her stepsister said, "Would you not like to go to the ball?"

"Alas!" said she, "you only jeer me; it is not for such as I am to go to such a place."

"You are quite right," her stepsister replied. "It would make the people laugh to see a Cinderwench at a ball." (Perrault)

Early the next morning, my phone blasts hard rock music and I jolt awake like a cat doused with ice water. What the hell? I didn't set the phone alarm.

Pushing aside my blankets, I cross the room to my desk and grab the annoying device. Stupid phone! I touch the power button, ready to shut it down, when a photo flashes across the tiny screen. It's Toffee! Dancing at Swap Market, prancing on her back paws, her spinning golden tail and snowy ears frozen in the moment.

Never Been Texted

I didn't snap this photo, so how did it get on my phone? From the background, I know it was taken yesterday when I was with Derrick. But who sent it? Definitely not Derrick. He doesn't know my phone number. Well, okay, he does, but he doesn't know it's *my* number. Besides he hates me now. Cross him off the suspect list. I check for new messages, but there are none. No surprise since I've only given my number to Rory, and no chance of her being at Swap Market since this is her every-other Saturday with her father who lives sixty miles away.

Could I have accidentally snapped the photo? No, the angle is all wrong, taken from a distance while I was on the platform with Toffee. I gnaw at an uneven thumbnail, desperately trying to come up with a logical explanation because I'm afraid there isn't one. The obvious explanation has nothing to do with logic and everything to do with magic.

Despite all the weirdness, I can't wrap my brain around the reality of magic. Believing in something so fantastical is bigger than what's going on in my life, my town, or the whole world. I mean, what is magic anyway? A word for things people don't understand. But often things one person doesn't understand can be explained by somebody else. Like computer techs totally get how computers work, but when I click on my computer, awesome magic happens that seems impossible. And what about rainbows? When I was little I thought rainbows were the sky's way of smiling, and I'd smile back – until a science teacher explained that rainbows were ordinary, something about a refraction of sunlight. Still, rainbows seem magical to me. Just because something can't

be explained doesn't mean it isn't real.

All I know for sure is that lots of really unexplainable stuff has been happening since I got my phone at a store that doesn't seem to exist. I wonder what will happen next.

I slip into jeans and a yellow shirt then quickly check my phone to make sure the photo hasn't disappeared. Still there, and I'm surprised how relieved this makes me. I love the photo, not only because it was taken during my day with Derrick, but Queen Bee photos always remind me of my mother.

Raising Queen Bees was Mom's passion, not Blake's, although the way he obsesses over them now, you'd think he created the breed. Yet it was Mom who grew up with no siblings, surrounded by kennels of Queen Bees, who inherited a love for the purring darlings.

Blake knew zero about Q-Bees until the grand opening of Bow-Wow Boutique when he showed up looking for a job. Mom hired him and within a month, they were dating. I hated him, of course. It had been just Mom and me against the world, and we were more like best friends than mother and daughter. Blake changed that, but he also changed Mom into someone who laughed a lot. Blake proved to be a hard worker with a gentle hand and genuine respect for the dogs. When Mom told me they were going to be married and asked me to give him a chance, I stopped looking for reasons to hate him. We discovered a mutual love for knock-knock jokes and dog puns, and I started calling him "Dad." When Mom announced she was pregnant, Blake celebrated by transforming his office into a nursery and ordering baby-

shaped dog cookies for the kennel dogs.

We were almost too happy – like a sitcom family, only the laughter was real instead of canned – until the day Blake sprained his ankle and couldn't drive. Mom was the one who drove to pick up the new stud dogs. A red light, crashing cars, a call into the school office. We went from sitcom to tragedy.

The stud dogs survived. I can't stand to be around them, but they've become Blake's obsession. He spends ridiculous amounts of time fawning over Brutus and Cretin or at the store, forgetting I exist. I might as well be the microwave or the vacuum cleaner, useful for meals and chores, but otherwise of no interest to my stepdad. The child he wanted died with Mom.

My hair dangles over the phone as I sit cross-legged on my bed, puzzling over the photo of Toffee. I start to reach for her then remember I couldn't sneak her into my room last night because Blake worked late in the kennels, repairing the stereo system for the dogs. I offered to help, but he said he didn't need me. Yeah, like that's news. Although sometimes I catch him looking at me with the saddest expression, like he wants to tell me something. Once I even asked him if he needed to talk, but he cut me off with a voice as sharp as an executioner's axe and ordered me to mop the kennel.

I don't ask personal questions anymore.

At least I have Toffee, and I love her so much I can't stop admiring her epic cuteness in the dancing photo. It'll make a cool avatar. I bet Derrick would like to see it, too — if I dared send it to him.

Why am I thinking of him again?

I know the answer, even though I hate admitting it even to myself.

In one short afternoon, Derrick slipped under my skin like a tattoo inked into my heart. I even dreamed of him last night — I don't know where we were but it felt like another planet with dazzling lights, waterfalls flashing rainbows and whirling dancers. I was dancing, too — with Derrick. Spinning in the air as if we *were* flying — then we were flying, his arms holding me tight to his firm-muscle chest. And I thought of kissing him. He pulled me closer, and I lost myself in his chocolate brown eyes. My heart on my lips, my lips lifted toward his. So very ready to taste his mouth, knowing it would be sweet and wonderful. I could feel his warm breath, and leaned in, my breath mingling with his and then...

The stupid phone alarm rang.

“Do *not* think about him,” I order myself as I glance into the mirror over my dresser. I undo my braid then flip my messy hair from my face and drag a brush through my tangles. I pull tight and cruelly, glad for a pain that makes sense.

I wave the brush at my reflection. “You’ll never see him again, except at a distance like when he picks up Beatrice at school or you see him on TV.”

Or at Talent-Mania, I think suddenly.

Not that I'm going. What would be the point? To give Beatrice new opportunities to humiliate me? Still I did sign up, which is, like, a ticket to attend. I could mingle in the crowd to watch the performances—and Derrick. No talent required.

Never Been Texted

That's when I get the idea.
I don't have any talent.
But Toffee does.



I'm consumed with texting Rory. She can't come over because she's still at her dad's house, so we text furiously back and forth with plans, because of course I told her I was entering the contest.

She's thrilled and says this will be a great way for me to meet a hot guy so I'll have a boyfriend, too. What she doesn't know is that my heart has become a traitor, sneaking dreams into my head and tormenting me with images of Derrick. But I won't talk about it, not even with Rory.

In homeroom the next day, Rory shows me a photo on her phone of the henna dragon she stained on her boyfriend's bicep. "Ian missed me so he came over to my dad's. When he saw my henna designs, he wanted one. He loves it and promised to show his friends so I can start my henna business." She leans closer to my desk. "You really need to find a sweet guy like Ian so we can go on epic double dates."

I nod like I'm all for double dating, but inside I'm aching, not wanting to think of dating any guy except Derrick, who is already taken. I switch the topic to Talent-Mania. "What should I call my act?" I whisper because we're supposed to be prepping for a test. We have a sub today, though, who is checking email and not paying attention to us.

Got to love sub days.

Rory leans over like she's picking up a paper she conveniently dropped and covertly whispers back, "How about Dancing Doggie?"

I stick out my tongue.

She tries again. "Prancing Paws?"

"Worse." I grimace.

"Something wicked and dark like Dogma?"

I shake my head. "Too enigmatic."

"Enig-what?"

"My point exactly." I sigh. "Choosing a name isn't nuclear science, so it shouldn't be this hard." I think of DJs mashing-up songs to create new sounds. "What about a mash-up of dog plus ballerina?"

"Dog-ball?"

"No." I chuckle. "I was thinking DogRina."

"Sure, it might work—if you're in kindergarten." Rory's arrow stud comes to a sharp point with the rise of her brow. "You need a name that will grab the audience by their hair roots and yank them to a standing ovation—not something that sounds like a B-minus show on Cartoon Network."

"I think DogRina is cute."

"Kittens and fancy cupcakes are cute. Slam the door on cuteness. Go for wild and wow." She taps the blunt end of a pen on the book she's supposed to be studying, which causes Sophia, who sits in front of me, to turn around with a "shush!"

Rory rolls her eyes and doesn't bother lowering her voice as she asks me, "DogRina is the best you can come up with?"

Never Been Texted

“Sadly, yes.” I sag against my desk.

“There must be something else.”

“Nope. Totally out of ideas.”

She wags her pen at me. “Ms. Super Achiever *never* lacks ideas.”

“True.” I grin. She knows me too well. “Toffee is the star, not me, so the name of our act should showcase her talent or breed. Something to do with queen since Toffee is a Q-Bee, like Queen Dancer or – “

And because great minds (and BFFs) think alike, we say it together. “Dancing Queen!”

Sophia whirls back around, glaring. “Shut up already. Some people are trying to study.”

And some people have a stick up their butts. I don’t say this, though, because I’m still smiling at the name for my doggie act. Dancing Queen, that’s exactly what Toffee is, my darling, dancing Q-Bee.

At the front of the room, the sub has put down her phone and is looking my way, so I give Rory a “finish this later” look and crack open my textbook.

Later happens during break when we meet at our shared locker.

Right away, I know something’s up, but I can’t tell if it’s good or bad. Rory’s hair flies around her flushed face like she’s been jolted with electricity, pressing her lips with such intensity as if she’s been holding back a flood of news so long she’s gonna burst.

“Ohmygod! Wait ‘til you hear!” She hooks her arm around mine and drags me over to our locker. As she spins

the combo on the lock, she lowers her voice to a foreboding whisper. “You will never, not in a zillion years, guess who just stopped me in the hall.”

“Skip the guessing torture,” I say. “Who?”

“Beatrice and that mousy little shadow of hers.”

“Hannah?”

“Yeah, that’s her name. They don’t usually bother talking to me because they know I’ll knock their faces off if they say crap about you. So, I was shocked when Beatrice smiled like we were besties and said she had something for me.” Rory sucks in a deep breath. “Well, not for me. For you.”

“Anything she wants to give me is something I don’t want. You told her that, didn’t you?”

“Not exactly.” She shrugs. “She was being so fake, but I was curious, so I asked what she wanted to give you and she handed me an envelope.”

“Death threats aren’t her style,” I say wryly.

“Yeah, she’s the knife-in-your-back type. Here.” Rory digs into her pocket then holds out an envelope.

Eying the plain white envelope, I imagine what evil lurks inside. “It doesn’t look explosive, but just in case, get ready to call the bomb squad.”

“Words can be as explosive as TNT. On second thought, you *should* destroy the envelope. It’s suspicious how nice Beatrice acted when she knows I’m your friend and she’s always such a bitch to you.” Rory’s dark brows narrow. “She was in a really good mood, which worries me.”

Me, too.

Yet I take the envelope.

Never Been Texted

Suck in a deep breath.
Then rip it open.

Chapter Nine

Her stepsisters took her dresses away and made her wear an old gray skirt. "That is good enough for you!" they said, making fun of her and leading her back to the kitchen. (Grimm)

The deep breath I've been holding whooshes out as I withdraw a plain folded paper from the envelope. "No bomb."

Rory raises a brow. "It could be a death threat."

I shake my head. "It's only rules for the Talent-Mania."

"No venom or drama?" Rory sounds disappointed. "I expected something less boring."

"I'll take boring."

The bell rings. No time to read the paper. Hastily, I shove it back into the envelope and wave at Rory as I take off running for my next class.

Thirty minutes later I've finished an essay question and have nothing else to do until class ends, so I pull the paper from my backpack.

Never Been Texted

Attention Contestants, it begins in small print then lists rules and instructions for the competition. Entrants must arrive a half hour early and report to the “green room” near the ballroom. Ballroom, huh? Cool. I hope there’s no rule against canines. I quickly skim through the list. I suck in an uneasy breath when I read the seventh rule.

7. This is an individual competition; groups are prohibited, as there can only be one winner. However, competitors may use background musicians or utilize props to assist in their performance.

Does performing with my dog constitute a “group?” I read this over again, deciding that I still qualify. Since my talent is training dogs, Toffee falls under the category of “prop.” A darling, adorable prop.

It’s crazy, but suddenly I’m looking forward to the competition. Not that I expect to win, and that’s okay. I love teaching Toffee creative tricks, and this challenge will raise my training skill to a new level. Being in the competition will also show my classmates I’m more than a stupid nickname. Even kids I hung out with in middle school avoid me because of Beatrice’s poisonous mouth.

I continue reading through the rules until I come to the location of the competition. When I see the address, I slap my hand over my mouth so I don’t squeal in class. OMG! It’s being held at the Mayor’s house.

Un-freaking-believable!

Since I was little, I stared longingly up at the majestic “castle” on the highest hill in Castle Top. Three stories

spiraling to the sky with wrought-iron balconies, spindly turrets, and pointed arches. I've heard the interior is equally grand with crystal chandeliers, stained-glass windows, murals painted by renowned artists, massive sculptures, and a waterfall fountain in the foyer. I imagined myself a captive princess trapped on one of the balconies, wishing for a rope of long hair or a winged dragon to rescue me.

And now I'm invited inside.

Realistically, I know anyone can attend for the price of a ticket, and it's unlikely I'll be allowed to go beyond the ballroom. Still, it's a dream-come-true experience, and for a few hours I'll be close to Derrick.

I'm so lost in my thoughts I almost skim by rule eleven, until a word snags my brain like a fishhook, jerking my attention back to the paper.

11. Judging will be based on performance and originality of entrant's costume.

I have to wear a costume?

I strum my fingernails on the desktop, frowning. I never gave any thought to what I'll wear. What sort of costume and how I will get one. My fashion style is simple, because I don't have one. Give me comfy jeans and a T-shirt and I'm a happy girl. Why bother with trendy clothes when I spend hours every day on my knees rolling up urine-drenched dog-potty papers?

When I gripe to Rory about rule eleven during lunch, she suggests renting a costume at Mask Parade in Empire.

“I wish,” I say with a shake of my head. She understands about my lack of funds.

Over chips and bag lunch sandwiches, we toss around ideas. I come up with a great costume idea, but not for me. For Toffee. The velvet doggie vest I got at Swap Market will look cute on her. But what will I wear?

Rory offers some great suggestions, but they all involve spending oodles of money that I don’t have. She even offers the use of her credit card, but I give her that *look* to remind her I’m not a charity case.

Sipping mango juice, I contemplate the costume issue. With less than five dollars in my pocket and only three weeks prep time, I’ll have to get creative with a costume, like I’m my own craft project. A costume made of winding sheets toga-style? No. All-black theme with a black-cloth mask or a sheet draped over me like a spectral dog trainer? Definitely not. With each idea comes a soundtrack in my mind of the audience laughing at me.

“Remind me why I’m doing this.” I sink my head into my hands.

Rory pats my shoulder. “You thrive on self-torture.”

“Public humiliation is so appealing,” I say grimly. “I might as well walk out on the stage naked.”

“Most original costume ever – Lady Godiva, the Dog Trainer.”

I groan. “I’d rather poke needles in my eyeballs while walking barefoot on fiery coals and broken glass.”

“But you won’t give up.” Rory rips open a bag of spicy salsa chips, tossing me a challenging grin. “You’re made of

awesome-sauce.”

“Who needs to quit? I’ll be disqualified if I don’t have a costume.” As I say these words, it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea. I never would have entered the competition if Beatrice hadn’t pushed my anger button.

“You’re looking at this wrong.” Rory taps her finger on the rule sheet, her expression thoughtful. “It says your score will be judged on your costume, not that you have to wear one.”

“You think?” I ask with a morsel of hope.

She sips cranberry-pomegranate juice and shrugs. “Don’t know for sure. Why not ask someone in charge?”

“There’s no contact number on the paper. I already looked.”

“Someone in the school office might know.”

“Let’s find out.”

Rory crumples her juice box and tosses it in the garbage. I cram my half-eaten sandwich in my baggie and score a direct hit when I throw it into the trashcan.

In the office, we ask about the competition, but no one has any answers. A student assistant, Macy from my science class, suggests calling the mayor’s office, but I’m reluctant to call any number associated with Derrick.

“I know who you can ask,” Rory says as we leave the office.

“Who?”

She grins wickedly. “Beatrice.”

“Shut up!” I smack her shoulder. “Like she’d do anything for me.”

“Afraid to talk to her?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“So go ask her. Now.”

I stop abruptly in the hall, glaring at Rory. As if I want to talk to the super bitch who treats Derrick like a trained pet, jerking on his choke chain when he doesn’t obey her commands. She’s like an abusive pet owner who kicks her pet for sport.

Am I afraid of confronting Beatrice?

It’s not so much fear of her, but fear of what will happen if she pushes me too far. Her self-entitled, snarky attitude makes me boil, and I’ve been holding back for so long. If I explode, it won’t be pretty. And for sure I’ll get one hundred percent blame, which in a school with zero tolerance for violence means ruining my permanent record and chances for a scholarship.

Still, I can’t stand a coward, especially when it’s me. I tell Rory I’ll talk to Beatrice. What can it hurt? A few words never killed anyone, right?

It’s easy to find Beatrice because after she failed to convince the school board to turn the cafeteria into a vegetarian café, she lunches in the library. She’s tight with the librarian, Ms. Farrow, who feeds her biblio-appetite. Beatrice brags that she speed-reads a book a day, mostly non-fiction history and political biographies. You’d think she was prepping for SATs but no, she’s prepping for a future as a politician’s wife.

Our shoes *click-click* down the hall, the sound echoing my quickening heartbeat. *Keep control*, I caution myself. One

question then I'll leave before Beatrice can sharpen her tongue and stab me with her sarcasm. I'll smile and act polite so she won't get a chance to mock me. I'll pretend I'm like Rory, who keeps her cool in any situation and is respected for her fearless, funny attitude. I'm glad she's coming with me.

Ms. Farrow, a pink-haired pixie with thick mascara framing unusually green eyes, glances up from her desk as we enter the library, a ginormous room with murals of children reading and skylights brightening shelves and computer stations. The librarian absolutely loves Beatrice, telling other kids they could learn a lot by following Beatrice's thirst for knowledge. I'm a big reader, too, but with Beatrice it's like a race to read the most books in one lifetime.

I don't see Beatrice on the library computers but Anthony Dunwilly is there, and when I ask him if he's seen Beatrice, he points to the back of the room. Winding down tall shelves, I find Beatrice with Hannah in the Teen Zone, sitting on a plastic chair beneath a Hunger Games poster. Hannah zombie-stares at a video on her iPad while Beatrice is engrossed in reading a book so massive it probably weighs more than she does.

Rory gives me a nudge, and I take a step forward, reluctantly. I clear my throat. "Beatrice," I say.

"Huh? Oh, *you*." Her eyes narrow down to my shoes, which have been scrubbed so clean they look and smell new. "I'm surprised Abi, I mean, Ms. Farrow, let you in. The library has strict hygiene standards."

"No animals allowed," Hannah adds, giggling.

Beatrice high-fives her loyal minion. "Exactly!"

Never Been Texted

Do not lose your temper. Do. Not.

“I have a question about the competition,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Be quick. Ms. Farrow trusts me to watch over the Teen Zone,” Beatrice says in a lofty tone. “If the other kids complain about a bad smell, you’ll have to leave.”

“Was that supposed to hurt?” I shrug. “Not even bruised.”

“Only because you’re too dense.” Beatrice rolls her eyes.

“Pathetic.” Hannah copycats an eye roll.

“Why did you even enter Talent-Mania?” Beatrice’s frosted plum smile would seem friendly to anyone who glanced at us. “Talent is so important, and I’m afraid you’re sadly lacking.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of,” I say in a low warning tone.

“I can smell failure, and you reek of it.”

Anger strikes a match and tosses it on my fuse. I’m going to rip off her lips and shove them down her throat. I start forward, hands clenched into fists.

Rory grips my arm hard. “Not worth it,” she whispers, and she’s right.

Deep calming breath. “About the competition...” I begin.

“It’s not too late to drop out.” Beatrice slips a bookmark into her book then slams it shut and stands to face me.

I’m spitting mad, and it takes all my control not to strangle her with her own hair extensions. But I manage to hold my head high and speak firmly. “Not. Dropping. Out.”

“You should rethink that. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first

time you quit something. Didn't you drop out of the Brain Bowl right before their big championship, which they lost?"

I lost so much more. I say nothing, frozen on the outside while a flash fire burns inside. I won't...I can't...talk about the car accident, about losing Mom.

Rory, though, is the one now knuckling her fists. I turn toward her and shake my head in a "don't bother" gesture, and she backs off.

Beatrice mistakes my silence for triumph. "I'm sure you have some talent, but not good enough for Talent-Mania. Like this book I've been reading advises, 'Never overestimate your abilities; accept your limitations, and embrace your natural skills.' This isn't like the Brain Bowl where everyone applauds when you spout off facts like a computer. Take my advice—save yourself the public humiliation."

I dig my nails into my palms. *Do not rip off her face. Do not.*

"I just want to know about rule number seven in the contest rules." I press my lips so tight I taste blood. "Does everyone have to wear a costume?"

"Duh. Costumes are mandatory. Mine is created by that designer who just won the Reality Fashion Runway." Beatrice's smile is poisonous with satisfaction. "If you don't have a costume, you can't perform. Sorry, but it's the rules."

She's not sorry. Not even one little bit.

I'm defeated before I even walk on the stage. I'll look ridiculous in a homemade costume competing against designer costumes.

"I'll be happy to cross your name off the list," Beatrice offers.

No costume and long days of work ahead training Toffee. Beatrice is right. I should just quit now. But then I think of the grand house on the hill that I've dreamed of visiting, and the boy who lives there.

I lift my chin. "Not quitting."

"There's zero chance of you winning against entrants with real talent." She gestures to herself with a flick of her purple-frost nails.

Rory steps forward and drapes her arm around my shoulder. "Beatrice, shut your face up! I'm sick of your attitude, especially when you're totally wrong about Ashlee. She has more talent in her pinky finger than you have in your entire over-blown ego, and that's saying a lot. Her talent is so freaking amazing she's gonna blow everyone away."

"Amazing talent?" Beatrice's voice drips thick sarcasm.

Rory looks at me expectantly, but what can I say? A dancing dog won't impress Beatrice, not unless the dog can also sing and recite poetry while tightrope walking in high heels. But backing down isn't one of my best skills, so I shrug with a mysterious attitude. "Sorry, but I can't reveal what I'll be doing."

"Ashamed to tell me?"

"My...um...mentor swore me to secrecy. But it's not cliché like singing."

Beatrice presses her lips angrily. "You only wish you could sing as well as I do. I'm professionally trained."

"Yay for you," I say in my most condescending tone. "But if you're so good, then why try to influence the judging?"

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. This is all about talent, and I’ve got the most.”

“Prepare to be disappointed. You won’t win.”

“And you will?” She snorts.

Angry hot waves flood my brain. “Definitely.”

Rory is grabbing my arm, saying something about needing to leave, but I’m locked in a staring war with Beatrice. I’d rather eat my sneakers than back down. I don’t have to, though, because Beatrice’s cell phone interrupts.

Bending down to the table, Beatrice lifts her red-metallic phone and glances at a text. Her crimson rage melts to rosy cheeks and shining eyes. This Beatrice is a changeling I don’t recognize. She says nothing as she reads her message, and I sense she’s not with us anymore. Finally, she blinks, looking up at me with annoyance. “What are you still doing here?”

Good question. The fireworks in my head have cleared to a hellish sulfur haze, and I’m regretting everything I just said. Once again I inserted my mouth without thinking first. I’ve really messed up. Now showing up at the competition isn’t good enough.

I have to win.

When Rory tugs me away from Beatrice, I don’t resist. The fight has faded from me, and I have nothing left to say. Behind me I hear Beatrice murmur “Derrick” in a breathy tone. The ground seems to tilt, plunging my emotions down a hellhole. My hand goes to my chest as if pressing against my heart will ease the ache. But pain comes anyway. I can’t even hate Beatrice because she has no idea I know Derrick or that for an amazing week his texts went to me.

Never Been Texted

My last text obviously worked. Derrick stopped texting the wrong girl, and all is right in his world. Beatrice has forgiven him and they're back together. Derrick must be so happy. I should be happy for him.

I lower my head, blinking back tears I refuse to cry. I walk faster, bolting into a run for the exit. I hear Rory running behind me, past rows of computers, book aisles, and a librarian who shouts at me to slow down. The library door thuds behind me, but I don't stop running until I'm outside the building, slammed with a shock of chilly air.

I collapse onto a bench, hugging myself and only vaguely aware of Rory beside me, putting her arm around my shoulders, asking what's wrong. She thinks I'm upset because I lost my temper, and I don't tell her otherwise because I'll completely lose it if I speak his name.

He's not mine. He never was. He never will be.

If winning Derek's heart were the competition, she'd have already won.

Chapter Ten

Her godmother, who saw her all in tears, asked her what was the matter. (Perrault)

Rory forbids me to speak to Beatrice ever again. “You’re a runaway train wreck around her.” We pause at the hall intersection, where we’ll split off in opposite directions for our next classes, and she touches my shoulder gently. “You gonna be okay?”

I nod, but I’m lying. I spend the rest of school mentally replaying my meltdown over and over. Did I seriously tell Beatrice I’d win the contest? That’s like an ant challenging an elephant to arm wrestle, and the elephant wins by a trunk. Stomp, squish, good-bye ant. What was I thinking?

The smart thing would be to bow out of the contest graciously, say I have a terminal illness or take a trip out of the country or fake a broken leg.

Even as I consider this, I know my competitive gene is too strong to give up. As a chronic over-achiever, I always go

Never Been Texted

for the win. But whoever heard of a dog trainer winning a talent contest? First place typically goes to a singer with a wow-factor voice. Still, I have to try.

So begins grueling days of practice.

For Toffee it's all a fun game, and she never tires. Her hoop tricks may impress people at Swap Market, but we'll be playing to a tougher audience and I need to come up with an outstanding trick. Like any project, I start with research, analyzing results from dog shows and hundreds of videos of amazing dog tricks. I finally settle on a routine comprised of doggie gymnastics and dancing.

Every morning I get up thirty minutes early to work with Toffee before going to school. Rory helps after school, at least for a few days until her boyfriend tells her he has some paying customers for her henna art.

By Saturday, it's just me and Toffee. I wake at an ungodly dark hour and drag myself out of bed. The way my body aches you'd think I was the one dancing on four paws. I'm grouchy from lack of sleep (why am I still dreaming of Derrick?), and I'm frustrated because my act isn't working. Cute dog tricks might win applause but not first place.

After a quick breakfast of yogurt and fruit, I zip through kennel chores then take Toffee into the garage where we can practice without interruptions from the snarky stud dogs. I created a playlist of background music from hip-hop to salsa, and when Toffee masters a complex trick I reward her with a gourmet doggie treat from Bow-Wow Boutique. Today, we're working on a pirouette somersault.

"Again," I say to Toffee in a gentle, encouraging tone.

It's funny how I can lose my temper so easily with people but never with animals.

Toffee whines, her mismatched eyes shining with longing. "No treat until you perfect this trick," I say with a firm shake of my head.

I turn on the music and start from the beginning. This time Toffee spins her pirouette perfectly, but stumbles on the somersault. She springs back up, gold tail wagging, eager to try again, but I shut off the music. "Good job, Toff." I toss her a bow-shaped doggie treat. "We both need a break. Rest or walk?"

She goes to her leash, and I know exactly where she wants to go – the Swap Market.

Setting the CD player on a shelf, I gesture for Toffee to follow me. I'm heading for the garage door when it bursts open. My stepdad stands there, stud dogs flanking him like a canine army.

"What's going on? I heard music." Blake taps his chin with his finger as he peers around the garage. There's nothing out of the usual — old bikes, boxes, an electric lawn mower, a ladder, and tools hanging on a wall. Only the CD player propped on a shelf hints at what I've been doing.

"Just hanging out," I say casually.

"In a drafty garage?" His narrowed gaze makes me feel like a little kid caught stealing cash from a wallet.

"I like it here. Is that a crime?"

"No, but it doesn't make sense."

The stud dogs sniff menacingly at Toffee and me. Toffee whimpers then dives behind my legs.

“Your dogs are scaring Toffee. Tell them to back off.”

“They’re harmless and just being playful. I’m waiting for your answer.”

His attitude rubs me like sandpaper on a bleeding cut. Why should I tell him anything? He doesn’t care what I do as long as I keep the kennels clean. I doubt he’d bother to come watch me perform if I asked him. Should I ask him? But he’s really into Q-Bees. Toffee is so talented he couldn’t help being impressed. Other performers will have family in the audience rooting for them. Other than Rory, who will root for me?

“I’m training Toffee.” I hesitate, biting my lip. “Because there’s this thing.”

“Thing?” He lifts a brow.

“A talent competition.” I reach down to scoop up Toffee, who licks my arms and wiggles her golden tail. “I’ve taught Toffee some tricks. She’s really good, and I can show you if you, um, want to see.”

He glances at his watch then shakes his head. “There’s a dog food shipment arriving in an hour, and inventory will keep me late tonight. I’ll have free time tomorrow and I’d like to see what you’ve taught Toffee. Can she roll over and jump on command?”

“Much more than that. She can dance.”

“Are you sure she’s not just jumping to music? That’s natural for Q-Bees.”

“She does real steps,” I say defensively. “Ballet, cha-cha, and rumba. She jumps through hoops, too, and somersaults. She’s the smartest dog ever.”

I expect him to argue, so I'm surprised when he smiles and scratches Toffee's snowy head. "Smart little girl, are you? Well, you should be with Chelshire Fields Golden Toffany for a sire – a champion with no equal. What a pity your markings are too flawed for breeding."

"Markings aren't everything." I hug Toffee tightly. "She's uber talented."

Blake regards me curiously. "Tell me about this competition. Is it sanctioned by the AKC?"

"Um, no. Not the Kennel Club. But it's a huge event with Mayor King awarding first place."

"How much does first place pay?"

"Nothing. I mean, not in actual money."

"Ribbons and trophies don't pay bills, but I'd like to see what your dog can do. I have experience training dogs and can give you some tips."

"That would be great, but what I really need is a costume." I look up at him, hopefully. "Rory says there's this great costume shop at the Empire Mall and she'll give me a ride there. I just need some money."

He takes a step back from me, shaking his head. "This isn't a good time."

"The competition is a week away, and a costume is mandatory."

"Sorry, but I can't help."

"Can't or won't?" I glare at him. "If this was about the stud dogs, you wouldn't refuse."

"Brutus and Cretin are assets, not liabilities." At the sound of their names, the stud dogs wag their tails.

Never Been Texted

“Are you calling Toffee a liability? If she is, then I am, too. I’ll quit school and get a job. Is that what you want?”

“Don’t be childish, Ashlee. You’re misconstruing my words.” He rubs his forehead as if in pain. “I’d help you if I could, but there isn’t any extra money.”

I reel back, my thoughts spinning. The last time I went to Bow-Wow Boutique it was quiet with only one customer. And no one has come by to see Honey’s new litter. How long has it been since we sold a Q-Bee?

“Is the business in trouble?” I hold my breath, terrified of the answer. When he looks away, his face furrows like a roadmap.

“You should have told me. I can help,” I offer. “What I said before about getting a job, I’ll do it. I can groom dogs or pet-sit. How much do we need to save Mom’s business?”

He stiffens like he’s turned to stone, an impassible mountain of granite. “It’s my business to take care of, and I don’t need your help. End of discussion.”

With his stud dogs flanking him, he storms out of the garage.



Bow-Wow Boutique is more than a building made of wood, mortar, and nails. It’s my mother’s heart and soul, and as long as it’s in business, her dream stays alive. I thought Blake felt the same way, that his passion for the store was his way to honor my mother. I can take being ignored and even a

forgotten birthday knowing we share memories and the pain of losing Mom. But now it's obvious he only cares about himself.

I'm curled on my bed, clasping a pillow and petting Toffee. I'm all saggy and deflated like one of Toffee's chew toys. No fight left in me. I have to drop out of Talent-Mania. In a way, it's a relief. I don't have to stress over a costume. So what if Beatrice calls me a quitter? She's said worse, and I didn't fall down dead. Her words may bite but they can't break through my skin if I don't let them.

It's really over. No competition. The little girl who dreamed of visiting the King mansion and the older girl who can't stop dreaming of a gap-toothed prince will have to accept that dreams don't come true.

"Sorry, Toffee," I whisper into her soft fur, the apology more to myself than her. She holds no grudges. She wags her tail and licks my face.

The harder part will be telling Rory. I look over to my desk where I left my phone, and cringe. This could get ugly.

I'm reaching for the mauve phone, rehearsing what to say, when it flashes and blasts a pop song by Kelly Clarkson, the one about what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

The song abruptly stops. The screen blinks like bright headlights. I'm hypnotized by strangeness. Can not look away. The screen mists over like someone's breathing on it from the inside. Then a shape emerges, lines sharpening into human features – a cherubic face with a grin that fills the screen.

"Farley!" I choke.

Never Been Texted

He giggles like a child and waves. There's a *plop* as he vanishes. The screen fades to black and I think the weirdness is over – until a curved line like a lopsided smile slides across the screen. Another shape follows, a circle rolling behind the smile. Wait. Not shapes but letters tumbling together on the tiny screen, spelling: C-O-S-T-U-

“Costume? What are you trying to tell me?” I ask the phone as if it's a living thing.

The screen flashes a rainbow of whirling colors, until it settles into a picture of an old-fashioned man with a bearded face and intelligent eyes. He's not someone I know, but I recognize him from my English class. The “Bard of Avon,” and the world's greatest writer.

“William Shakespeare?” I speak out loud, puzzled. “What does he have to do with a costume?”

Of course! I snap my fingers then grab my phone just as it goes black and shove it into my pocket.

“Come on, girl,” I tell Toffee, “We're going on a walk.”

Chapter Eleven

Her godmother then touched her with her wand, and, at the same instant, her clothes turned into cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels. This done, she gave her a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world. (Perrault)

Shakespeare shows zero surprise when he answers his door and finds me on his sagging porch. I've gone to his backyard many times, but never his house. He's wearing ordinary clothes – dark slacks, a blue button-down shirt, and brown loafers.

Before I can tell him why I've come, he says, "Follow me, Miss Ashlee." His voice booms with theatrical force and, instantly, there is nothing ordinary about him.

I want to ask him how he knew I was coming, but he's moving too fast for questions. I run to catch up with him as he rushes off the porch, leading me down the creaking steps to a gravel path. We wind around his house, beneath a whispery willow and through an orchard path to a tiny house

Never Been Texted

with gingerbread trim so sweet-looking that I expect the walls to taste like candy. When he opens the door, it's what's inside that makes me drool with a different kind of hunger.

Costumes!

Every color, design, era, size, and style. I've left the audience of my real life and entered a fabric fairy tale. Costumes from every play imaginable – cats, lions, devils, demons, angels, phantoms, narrow skirts, hoop skirts, tuxedo suits, bridal dresses, and even a green-scaled dragon costume.

The awesomeness doesn't stop there, because there are props, too, from cannons to swords to feathered angel wings. I ask how he knew I needed a costume, and Shakespeare winks then whispers, "Farley told me."

Farley again! My head spins as I try to make sense of everything. But there is no sense. Only wonder, amazement, hope.

Impossible things are becoming my normal since I stepped into the W.I.S.H. store a week ago. It makes me think of being little and blowing soapy bubbles into the air then trying to catch them. Only when my finger touched a bubble it popped and vanished. I have a feeling my weird happenings are like airy bubbles that will pop and vanish if I grasp for answers.

"I'm performing with my dog in the Talent-Mania contest," I explain, although he probably already knows. I gesture to Toffee, who is tugging at the long tail of a lion costume. "That's why I need a costume."

"Something exceeding the ordinary." He steps in front of a fun-house mirror, his reflection stretching to gigantic

proportions and sweeping his beard into a tornado. I'm feeling swept away, too.

"I just want something shiny. Maybe with sequins," I add in a small voice.

He wags a gnarled finger at me. "As Van Dyke said, 'Genius is talent set on fire by courage.' Do you have the courage to fire your inner genius and push your talent to the limits of imagination?"

"Well, um, I guess so." No clue what he's talking about, but I have this weird suspicion he can read my mind.

"A performer's appearance is much like that mirror; it's a mask of illusion created to deceive and delight." He rubs his gray beard, pausing for a thoughtful moment before snapping his fingers. "I have just the illusion for you."

"Illusion? But I'm a dog trainer, not a magician."

"Performance is a science of mass perception. You must accept what is possible with the impossible for the best results. Watch carefully."

He taps a painting on the wall and a hidden door slides open. He slips into the darkness, seeming to vanish before my eyes. I hear bangs, squeaks, and a burst of chimes, then silence until he steps back into the light, twirling a large purple Hula-Hoop. "This is your trick."

A hoop trick? Been there; done that. Not impressed, and the audience won't be either. "Thanks, but I already have my own hoop."

"Like this?" He taps the hoop then flings it spinning up into the air – where it stays. Seriously, the hoop hovers by the ceiling! Electricity sparks from the hoop like stars exploding

Never Been Texted

in a night sky, as if the universe exists inside the hoop.

“Wow.” Hairs rise on my skin. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You’ll do more than see. You will master this illusion.” His smile sets his eyes twinkling like he’s made of stars, too.

“Will it be good enough to win the competition?”

He tilts his head, studying me. “That, my dear, is up to you.”

Then he shows me my costume.



By the time I leave Shakespeare, the afternoon has shadowed into early evening. It’s too late to stop by Swap Market. Also, I’ve missed the turtle races (frogs are only on the first Saturday of the month). I have no regrets because I’ve learned the BEST EVER dog trick. I have a costume, if you can call it that. With so many fabulous costumes to choose from, I expected Shakespeare to offer me a glittery gown of sequins or satin. Instead, he gave me a bodysuit woven with wires that stretch like metal vines across my arms, legs, and up my neck to a rubber cap that hides my dark hair. SERIOUSLY! I feel like Frankenstein hooked up with all these wires. But it gets worse. The white bodysuit is so sheer that when I look down at myself I see the outline of my beige bra and blue-striped bikini underwear. If I can see them, everyone in the audience will, too.

“I can’t perform in this!” I’d protested, peeking out from

the bathroom I'd used for changing my clothes.

"You can and you will," Shakespeare insisted.

"But I'm practically naked!"

"You're covered sufficiently. Once you click on the remote control, which I'll give to you, the hoop's illusion will alter your appearance. Your suit will function like the screen for a movie, blank until a holographic image supersedes reality. The audience won't see wires or whatever charming color of underclothes you're wearing. They will only see a glittering princess in a glamorous costume. Trust me."

So I do.

I practice every day. Blake isn't around, working long hours (no shock), and when he does show up, he doesn't ask to see Toffee perform. Whatever. He doesn't want my help, and I don't need him. I put all my energy into practice. Thanks to Shakespeare (and my marvelous mauve phone) I think I have a real chance to win the competition. *Suck on that, Beatrice!*

The act is going great, except the finale. That's when Toffee gets stubborn. When the firework effects go off, she sits on her haunches and refuses to jump. I bribe her with treats but she won't budge. By the weekend, I'm so frustrated I'm almost in tears and ready to give up when I get an idea. We run through the act again, but this time when we reach the finale, I pull over a stool so I'm level with the hoop. Then, instead of begging Toffee to jump through the hoop, I do it myself.

Toffee stares at me, tilting her head curiously. Then she's flying through the hoop right after me. I catch her.

Never Been Texted

After that, we don't have any more hoop issues. I reward her with a walk to Shakespeare's Theater. We're just in time to watch him perform a version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Red Shoes*, starring a tap-dancing goose. Seriously, I'm not making this up. Afterward, I watch pig soccer and laugh like crazy when Granny Dermott's pig, Fluffy, tries to eat the soccer ball. Then, Toffee's dancing scores enough swap-its to "pig out" (excuse the pun) at Swap Market.

It's not until later, while I'm slaving in the kennels and spreading clean newspapers in the cages, that I realize I'm missing a crucial accessory for my act – shoes!

The hoop illusion doesn't cover my feet, and a barefoot dog trainer will not do. Rory wears larger shoes than I do, but I send her a quick SOS and ask if she has fancy shoes that might fit me. She texts back a frowny face. Sighing, I slip my phone into my back pocket then cry out when it scorches through my jeans like coals on fire. I jerk it out and instantly the heat cools. When I look at the tiny screen, a text message spells out a single word: S-H-O-E-S.

"Where?" I ask desperately, accepting that this smart phone has wisdom beyond the combined knowledge of Google and Wikipedia.

The phone shows me a dark room piled with boxes, folding chairs, holiday decorations, and a sewing machine.

The attic! I palm-smack my forehead. Duh! I should have thought of looking there myself, except it's someplace I avoid since it's full of memories of Mom. I'm not sure if my phone is being helpful or hurtful, reminding me of feelings I'd successfully shut out for so long.

But instead of the usual sadness when I enter the attic, I get a warm feeling around my shoulders, like someone is hugging me. I can almost hear Mom's voice, urging me to search through boxes until I find one labeled *shoes*. I trace my fingers over Mom's bold inked lettering, the loopy Ss like curving roads beckoning me.

My fingers tremble as I lift off the lid, and there they are.

Shoes. Not just any shoes but shoes more beautiful than anything I've ever worn, made of velvety leather the color of snow with twists of silver laces and a sprinkle of crystal beads with three-inch heels. They seem familiar, like I've seen them before but can't remember where.

When I slip them on, they're a perfect fit.

Two weeks until Talent-Mania.

Against all odds, I'm ready.

Chapter Twelve

She asked them the name of that princess; but they told her they did not know it, and that the king's son would give all the world to know who she was. (Perrault)

It takes a few days to get used to the high heels so I don't slip and fall in the middle of the act. Between practice, school, chores, and homework, I'm moving in a fog like the walking dead. I'm so ready for a break when Rory suggests a girl's night sleepover on Friday.

She comes over to my house lugging a backpack full of henna supplies. "I made the mistake of telling Mom I was thinking of going into the henna business, and next thing I know she's ordered boxes of henna kits online." Rory sighs as she dumps her backpack on the couch. "Love the products. Hate enabling Mom's shopping addiction."

"Not your fault." I pick up a box labeled *Henna Hexes*. "This looks interesting. My fairy-bird is starting to fade, so I volunteer as a victim if you want to experiment."

“You’ve guessed my evil scheme.” She gives a witchy cackle.

“Diabolical, but first I need your opinion about my act.”

I invite Rory into my garage for my “dress rehearsal,” (or maybe I should call it an “undress” rehearsal), showing her like an usher to a folding chair I’ve set up for my audience of one.

When I step onto the “stage” in my wired bodysuit, Rory’s eyes widen. “Seriously? You do realize I can see your pink undies, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” I lift up the remote control Shakespeare gave me. “But you shouldn’t see them for long.”

With a click of my CD player, the garage rocks with techno music, and I lift a screwdriver to my mouth like it’s a mike. “Prepare to be amazed by a display of extraordinary canine tricks!” I announce in a theatrical voice that would make Shakespeare proud. “Introducing Dancing Queen!”

I fling the hoop into the air, and it dazzles in lights like a rainbow struck by lightning. I gesture to Toffee with a hand signal to trigger her first jump. She somersaults through the hoop universe, dancing into holographic scenes of sky, stars, and galaxies. The routine lasts only minutes yet feels much longer as holographic images send me traveling from the earth to the stars with a tiny gold and white dog. When the fireworks spark for the finale, Toffee doesn’t hesitate to jump through the hoop.

Rory bounces to her feet, applauding. “OMG, Ashlee!”

“You liked it?”

“Abso-freaking-lutely loved it! Your act is awesome-

sauce to the max! I knew Toffee was smart, but this is beyond anything I've ever seen. And you look gorgeous! It's so cool how your hair and gown change with each hoop scene, all glowing and glittery like a Disney princess. And when did your boobs get so big?"

I glance down at myself. *Hello, cleavage!* Too bad they're an illusion and I can't keep them. The hoop's energy only lasts two hours, and Shakespeare warned me not to waste the battery. Regretfully, I click off the remote control. The hoop thuds to the ground, and the glamour vanishes, except for my shoes.

Rory develops a massive case of shoe love and begs to try them on. I kick them over to her, but no matter how much she pushes and pulls, they don't fit. I inherited my Mom's narrow triple-A feet.

"Oh, well. They look great on you, and that's what matters." Rory gives my shoes a wistful glance then grins at me. "I can't wait to see Beatrice's face when the mayor announces you're the winner."

"A singer will probably win," I say, not wanting to get my scholarship hopes up. "Katelyn's performed on Broadway."

"She's good, but can she send a dog dancing through the universe? I don't think so. That hoop trick blows my mind. Show it to me again. Please!"

Laughing, I reach for the hoop.

We stay up late, watching DVDs and checking out the henna kits. Who knew there were so many different types? Ready mix, paste, professional, and even a starter kit for kids.

There are stencils, too, with swirling designs especially for hands and feet. While I'm loving the designs, Rory tosses them aside and sketches her own. She replaces my fairy-bird with a henna image of Toffee jumping through a hoop.

Our girls' weekend continues with turtle races, Shakespeare's Theater, and Swap Market. Toffee shows off some of her new dance moves and Rory is a hit with her henna tattoos. We score more swap-its than ever.

I'm so glad I had that great weekend, because things get really weird a few days later at school. I'm sitting at my usual table at lunch, pretending to be mad after Rory swipes my kettle cooked chips, when I get a "being watched" feeling. I look around to see if someone is staring at me. At the next table, two girls from my French class jerk away. Some guys at another table turn away quickly, too.

"Rory," I whisper. "Am I paranoid or is everyone staring at me?"

"Not everyone." The guilty look on her face sparks my suspicions.

"Do you know something I don't?"
"Well, maybe. But I couldn't help myself. Jack Quinn was doing his bookie thing and taking odds on who will win the talent competition. He's giving Beatrice 2-1 odds, Katelyn 4-1, and you 30-1, which is just stupid because there are only twenty-five entrants. So I slapped him with some truth."

I groan. "Please say you didn't mention me."

"I told him your act is unique like nothing anyone has ever seen before and you were sure to take first place. I just boosted your school rep a thousand percent. You should

thank me.”

I cover my face with my hands. Jack is a social networking fiend who spills gossip faster than a flash flood. Give me a life jacket now.

But as it turns out, maybe I *should* thank Rory. By my last class I’m enjoying the smiles and thumbs-up from kids who usually hurry past like I’m invisible. Even Drew Nickerson, the hottest guy on the Brain Bowl team, stops in the hall to say he’s rooting for me. I had a secret crush on him in ninth grade and was working up the courage to talk to him – until Mom’s car accident. After that I quit the team and didn’t hang out with anyone except Rory.

But Drew acted like we never stopped being friends. Nothing romantic (not when I’m dreaming of Derrick every night) but it’s like a closed window inside me suddenly flung open so I’m seeing outside of myself. I assumed my old friends avoided me because of Beatrice’s rumors. But had I pushed them away first? I was so afraid they’d ask questions about the accident or worse – pity me. Was I the one shutting people out instead of the other way around?

I’m thinking on this while I walk home, wondering if I’m not as unpopular as I assumed. Or am I just the latest gossip topic and nothing has changed? I’m yanked from my thoughts, though, as I walk up the steps to my house and hear ringing from inside. I fumble with my key, unlock the front door, and am almost to the phone when Brutus and Cretin block my way, growling.

I grab a pillow from the couch and hurl it at them. It misses, but they turn tail and retreat to their room.

Too late. The answering machine clicks on and a male voice, polite but edged in hostility, says he's from Castle Community Bank and that if Blake Montes doesn't contact him immediately, the sheriff will deliver an eviction notice.

"OMG!" I gasp as the phone clicks off.

Eviction. As in losing the house or business, or both.

I call Blake's cell, but it goes to voicemail. When I try Bow-Wow Boutique, his clerk, Cherie, says he's busy and will call back later.

Shaking all over, I sink onto the couch, squeezing a pillow to my chest. *Mom sewed this pillow*, I think, rubbing my fingers over the uneven cross-stitching and aching for Mom to hug me and say everything will be okay. But she's gone, and all I have is a stepdad fail. I'm so angry at Blake it's like a fist of hate smacking my heart. He's never there for me and now *this*.

So I send him a text:

Bank called.

Need to talk.

ASAP

He texts back: Late night. Don't wait up.

When I wake the next morning, his car is already gone. I swear and stomp around as I get dressed, vowing to confront my stepdad, even if I have to storm into Bow-Wow Boutique and lasso him with a leash.

I'm stressing over the evil word "eviction" as I reach school and look for Rory. She isn't at our locker waiting for

me. Grabbing a few books, I slam the locker shut then head for homeroom. I find Rory there, in the middle of a group of girls, talking. When she sees me, she rushes over.

“Have you heard the terrible news?” Rory’s tone is hushed like she’s at a funeral.

Have rumors about my pending eviction already spread around school? I clutch my textbooks to my chest like a shield that can protect me. “What news?”

“Poor Katelyn,” Rory says.

“Katelyn?” I glance over at the chair Katelyn always sits in. It’s empty. “Did she have an allergy attack?” We’ve all been warned not to even breathe peanut butter on Katelyn, her peanut allergy is so severe.

“Worst. Attack. Ever.” Rory shudders. “She’s usually so careful, but last night she was out for pizza with some friends and suddenly swelled up and couldn’t breathe. She was rushed to the hospital but...” Rory’s voice cracks. “No one has heard if she made it.”

I’m too shocked to speak. Katelyn is so nice that even though she’s gorgeous like a Barbie come to life and guys act stupid around her, you can’t hate her. And she might be dead?

By lunch the rumors are insane and the level of noise in the cafeteria is so loud I can barely hear Rory, until silence stills the room like someone pressed a mute button. Heads swivel to gaze at a group of girls entering the cafeteria. I gasp when I see Beatrice, who never lunches in the cafeteria, flanked by Hannah and two girls I’ve seen around but don’t know. They sit at a central table, chairs scraping to make

room for them. Beatrice smiles like royalty bestowing her honored presence on peasants, her gaze sweeping the room. Maybe it's my imagination, but for a second she looks directly at me before normalcy returns with clattering silverware, shuffling feet, and noisy talk.

"What's *she* doing here?" I have to raise my voice so Rory can hear.

"Not eating lunch, that's for sure." Rory purses her lips. "Watch out, Ashlee. Did you notice how she stared at you?"

"I hoped it was my imagination."

"Nope, she stared hard enough to bore tunnels through your head. Beware, she's up to no good."

Before I can bite into my salami sandwich, "no good" arrives at our table. I look up to find Beatrice standing beside me. And she's smiling.

"Hey, Beatrice," I say warily. "I thought you were boycotting the cafeteria until it goes vegetarian."

"The school board compromised and agreed to make one day a week all vegetarian. Didn't you notice they're serving tofu burgers?"

"That explains the gross smell. Lucky for me, I brought a bag lunch." I gesture to my chips, juice carton, and sandwich. "I'm surprised you convinced the school to change the menu."

"I always win." Beatrice flashes a pearly grin. "I utilize the power of visualization and positive affirmations, and I hear you have some unusual power yourself."

"Huh?" I gasp, reaching into my pocket for the reassuring bulge of my phone. It warms to my touch.

Never Been Texted

“Everyone is saying you have a powerful act,” she goes on with a breezy smile like we’ve been friends forever. “So I came over to wish you good luck.”

“*You* came over to wish *me* good luck?” My head spins, and I wonder what alternate universe I’ve suddenly landed in.

“Sure. I know the most talented entrant will win and I’ve been hearing great things about your act, except no one knows exactly what it is.”

“It’s super awesome,” Rory raves.

My cheeks burn. I know Rory means well, but I wish she’d shut up.

“Mind if I sit down?” Beatrice doesn’t wait for an answer, elbowing Rory out of the way to sit beside me. “All the drama about the contest is exhausting. I can’t believe that sweet Katelyn is out of the competition. It’s so tragically sad.”

I nod. “Terrible. I hope she’ll be okay.”

“Oh, she’s not dead or anything. My friend who works at the hospital told me she’s out of danger but won’t be released before the competition. Such a shame.” Beatrice flicks her purple frosted nails as she sighs. “I was so looking forward to watching her perform.”

“I’m sure you were.” *Not.*

“Just last night at Pizza Joe’s, Katelyn was so excited about Talent-Mania, and when she sang karaoke, she blew everyone away. I was shocked when she suddenly couldn’t breathe, but I kept my cool and looked for her Epi-pen, only she’d left it at home. While everyone else was panicking, I acted quickly and called 911. Scary! To think that one little peanut could almost kill someone.”

I nod, imagining how easy it would be for someone – let’s say Beatrice – to sneak a tiny peanut into one of Joe’s cheesy slices.

Beatrice stands, flipping back her satiny hair. “I can’t wait to see your act, and I’m not the only one. Jack changed his odds so you’re now 3-1 for the win. Of course, I’m still 2-1.”

“Of course you are,” I say.

“As it should be.” She laughs like she’s joking. Only it’s no joke. I move protectively in front of my food, glad I don’t have a peanut allergy.

Beatrice turns to leave then exclaims “oh!” like she’s remembered something and spins back to me. “Almost forgot what I came over to ask you, about your Bee-Hive dogs.”

I cringe, memory jumping back to our first meeting at the kennel. “I didn’t think you were interested in Q-Bees.”

“Not me!” she snaps as if insulted. “You know I’m going out with the mayor’s son and am practically part of the King family, although Derrick and I aren’t officially engaged. Yet.”

His name shocks through me like high voltage, stealing my breath so I only manage a nod.

She giggles. “We’re like such a famous couple I’m thinking of asking everyone to call us BeaRick. Cute, huh?”

Gag me with a dirty sock and spit on my face. Please. Anything would be preferable to listening to Beatrice.

“It’s not me, but Derrick who’s interested in those Bee-Sting dogs your dad sells.”

“Stepdad, and they’re called Queen Bees.”

“Whatever. I told Derrick they’re annoying and smell bad, but he wants one because of some girl he met with a Queen Bee. He wants to find out more about the breed from that girl but doesn’t have her number. Since you raise those dogs, I figured you might know who she is.”

“I’d have to know more about her,” I say in a disinterested tone, but inside I’m jumping through hoops made of rainbows. *Derrick doesn’t hate me! He wants to talk to me!* Of course, he might only be interested in Q-Bees. But that’s okay, too. I can’t stop smiling.

“If Derrick doesn’t know her name, I sure don’t.” Beatrice throws up her hands. “I told him it was a waste of time. How can Derrick expect me to find some random girl? Sometimes I’m just too nice.”

Rory and I exchange glances but manage to keep straight faces. Does Beatrice have any concept that people exist for reasons other than as supporting players in her life? Probably not.

“I told him to look up the dogs online, but he’s determined to talk to that girl. But it’s only about the dogs, nothing personal,” Beatrice adds as if trying to convince herself. “When Derrick gets an idea in his head, all I can do is humor him.”

I hate the condescending way she’s mocking Derrick, like he’s a two-year-old asking for a new toy. If he were my guy, I’d listen to everything he had to say, and I mean *really* listen, so I can be the one who holds his hand when he’s sad, offers advice when he’s worried, and laughs with him when he’s happy. I’d never roll my eyes like Beatrice is doing, with a

superior attitude that only proves my theory that she believes she's queen of the world.

"Are you even listening to me?" Beatrice snaps.

"How could I not?" I retort.

"Derrick only knows the girl's name--is Jane."

"Jane?" Rory's brow arches as she slams me with a "did you forget to tell me something?" look.

I shake my head, warningly.

"Not a common name, at least in this century," Beatrice adds. "She's supposed to go to our school, but I checked with my friend who works in the office and can't find even one Jane. The closest is Janeece Lu, but she's allergic to dogs. It's like Jane doesn't exist. She probably bought her dog from your dad, so could you check his records?"

"My *stepdad's* business records are private."

"Not for you," she says as if challenging me to prove her wrong.

I fight the impulse to rise to her challenge. "Even if I was willing to look in his records, I'd need more than a buyer's first name."

"Would the dog's name help?" Beatrice taps her purple-tipped finger to her chin. "Now what did Derrick call the dog? Truffle? Taffy? Some sort of candy?"

"Toffee?" Rory offers, and I almost smack her.

"Yes, that's it!" Beatrice turns back to me. "Is that enough for you?"

Rory shoots me a wicked grin, which I ignore. I scrunch my forehead like I'm thinking hard. "Nope. We've never sold a dog named Toffee."

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This is absolutely completely true, but Beatrice narrows her eyes at me as if she smells deceit. “Are you sure?”

“More importantly, are *you* sure?” Rory interrupts, her eyes lighting up with mischief as she tilts her head toward Beatrice.

“About what?” If glaring was a performance art, Beatrice could claim her first place prize in Talent-Mania now.

Rory pauses to sip her mango juice. “About your boyfriend.”

“What are you implying?” Beatrice demands.

“Is he more interested in the dog or the girl?”

“Shut up, Rory.” I shoot her a dark look.

“I mean, he’s the son of the most famous guy in town and he could have any girl he wants, or maybe two.”

“Ridiculous!” Beatrice lifts her chin defiantly. “I’d take offense except I’m not the insecure type that’s threatened by other girls. Derrick is crazy about me.”

Yet he’s trying to find me.

“I have no problem if Derrick talks to other girls,” Beatrice protests a little too vehemently as she turns back to me. “Are you going to check your dad’s records or not?”

I don’t even bother to correct her this time. “I’d need the dog’s exact name. AKC registered names are long and usually different than what the dogs are actually called. Like my stepdad’s dog Brutus is registered as Whittingmeer Snowblood of Caesar’s Golden Sequins.”

“How do you get Brutus from that?” Beatrice asks.

“Et tu Brute?” I answer.

“The infamous knife in the back betrayal of Brutus to

Julius Caesar,” she says with a nod. “Harsh way to end a friendship.”

I’m impressed she knows this, although I shouldn’t be surprised since she reads all those thick biographies and is besties with the librarian. She’d make a killer opponent on the Brain Bowl – not that she’d ever join an activity with the social equivalent of the chess club.

“If you don’t know the owner’s name or dog’s registered name, I can’t check the records,” I say in the business tone I use when I help customers at Bow-Wow Boutique.

“Well, Derrick can’t say I didn’t try.” Beatrice sounds relieved, like she’s done her “good girlfriend” deed for the year and considers herself a candidate for sainthood. She stands to leave, faking a sweet smile. “If you find out who the girl is, let me know.”

“Oh, I will,” I return just as sweetly.

“And good luck in the competition, but be careful.” Beatrice pauses, resting her hand lightly on my arm, which creeps me out a little. “It would be a tragedy if something terrible happened to you like it did to Katelyn.”

“No worries,” I say sharper than I intend. “I don’t have any food allergies.”

Beatrice scowls then whirls off.

“Good riddance,” Rory mutters. “I’d rather eat tofu slimed in snot than suffer through another second of her verbal sewage.”

I smile, but I’m only half-listening, my thoughts whirling on a Derrick-themed thrill ride. OMG! He’s trying to find me! Has he been thinking of me like I’ve been thinking about

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him? Wouldn't he be shocked to learn Beatrice's old number is my new number and that he's already texted me, only he didn't know it?

I'm all tingly thinking about seeing him again. And I will on Friday night at Talent-Mania. Everyone knows he'll be there with his parents since Mayor King is judging and giving a keynote speech. But will I be able to talk to Derrick alone? I hope so, because there's so much I want to say. We'll talk and I mean really talk, no more secrets. I'll even tell him about getting his texts and that my name isn't Jane.

If something does happen between us, something good like he asks me out, I won't refuse this time. No flirty games, only honesty. Of course, he'll have to be honest, too, which means ending it with Beatrice, the same girl who (I'm sure) maliciously put a peanut in Katelyn's pizza, which could have killed her.

And I wonder....

What will Beatrice do if her "prince" chooses me?

Chapter Thirteen

“What is that useless creature doing in the best room?” asked the stepsister. “Away to the kitchen with her! And if she wants to eat, then she must earn it as our maid.” (Grimm)

When I get home the strong aroma of coffee leads me into the kitchen where I find my stepdad hunched over a coffee cup with the saddest look on his face. I don’t need to ask what’s wrong—the eviction phone message said it all.

“So it’s true,” I say as I sink into a chair across from him.

“You heard the phone message.” It’s not a question.

I’m not in a coffee mood but need something hot and comforting, so I make myself a hot chocolate. I top it with whipped cream then slide into the chair opposite Blake. “Are we losing the house and the business?”

“Not the house.”

I nod, not feeling any better. I think of Mom and how much she loved the boutique—her voice rising with

excitement as she ordered supplies, her triumph over colorful advertising flyers, and the celebratory clip of scissor cutting on the opening day of the Bow-Wow Boutique. I was Mom's first customer, buying a beef-flavored Tasty Pastry for Toffee.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to but..." Pushing away his cup, he puts his head in his hands.

"But what?" I demand.

He lifts his head, his eyes shining with misery. "I just couldn't. Since that...that day...you don't talk to me."

"We talk a lot."

"About grocery lists or laundry or what we're having for dinner. Not about things that really matter." He rubs his forehead, sighing. "It's my fault, and I understand why you blame me. Hell, I blame myself."

He's not talking about losing the business. He's talking about losing Mom. And he's right. I have blamed him, for not driving, for letting her go alone, for being alive while she isn't.

"I failed her and you." He sighs. "I even went to a therapist, and he advised me to give you space to heal in your own way. And you have. I hear you laughing with Rory, and I'm glad, but sad, too, because you used to laugh with me."

"Yes, at your terrible dog puns, only you stopped telling jokes and sometimes when you look at me you cringe because I'm not" – my hands clench in my lap – "not your real child."

"You're real and wonderful and the only daughter I want." I'm shocked to see tears in his eyes. "My darling,

Ashlee, I never stopped loving you. It's just that I miss your mother and you look so much like her."

"I miss her, too." I blink so I don't cry. "And I've missed you, even your bad puns."

Pushing aside his coffee cup, he reaches over to clasp my hand. "We need each other."

I snuffle and nod.

"And I swear I'll do whatever it takes to save Bow-Wow Boutique."

"We'll both do it," I say firmly.

"I'd like that." He gives that goofy grin I haven't seen in a long time. "Did you hear about the dog that gave birth to puppies near the road?"

I groan, but I'm smiling. "What happened?"

"She was ticketed for littering."

Laughing, I open my arms, and for the first time since Mom died, I hug my stepdad.

That night we talk for hours, and he shows me the financial records. Bow-Wow Boutique is in bad shape. Low sales plus higher overhead equal negative profit. If we can't pay five thousand dollars in three days, we'll lose the business.

We need a miracle, I think as I climb into bed with Toffee curled beside me like a fuzzy pillow. I'm worried, yet I'm feeling lighter, no longer angry, and even hopeful. Tomorrow is the competition, and I'll see Derrick.

I expect to dream of Derrick. Instead, I sink into a nightmare of darkness and smoke, trapped inside Bow-Wow Boutique while the walls crumble and blaze with fire. I'm

rushing from room to room, trying to rescue the dogs. Sirens scream, and I wake breathless, sweating, and still hearing sirens.

Not a siren, the downstairs phone. Before I can reach it, my stepdad has the phone to his ear, nodding. At first I think he's talking to the bank because of his solemn expression, but then he smiles like he's won the lottery and ends the call with a cheerful, "I'll get them ready!" He grabs my hands and whirls me around the room, dancing.

"What's going on?" I pull away from the crazed dancer.

"Someone wants to buy a Q-Bee!" Blake singsongs as he kicks up his heels. Who knew he could tap dance?

"Great, but one customer won't save the business."

"It can when the customer wants a puppy for the most respected person in Castle Top – Mayor King!" Blake looks silly laughing and dancing in his green striped pajamas but seeing him so hopeful makes me want to dance, too.

I wonder if Derrick has anything to do with this miracle. Did he discover who I am? Will the phone ring next for me?

The phone stays silent, but Blake keeps dancing. "We'll need to have the pups ready for the mayor's assistant, Maud," he says. "She's arriving at seven tonight."

"That's when Talent-Mania starts, but if you need me here to help out" – I gulp – "I'll stay home."

"No, you will not!" He wags a finger at me. "You're going to kick talent butt tonight. I'll handle the sale, although I hate to miss your performance."

"You won't miss anything." After breakfast I lead my stepdad out to the garage and sit him in the audience chair.

A strange expression, blending surprise with sadness, crosses his face when he sees my costume.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be wearing more than a bodysuit,” I quickly explain, not wanting him to feel guilty about not affording a costume for me.

But it’s not the suit he’s staring at. It’s my white crystal-beaded shoes.

“Your mother wore those at our wedding,” he says softly. “You wear her shoes beautifully.”

Blinking back tears, I stare down at my shoes, and in the reflection I see my mother’s face, smiling, and suddenly I’m desperate to make her proud. I didn’t enter the talent contest expecting to win, but now I want that win more than ever for Mom, my stepdad, and myself. So, I power up the hoop remote control and ignite the dazzling illusion of my costume. Showtime!

Dancing Queen rocks the garage, and Blake gives me a standing ovation. Toffee sweeps a front paw down for a graceful bow. I bow, too, so caught up in my illusion I’m surprised to touch air when I reach for my glittery gown. When Blake praises my dog-training skills it’s a reward better than any trophy.

Afterward, we groom the pups. Working together, it takes about a half hour to groom each Q-Bee, and there are eleven puppies.

I gather supplies – nail clippers, brushes, towels, scissors, and cleaning products – then begin with Daisy’s tiniest pup that I’ve nicknamed Buttercup.

Starting with her neck, I brush her snowy-gold coat and

work down to her paws, careful to untangle any mats. Q-Bees' golden eyes are uber sensitive, so I check for eye boogers (none) then trim longish hairs obscuring her vision. Moving on to the ears, I swab cleaning product on cotton to gently dab the ears. Next, I slip on a surgical glove with bristles to finger-clean Buttercup's teeth. After I clip her tiny toenails, it's bath time. Shampooing, scrubbing, and rinsing a wiggling puppy is *not* easy, especially when she lunges away and escapes through the door I've forgotten to close, giving me a marathon-worthy workout chasing her. I finally bring her back to the washing tub and have to start the process all over again. When I'm done, Buttercup is adorable with tiny pink bows in her ears, a shiny coat, and polished pink toenails. But me? I'm a soggy mess. I glance over at Blake and giggle at the soapsuds in his hair.

The next few pups give me no problems, and time blurs by until Blake says we need to break for lunch. I nuke burritos in the microwave, gulp down a tall cold glass of iced tea, and then it's back to work. When we finish the last Q-Bee, it's almost three o'clock.

"I can't believe we pulled it off," Blake says with a weary grin. "Eleven pups all fluffed, clipped, and ready to show. Thanks, Ashlee. I can always count on you."

I smile, thinking that I can count on him, too, in the ways that matter.

After showering, I slip on a bathrobe and blow-dry my hair. Opening my closet, I frown at the bodysuit waiting for me on a hanger, wires dangling like steel snakes. At least I won't need to put on the rubber cap until right before I go on

stage. I hear the house phone ring but don't think anything of it until Blake appears at my door, scowling.

"That was Mrs. Evanston," he says in his "bad news" voice.

"What's wrong?"

"Sweetie-Pie didn't take."

Which in dog verbiage means Brutus had a stud-fail, and according to our standard contract, the customer is allowed a do-over visit. Usually the female dog comes to stay with us for several days, but Mrs. Evanston won't leave her house.

"Sorry you have to make that long drive again," I say. "I can go along with you tomorrow if that will help."

"If only I could wait until tomorrow." Blake groans. "She's offering a huge bonus fee if Brutus stays with her for a week and I bring him immediately."

"But that's seventy miles away and the mayor's assistant will be here in three hours."

"I can make it work."

"Reschedule the appointment with Maud?" I ask hopefully.

"I would but the number she gave me didn't work, so I must have written it down wrong. Don't look so worried. I've got this under control and can make both appointments. If I drive slightly over the legal limit" – he pauses with a grin that promises a heavy foot to the pedal – "I'll drop Brutus off in just over an hour, settle him in quickly, and be back here by seven."

I mentally calculate the driving time and shake my head. "Didn't you tell me that Mrs. Evanston loves to talk and you

never get out of there in less than an hour?” I swallow a sharp lump in my throat. “I’ll skip the competition.”

“No, you will not.”

“Don’t be stubborn. You need me.”

“I can handle this.”

“But what if you don’t make it home in time?”

“I will, and you’re going to be amazing tonight.” His face softens as he looks at me. “Now go have a ball at your competition.”

When he’s gone, I squeeze into my latex costume, which looks ridiculous without the illusion. I can’t arrive at such a fancy event in a Frankenstein bodysuit, so I cover up in sweat pants and a hoodie. It’s warm and comfy, and the pockets hold my cell phone and the hoop’s remote control. I probably look strange carrying a dog and a plastic hoop. Only my glittering shoes hint at my true destination – the mayor’s mansion!

Since Blake took the car, I text Rory, asking for a ride. She’s going with her boyfriend so I’m not sure she’ll want a third wheel hanging around, but she replies quickly with a big smiley face symbol and *See you soon*.

As I tuck my cell phone in my pocket, there’s a shrill ringing from the house phone. If it’s the bank again, I don’t want to hear it. I’m tempted to let the machine pick up. But what if it’s important? When I answer, a woman with a gravelly, aged voice asks for Blake.

“He’s not here,” I say. “Can I take a message?”

“Please do, my dear. Tell him Maud, Executive Assistant to Mayor King, will arrive precisely at seven and I expect the

dogs to be well-groomed.”

“The pups are already groomed and adorable.”

“Pups? Oh dear, that won’t do.”

My stomach lurches. “What do you mean?”

“I specifically requested adult dogs.”

“But my dad said you wanted puppies.”

“Clearly he misunderstood. Puppies are too messy and energetic for a busy mayor. I’ll need to see every adult dog at their very best.”

“But that would mean grooming” – I pause to count – “fourteen dogs!”

“Your problem, not mine,” she says in a brisk tone. “I’ll be there precisely at seven.”

The phone clicks off, but I’m still staring at it, sick to my gut. Toffee nuzzles my ankle, staring up at me with trusting mismatched gold and brown eyes. She’s worked so hard to learn new tricks and deserves to show off tonight. But Blake needs me.

Gripping my phone, I text Rory. Don’t pick me up. Can’t go.

My cell blasts music, and I’m sure it’s Rory calling to find out what’s wrong. She’ll argue and offer to help, but unless she has a wand that can magically groom fourteen dogs, it’s hopeless.

The music on my cell keeps trilling, and I owe Rory an explanation, so I click to answer. But as I glance down at the screen, instead of Rory’s number, bold black letters wave across a misty gray background.

Swirling three words.

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Answer the door.

Chapter Fourteen

She went to the front door, and there was a carriage with six black horses all decorated with feathers, and servants dressed in blue and silver. They helped her into the carriage, and away they galloped to the king's castle. (Grimm)

When I find Mrs. Dunwilly on my doorstep, I get this out-of-context vibe. I'm used to seeing her at Shakespeare's Theater or cheering on her kids at frog races. But *never* at my house. And she's brought friends, over a dozen kids plus some adults, including Mr. Carter, Mrs. Baker, and Granny Dermott.

"Don't gape, Ashlee. It's not attractive," Mrs. Dunwilly says in that bossy tone usually reserved for her children. "No time to waste. You have to get ready for your competition."

"Yes, I know but" – I shake my head, bewildered – "how did *you* know?"

"Your friend sent me a text."

"What friend?" I ask as a wild suspicion forms.

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“I didn’t recognize his name, but he sounded young.”

“Farley?”

“That’s it!” She nods enthusiastically then gently touches my cheek. “Never be ashamed to ask for help. Neighbors look out for each other. I’m an experienced dog groomer – owned my own shop years ago – and I’ll instruct my helpers. We’ll have your dogs groomed by seven so you can make the contest.”

I shake my head. “I can’t just leave while you all do my work.”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do. Now get on girl, so I can get my crew started.” She shoos me away with a flick of her hand then bustles down the front steps to join the others.

Abso-freaking-lutely impossible. Yet all these people are on my doorstep--families who sat beside me at Shakespeare’s theater, young athletes I applauded while they raced frogs and turtles, and children who laughed in delight at my dog show. I recognize Tabitha, Tony, Jemmily, and so many more wonderful faces. I can’t think of what to say, so I stand there with my mouth hanging open.

Mrs. Dunwilly, on the other hand, has no loss of words and is already assigning duties to her army of “helpers.” She’s even brought her own grooming supplies: cleaners, brushes, combs, scissors, and shears. I begin to believe fourteen dogs really can be groomed in two hours.

But that still leaves me with a huge problem.

How will Toffee and I get to the mayor’s house?

By car it’s a short drive, but by foot it’s a long uphill

walk, especially in glitzy high-heeled shoes. I glance around, hoping for another miracle like a horse-drawn carriage or chauffeured limousine. But there aren't *any* cars in the driveway. Apparently the neighborhood crew walked over.

"No dilly-dallying, young miss," crackles a feeble voice.

Turning, I see wrinkled Granny Dermott hobbling toward me on her cane. She gestures with her cane toward the street. "Your coach awaits."

Coach? I see four scruffy goats tethered to a rickety wheeled cart.

Granny can't possibly expect me to ride...OMG!

I can not arrive at Mayor King's mansion in a goat cart!

"Climb in, missy." Granny prods me with her cane like I'm one of her goats.

"But I can't."

There's barking behind me and a whoosh as Toffee springs into the cart.

Granny Dermott pats Toffee's fuzzy white head. "Your dog has the right idea. Are you going to join her?"

A bigger force than me is at work here, and who am I to argue? Wonder and gratitude fill me. All these people, my neighborhood family, are here to help me. It's my turn to help myself.

Smiling despite the smell of goats and risk of splinters I say, "Thank you, Granny."

As I climb into the cart I glance down at my silver shoes, and they sparkle like they're winking with secrets.



One bruised butt and a ripe odor of eau de goat later, I'm standing before the mansion I've admired since I was a little girl. Instead of stairs leading to the front door, there's a bridge arching over a rippling stream like a medieval moat. I can't resist leaning over the rail and peering down into the blue-green water, expecting to see alligators but seeing a dazzling sparkle of coins, as if coins have been dropped for wishing.

"I'm really here!" I whisper as the *clop-clop* of Granny's goat cart fades around the curve of the elegant driveway and out of sight.

Cradling Toffee against my hoodie, I take in the grandeur. I can hardly believe I'm entering the wrought-iron gates of the mansion I've fantasized about forever. Blooming gardens of roses, statuesque animal-shaped topiaries, diamond-glitter off a pond beyond graceful willows, and grand pillars arching over the entrance. It's even more beautiful than I imagined.

Careful not to trip in my crystal heels on the wooden boards of the bridge, I walk to the carved oak front door and press a crown-shaped doorbell.

No answer. Am I too late? But a glance at my cell phone shows I'm early. As I reach to press the "crown" bell again, the door is yanked open. I stare up, up, up at a straw-blond scarecrow of a man.

"Please, come in," he says in a deep monotone voice.

Entering the gleaming white-tiled foyer, I gaze up at a sparkling crystal chandelier. Toffee wiggles from my arms and scampers over to sniff a massive marble lion statue, growling with little dog bravery, ready to take down the lion.

When I glance up at the butler, there's nothing in his expression. He's so emotionless I study his skin to check for circuitry, finding none but still unconvinced he's human. The marble lion has more personality.

"Will you and your companion require seating in the audience or contestant lounge?" he asks like a well-mannered robot.

You'd think it would be obvious considering the hoop in my hand. But he's waiting for a reply. "Um, contestant," I say.

"The Red Room is serving as a lounge for contestants. Please follow me." He pivots on his polished black heels, and I scoop up Toffee.

We go down a narrow marble-floored hallway bordered with paintings of grim-faced old people. Are they Derrick's ancestors? I wish I could look closer, but butler-bot walks too fast. After turning three corners, I pause to admire a waterfall spilling down a rock wall into a blue pool. An indoor waterfall! Seriously cool. Toffee squirms in my arms, and I know what she wants. "No, no swimming," I say firmly.

The Red Room dazzles with rust-hued carpet, antique cherry-red couches, and pleated burgundy drapes. Walls, a pale shade of blush, are lined with shelves of leather-bound books. And I smile as I think how I'll tell Blake later about the books in the Red Room being "read," too.

Butler-bot instructs me to wait for the other contestants. When he's gone, I wander around the room, running my fingers over leathery book spines and admiring vintage ceramic figurines. I hear the creak of the door opening and look up expecting to see another contestant. Instead, I stare into warm chocolate eyes.

"Jane!" He's clearly surprised but even more pleased.

I look around and almost say "Jane who?" until I remember my fake name, but I'm too thrilled to see him to care what he calls me.

"I can't believe it's you." I shake my head, trying to make sense of everything. Seeing him after so long is confusing, mixing reality with my nightly dreams of us together (not exactly X rated but a few were sensuously close to R).

"Why not? I live here." Derrick grins with a hotness that could melt diamonds. "But if you want me to leave..."

"No! Don't go!" I start to grab for him until I realize what I'm doing. I slap my arm to my side and shrug like being alone with him at his home is no big deal. "So, um, how did you know I was here?"

"I saw you with Perky, although I wasn't sure it was you under that sweater."

"Perky?" I try to breathe normally, but Derrick's so fine I can't stop staring, longing oh so much to touch him, to make sure he's really here.

"Perkins, our butler. I know what you're thinking. Who has a butler these days? But he's more like family than an employee. He insists on being called a butler because he attended a professional butler academy and is proud of his

certificate of ‘butlership.’”

“I can’t imagine going to a school to learn how to open the front door.”

“Oh, it’s more than that. He can greet guests in over a hundred different languages, including Latin and sign language. He’s versatile in skateboarding, too, and can do expert tricks like kick flips and pop-shove it.”

“A skateboarder?” I snort. “I’d like to see that.”

“And I’d like, well, it’s good to see you again. I acted like a jerk last time I saw you.” Derrick bites his lip. “You probably hate me.”

“No hate.”

“So we’re okay?”

I nod, smiling.

“Whew! I thought I totally blew it.” He swipes his hand across his forehead. “I’ve been trying to find you, to apologize for losing my temper.”

“I know what it’s like to lose my temper,” I admit.

“So how about we have a do-over, like we’re meeting for the first time. You may think you know about the mayor’s son, but there’s a lot more to tell.”

“I have things to tell you, too.” I touch the cell phone in my pocket.

“Me, first. There’s something you need to know.”

“What?”

“About my online status, it’s changed to single.”

“Seriously?” I can’t hide my goofy grin. “You broke up with Beatrice and live to tell about it?”

“She wanted to kill me.” He winces. “When I made it

clear we were over, she threatened to go to my parents. I told her it wouldn't matter because I'm making my own decisions from now on. That's when she lost it, swearing and shouting like a crazy person. I tried to calm her by saying I still wanted to be friends, and she slapped me." He rubs his cheek. "Hard."

"Ouch." I nod sympathetically, although inside I'm grinning like a fool. He's single! He's free! I have a real chance with him.

"Beatrice packs a wicked punch. But after a few days she cooled down and shocked me by apologizing, something she never does. She accepts that we're not together and is okay with just being friends."

That doesn't sound like the bitch-queen I know and loathe. If they've been through for a week, why is she pretending they're pre-engaged? She isn't acting like anyone's "just friend."

When I mention this to Derrick, he scowls. "I only called Beatrice and made up that story about wanting a dog to try to find you."

"You don't want a Q-Bee?"

"I'm more interested in the Q-Bee owner." He scratches Toffee's head, and I admire how his blond lashes shine golden like a Q-Bee's tail.

I should say something clever about being interested in him, too. That seems flirty, so not me. Still I'm liking that he tried to find me. But he's shifting his feet and looking everywhere except my face and there's this awkward energy between us, so I say the first thing that jumps into my head.

“It’s ironic that you don’t want a Q-Bee.” When his face scrunches like he doesn’t understand, I add, “I mean, ironic because you don’t want one, yet your father does.”

“Huh?” He shakes his head. “Where’d you hear that?”

“His executive assistant made an appointment to see the dogs tonight.”

“Tonight? Hallstead usually stays with Dad at official events like Talent-Mania. Besides, Dad says they’re too yappy.”

“Queen Bee’s don’t yap. They purr.” I tickle Toffee’s chin and enjoy the sweet rumble of her purring.

“Nothing like the ear-splitting bark of my dog.” He bends down to hear Toffee. “Sweet girl.”

“You really don’t know anything about your dad wanting a Q-Bee?”

“Not a word,” he says, and I’m disappointed because I’d suspected it was Derrick’s idea to help me out. Not that he had any way of knowing about Bow-Wow Boutique’s financial problems. Still, it just seemed like such a coincidence; I meet the mayor’s son and suddenly the mayor wants to buy a Q-Bee. Mayor King buying a Queen Bee would be great publicity for Bow-Wow Boutique.

“I never have a clue what my father is doing,” Derrick adds, leaning against a bookshelf and idly rolling his fingers across leather spines of old books as he glances a bit shyly up at me. “No more talk of Dad, okay? I want to know about you.”

I’d rip open my soul and spill my blood just to keep his dimpling lop-sided smile flashed at me. “What do you want

to know?”

“Well to start with, Beatrice says there’s no Jane at her school. You obviously know her, so why doesn’t she know you?”

“Oh, she knows me all right,” I say wryly. “Although she never calls me by my real name – her idea of a joke.”

Biting my lip, I look away from Derrick. I used to be so proud of my name, a combination of Mom’s name (Leena) and my father’s (Ashton). But now all I can hear are Beatrice’s taunts.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” He reaches for my hand, his thumb tracing along my palm. “I like the new tattoo.”

“Not a real tattoo, it’s henna.” His tender touch warms my skin deliciously.

“It looks like your dog.” He nods toward Toffee.

“Yeah, my friend Rory did it.” It’s hard to think with his hand on mine. “She designed it herself.”

“Cool. I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“She’d *love* to meet you.” I grin. “But be warned. She’ll talk you into getting a henna tattoo.”

“Could she do a design of my dog?” He points to a picture of Pete.

“Sure. She likes to say drawing is no big deal, but she’s studied hard and has amazing skills. When she gave caricature drawings at Swap Market, kids lined up for hours.”

“You sound like her publicist. It’s cool you’re so supportive.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? She’s my best friend.”

“Beatrice is always trash talking her best friend.” Derrick furrows his brow. “I guess girls have a different way of showing friendship.”

“Not that different. Rory and I tease each other, but we’re never mean.” I pause. “Sorry. I know Beatrice is still your friend, and I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“What I feel is stupid for shrugging off her bad behavior. When you grow up with someone, they’re like family and you just accept them. Maybe I accepted too much because it’s easier to keep doing the same things, which is like doing nothing.”

His words strike to my core, although for a different reason. I’ve spent a year of “nothing.” After Mom’s accident, I stopped doing things I enjoyed because it felt like a betrayal to Mom to be happy without her. Oh, I did homework and chores and hung out with the dogs. But I quit Brain Bowl, shut out friends (except Rory who obstinately stuck by me), and didn’t give my stepdad a chance to be my dad. Lately, it’s like a power switch flipped on inside me and I’ve been busting out of my comfort zone: meeting Derrick, entering Talent-Mania, training with Toffee. I even stood up to Beatrice, although hating her is a waste of energy; I’d rather focus on good feelings, like what I’m feeling for Derrick.

I take a step closer, tilting up my chin so we’re almost eye level. We stare at each other (is this flirting?) and I’m fascinated by how much can be said without words-- a lift of a brow, a curve of full lips, and the soundless connections of souls. I’m so ready to connect with him.

Never Been Texted

But he cups his ear with his hand. “It’s about to get crowded. Footsteps headed this way.”

I swear under my breath.

“I feel the same way, so, let’s get out of here.” Derrick gestures to a side door half-hidden in a bookcase. “I know somewhere we can talk privately.”

“Leave? Is that allowed? I mean, your butler told me to wait here.”

“We have time. The competition won’t begin until after my father gives his opening speech – a very, very long and boring speech. Come on, I want you to meet someone special, and on the way I’ll show you around my house.”

I don’t need any more convincing.

The little girl who stared in awe at this mansion imagining it to be an enchanted castle is finally going to get a tour.

And the prince is my tour guide.



I follow Derrick up flights of stairs, through spacious halls with oriental carpeting and gold-framed portraits, and glimpse into rooms of over-stuffed couches and four-poster beds. He uses a faux-British accent, and I suspect he’s making up facts.

When I glance out a window on the third floor and admire the panorama of greenery and flowers, Derrick pushes open double-doors to a balcony overlooking the rose garden. I lean against the rail, but my gaze slides over to Derrick,

memorizing each curve of his face and the tiny laugh lines around his eyes. His mouth is perfection, as exquisite as any priceless painting, soft and bow-shaped and dimpling into a smile.

But the tour isn't over yet, and he guides me back down flights of stairs, zigzagging through halls until we enter an enormous kitchen with two refrigerators, shining gold-rippled tile flooring, and a marble island beneath copper pans that hang like wind chimes. Derrick waves to a sturdy woman with a long white braid perched on a wooden stool while she peels potatoes, and I guess she's the chef he mentioned who owns a Queen Bee.

When she calls out to him, "What mischief are you up to now?" he laughs and replies, "You don't want to know," then tugs me forward and out through a back door.

I blink at the glaring shine of the setting sun as we step onto a cement patio. Derrick points to a high chain link fence where dark eyes gleam beneath a tree, and I glimpse a large dark creature. "Here, boy!" Derrick calls, and the creature lunges toward us with a deep bark that makes Toffee jump out of my arms and cower behind my legs.

"Meet Pete," Derrick tells me as he leads me through a gate into a dog run that's so large, with shady trees and climbing toys, that I can't see where it ends. "Don't worry, Toffee, Pete looks fierce, but he's as gentle as a baby bunny. He won't bite, but you could drown in his drool."

"Wow" is all I can say as I admire Pete's powerful tawny gold body. I set my hoop on the ground and reach out to stroke Pete's massive head. "You told me he was a mastiff,

but not a Dogue de Bordeaux!”

“You know your dog breeds,” he says, impressed. “I usually just say he’s a French Mastiff. All 145 pounds of him.”

Toffee cautiously takes a step toward Pete’s backside, sniffing. After a moment, her gold tail wags like a friendly hello. Derrick and I sit on a nearby cement bench, watching the dogs sniff each other.

“So, what do you think of my home?” He smiles in that teasing yet shy way I find adorable.

The little girl in me wants to gush about how amazing everything is and how it’s even better than I imagined. But I don’t want him to think of me as a “little girl,” so, I act casual and say, “If this is a house, then I live in a closet.”

He chuckles. “Sometimes I’d prefer a closet. At least it would feel like a home. This is a cool house, but my parents don’t own this McMansion. It owns them. They’re always talking about how much everything costs. I’m surprised they don’t make *me* wear a price tag.”

I’m not sure whether he’s serious or joking, but it doesn’t matter. When he laughs again the sound is so wonderful I could sit in this dog run forever.

He points to Toffee. “Why did you bring your dog to a talent show?”

“She’s the one with talent. Not me.”

“And I was looking forward to watching *you* jump through that hoop.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” I smile.

“Is Toffee going to dance like she did at Swap Market?”

“We’ve been working on a new act,” I say mysteriously.

“Can I have a preview?”

“I have to conserve the batteries.” When his brows knit together, I lift out the remote control from my hoodie pocket. “The remote activates the hoop so it’ll spin in the air and create holographic illusions. I don’t really understand how it works. Anyway, I’d rather hang out here a little longer with our dogs. Can we just talk?”

So, we do. We talk about random things like this game I made up of finding dog breeds in the shapes of clouds and home schooling versus public school. Turns out while I’ve always thought home school would be so much better than dealing with other kids every day, Derrick felt trapped in his house and longed to attend public school.

“But next year I’m going, no matter how much my parents object,” he says with the same passion he used when he spoke about wanting a job that helped people.

“You’ll convince them. It can’t be that much harder than telling them you aren’t interested in politics,” I say. “How did they take that?”

“I didn’t tell them, and it’s your fault.”

“My fault?”

“You showed me a different side of Castle Top,” he says with mock accusation. “Swap Market, frog races, and a backyard theater. People were so giving, even if they had little to give. When you explained how some of them had their land legally stolen from them, it made me angry, especially since I’m sure my father was responsible.”

“You’re not to blame for what your father does.”

“No, but I can fight injustice.”

“Going to wear a cape and go all super-hero?”

“I might.” He winds his fingers through the chain link fence, his gaze sweeping beyond treetops as if he’s seeing all of Castle Top. “I’ve been reading about the risks of underground gas and fracking — because of all the chemicals they pump into the ground. When I asked my father about it, he said to leave it to the professionals. So, I’ll become one of the professionals by majoring in law and learning legal ways to help. Shouldn’t laws be upheld by someone who cares about all people, not only the rich and influential?” He pauses, cheeks reddening as if embarrassed. “There I go, sounding like a politician again.”

“You do it so well.”

“Scary, huh?”

“Only for your father. He better watch out. I believe you can do anything you want.”

“Anything?” he whispers and leans closer so he’s only a breath away.

“Well...” I feel my cheeks burning. “Depends on what you have in mind.”

“What if I want to kiss the girl I’ve been thinking of since her dog knocked me in a pond?”

“That could be arranged,” I say softly, and I lean forward to meet him halfway. He pulls me so close our noses bump, and we both smile. I close my eyes and lift my lips...just as Toffee yips like she’s in pain.

I jerk back then look over at my dog. She’s jumping to dodge Pete’s swinging rope-like tail. She snarls at Pete, giving

him some attitude, and he cowers to the ground and rolls over, his tail still wagging. Toffee's not in any danger, but I'm not so sure about me. When I turn back to Derrick, he brushes his finger across my cheek. His touch is softer than a whisper yet sends a powerful surge of heat through me like I've swallowed the sun. When his arms slip around my shoulders, a natural gravity pulls me against his chest where I fit perfectly.

A cool wind picks up. Swirling leaves crackle in a dance at our feet, but I'm impervious to cold, warm in Derrick's arms. I'm where I belong; I know this deep in my soul. But it's not enough. I need to be closer, to taste his lips and –

His stupid phone dings.

“A text,” he tells me.

“No more interruptions. Can you ignore it?”

“I'd like to, but it's from Mom.” He frowns down at his phone. “She wants me on stage ASAP, and if I don't show up soon, she'll send a search party.”

I sigh. “I guess you have to go.”

“Yeah. Dad's starting his speech.”

“He is? OMG!” I jump away. “I have to go!”

“No need to rush. I told you Dad's speeches go on and on and on.”

But I'm not listening, jolted with high-voltage stage fright. What was I thinking? Why did I sign up for this? Go out on a stage in front of hundreds of people, most of them from my school? Insanity!

I steal Toffee away from her new giant buddy and grab the purple hoop. “I need to get back to the red room.”

Never Been Texted

Derrick groans. “Timing sucks.”

“I just hope my performance doesn’t.” My voice shakes.

“It’ll be amazing, like you,” he adds softly. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” *For so many things.* I long to stay with him and the dogs, and forget all about the competition.

Instead, I summon up courage and race out of the room with Toffee, slowing only on the stairs, careful not to trip in my high-heeled shoes.

Chapter Fifteen

She was dressed in all the colors of the heavens; all the comets, the stars, and moon on her dress, and the sun on her brow. She enters the ballroom. Who could look at her! For the sun alone they lower their eyes, and are all blinded. His majesty began to dance, but he could not look at her, because she dazzled him.
(Crane)

You're late." Butler-bot's tone shows no expression, but I sense I've pissed him off. I eye him curiously, smiling when I notice him slide on the tile in his black polished shoes like he's making a skateboarding move. He doesn't talk to me, though, as he leads me down a hall that's jam-packed with other contestants, including my nemesis and her loyal sidekick.

Contestants have been randomly assigned numbers for order of performance from one to twenty-five. I'm given a badge with a large black number two, which is better than going on first, but not much.

Never Been Texted

Carrying a hoop and a dog triggers snickers as I move down the line in my concealing sweatpants and hoodie toward the front. A pink-haired girl in a Hawaiian grass skirt (freshman, I'm sure) grins at Toffee. "Cute doggie!" I notice other kids smiling at Toffee, too, and I get this thrilling rush like I can really do this and maybe even win – until I spot Beatrice (contestant number fourteen) and Hannah (contestant number fifteen) both wearing sexy, short dresses that shimmer like expensive jewels beneath the chandelier. Beatrice always looks stylish, but Hannah, who is usually only a mousy clone of Beatrice, has lifted her long hair into an elegant twist of curls that enhance her large brown eyes and high cheekbones, and she's holding a violin. I steel myself for their usual onslaught of negativity, but Beatrice gapes at me, her mouth hanging open.

Beatrice smacks Hannah's shoulder then covers her mouth like that's enough to muffle her voice, but I can still clearly hear her say, "You swore she wouldn't be here."

Hannah shakes her head, staring with confusion and horror, like I'm a zombie raised from the dead. "I did what you told me. I was so sure she'd quit."

"Obviously not sure enough. If you think –"

"I don't understand..." Hannah's voice trails off like an apology.

I don't understand either, but someone shouts my name so I don't hear the rest of what Beatrice says. I glance down the line and see number twelve, Maria from homeroom, waving to get my attention. She's wearing a fifties-styled blond poufy wig with clunky saddle shoes. "Adorable

puppy!” she says. “Can I pet him?”

“Toffee is a *girl*,” I correct. “And she loves attention.”

Maria pops out of the line to pet Toffee and I stand there self-consciously, uneasily aware that Beatrice has stopped whispering to Hannah. She swivels her head in my direction, fury twisting her pretty face into a hot mess of mad. Her black eyes are bullets aimed and fired into my flesh.

Beatrice silently mouths one word: *Toffee*.

And I understand. She’s figured out I’m the “Jane” Derrick asked her to find, and she is *not* pleased.

“Your puppy is so sweet. Thanks for letting me pet her,” Maria says then slips back into line.

“Sure,” I say absently as I wrench my gaze away from Beatrice.

What’s the worst Beatrice can do? I ask myself. Spread more stupid rumors? I’ve proven she doesn’t scare me by entering the contest despite her attempts to make me quit. Did she really think I’d give up that easily? Never again will I let her words have power over me.

Riding a sweet wave of confidence, I lift my head and stride past like she doesn’t exist.

I take my place in line behind a “cowboy” with number one on his badge. He’s blowing into a harmonica and seems relaxed like it’s no big deal to go on first. I whisper “good luck” to him as our line begins to move down a staircase and through double-doors into the ballroom.

A band strikes up marching music, and my heart *thump-thumps* in time with the drums. Blinding lights make me squint as I search the audience for Rory. I’m sure she’s here, but it’s

so crowded it seems like all of Castle Top has come to watch. I spot some of my neighbors in the audience: the Kabkees, Carters, Smiths, Mr. Shakespeare and even the Dunwillys made in time.

Applause, shouts, and whistles are deafening as we file up to a raised stage where Mayor King looms tall and powerful beside a pudgy red-haired man and a petite woman at the podium. Seated behind them in a line of folding chairs are a blur of mostly official, suited people – except for an elegantly dressed woman I recognize as the mayor’s wife and the sandy-haired boy beside her, who’s giving me a thumbs up.

I grin back at Derrick, twirling my hoop on one finger like I have the world at my fingertips.

Butler-bot leads us to a row of chairs below the stage off to the left rear side. The audience can’t see us, but we have a good view of the stage. We sit according to our numbers in two long rows and an official tells us that when he calls our number we’re to climb a short flight of stairs to the stage.

Toffee wiggles impatiently. “Soon,” I promise her.

Mayor King stands at the podium, front and center, introducing his staff. I’m tuning him out, mentally rehearsing my routine, until I catch the words “executive assistant” and look up to see a chubby silver-haired man taking a bow.

That can’t be right. The executive assistant is an elderly woman named Maud, who at this very moment is choosing a Q-Bee for the mayor. I stare at the man speaking on stage, and when I hear the mayor refer to him as “Hallstead,” I get a very, very sick feeling.

Unless the mayor has two executive assistants, one of them is a fake, and it's clearly not this chubby man standing beside the mayor.

So who exactly is Maud?

Fragments of conversations spin through my head like slippery puzzle pieces. Derrick said his father's executive assistant Hallstead would be here tonight, not out buying a dog that Derrick had no idea his father even wanted. Beatrice's shock at seeing me here, and the accusing look she gave Hannah. The final pieces lock into place.

I aim a furious gaze down the line of entrants to numbers fourteen and fifteen, and wonder which one of them faked the voice of Maud.



Harmonica playing cowboy walks up the stairs to the stage, which means I'm next, but how can I stay here when my stepdad is at home, waiting and waiting for a customer who will never come? All his hopes ruined by a cruel prank meant to keep me out of the contest.

If there wasn't an audience of witnesses, I'd go over to those mean girls and smack them both down. But my stepdad...waiting...not knowing. I should be at home with him, but what will that accomplish? Blake would want me to stay. Beatrice schemed to get rid of me, and damn if I'll give her that satisfaction. Toffee and I have worked too hard to give up now, and I'm going to do my best to win. Not for the

trophy or parade or even the scholarship, but for everyone who helped me reach this stage: my one-girl cheer squad Rory, my amazing dog-grooming neighbors, goat-cart Granny, master of illusion Shakespeare, and Blake. I slip my cell from my pocket and send a text to my stepdad.

Maud fake. No sale.

As I start to put my phone away it dings with an incoming text.

I brace myself, knowing it'll be my stepdad. He'll be so upset, and there's nothing I can say to make it better. I'm tempted to ignore the message, no time to deal with this now, but when my phone dings again, I glance down at the message. A cherubic face grins at me!

Farley, again. He waves an official looking paper, pointing to a signature scrawled on the bottom. My signature. I recognize the contract I signed when I bought my phone. One line of the contract flashes large:

**At the end of a period of one month,
this contract will expire at midnight.**

I just thought this was unimportant legalese when I signed the contract, that, of course, I'd be able to renew. How much can a service plan for a two-dollar phone cost? I assumed my marvelous mauve phone was an ordinary phone with ordinary rules. Guess not.

The screen swirls to midnight black. The extra-ordinary phone *tick, tick, ticks* like a countdown to doom. Digital

numbers of a clock flash onscreen, whirling backward until they stop at the current time: 7:14. I'm just a few hours away from the end of my contract. I remember Farley saying, "A lot can happen in a month." Was he ever right! What will happen in a few hours? I have no idea, but I have a feeling I won't like it.

Harmonica music from the stage cues that it's almost time for me to perform. So many things have gone wrong, but now is my chance to do something right. I know in my soul that if I can win Talent-Mania, everything will work out.

High notes rise then stop abruptly, and the audience thunders with applause for the first performer. I haven't been watching him and have no idea how he's done. But the audience seems to love him. Will they love me, too?

"Contestant number two," Mayor King announces.

This is it. I rise to my feet.

I kiss Toffee's soft head for luck – or perhaps courage – then walk slowly up stairs, four of them, to stand on the stage. The intense lights are blinding, but as I look around the stage, a strange calm settles over me. The hours of practice slip like a second soul beneath my skin, made of confidence. I do a quick checklist of each of my props: the hoop, the remote control, and, of course, Toffee.

As I step up to the stage, coming from a back staircase out of sight from the audience, I'm relieved to see a table I'd requested to set up the hoop's remote control. I check to make sure it has a clear view of where I'll be performing on stage. The table isn't visible to the audience (only the other contestants) and it's close enough to project the holographic

images to the hoop. Perfect. I set-up the remote like Shakespeare instructed, and when I click the power button on, the hoop vibrates with energy that shocks through my hand.

Now is the moment of revealing. I have to time it precisely or the audience will see me wearing only the wired bodysuit. Holding my breath for a fearful second, I click the button to set the spinning hoop in motion then slip out of my sweats and let my hoodie fall to the stage floor. I feel completely naked and have to remind myself the illusion is as solid as actual clothes. Still, it's hard not to cover myself with my hands while I stand in a shimmery see-through bodysuit. From the excited *oohs* from the audience I know they're seeing a virtual image of me. I'm liquid like the sea under a sparkling sun in a gown of illusion, and Toffee shimmers beside me, too.

Music bursts from the remote control, and as I fling the hoop into the air, it swirls like a cloud shooting into the universe. At my hand signal, Toffee soars through the hoop, a spectral furry rocket. There's a whoosh of gasps then roaring of applause, but I'm lost in my purpose, giving signals and twirling along with Toffee as I grab the hoop and fling it so it sails over her head. The hoop flashes virtual laser lights of changing colors, and Toffee jumps so she's dancing on her back legs.

I glance over and catch Derrick watching with shining eyes and a huge smile, and I'm so hyped that when I toss the hoop up again I feel like I'm the one flying. Toffee is dancing and jumping precisely on my hand-signal cues.

We're nearly to the finale, where the hoop storms like a meteor shower, and when Toffee jumps through it her fur shimmers silvery gold, the projection from the remote giving an illusion that she's changing shape and glowing like a living star. When she soars through the hoop for one last time, she'll seem to vanish then reappear in my arms.

I'm reaching for the hoop, ready to toss it higher than ever for the final trick when the holographic sky of images goes dark as if swallowed by a black hole. The hoop slips through my fingers. It clatters to the ground, like a bird shot dead in flight. No sizzling energy. No shimmer. Nothing.

I blink, not understanding why the audience has gone silent — until I look over to the prop table and see Beatrice standing there, clapping like she's my biggest fan — but I'm close enough to see what the audience can't. Beatrice is holding my remote control like a prize.

And I'm standing in the center of the stage in front of hundreds of people, most from my school, wearing nothing but an almost see-through bodysuit.

Someone laughs and others join in. Fingers point. Everyone stares at me.

When I look over at Derrick, he's staring, too.

So are his father, his mother, and all the King's men (and women).

I scoop up Toffee and run off the stage, leaving behind laughter and the lifeless hoop.

Someone calls for me to come back. Derrick? But I'm not stopping for anything. I escape down a side aisle, tears stinging my face. I have to get out of here, go home, and

Never Been Texted

never show my face in public again. Mocking laughter slams into me, piercing my skin like shards of shame.

I push through double doors and look around an empty hallway, panicked. Which way to go? How will I get home? I can't run all the way in Mom's high heels (the only part of my costume that didn't fade to humiliation). I need a ride, and the goat cart isn't an option, even if I could find Granny in the crowd. Rory? No, she's somewhere back in the audience with her boyfriend.

While dashing around corners and decorative statues, it hits me who I can call. I dig into my pocket for my mauve phone and send a short text.

No time to wait for a reply.

Run, run, run. My lungs burn and my muscles scream for mercy. But I'm merciless and run faster on gleaming tile. Got to keep going. *Don't think of Derrick and his shocked expression while the world laughed at me.* I don't think he laughed. I'm sure he wouldn't. Still, I can't face him or anyone. Ever.

I wind through halls until I recognize the diamond-dazzle of the chandelier in the foyer.

I sob relief when I see the massive double entry doors ahead. I shift my grip on Toffee and reach for the knob, hesitating at the sound of Derrick's voice shouting my name. Not my name, though, he still thinks I'm Jane. I blew my chance to tell him who I really am, and now he'll never know.

Cradling Toffee under my arm, I grip the phone in one hand and yank open the door with the other. Cold air slams into me like icicles, freezing my blood and breath. I force myself to keep going and step outside, looking across the

bridge arching over dark water. I've just started across the wooden planks when I hear a shout of "Jane!"

Derrick. Oh, my breaking heart. I shouldn't, yet I can't resist swiveling my head to look at him, his face flushed from running yet his expression focused with determination. He'll try to fix everything and insist I come back. He'll compliment my performance and say no one cares about my fashion malfunction. I'll love him even more for his lies. But what can I say to him? If he asks what happened and I tell him Beatrice sabotaged me, he'll be stuck in the middle of his old girlfriend and his almost new one. I can't do that to him. I blew it tonight, even if it wasn't my fault. Beatrice told me she never loses, and she proved it. A room full of people laughed while I stood practically naked on stage. I can't forget that and want to hide from the world for the next fifty or a hundred years.

Derrick calls out again.

The front door bangs shut behind him, and he's so close I can see the confusion on his face. I turn away and run onto the bridge.

I'm nearly across when I stumble in my mother's beautiful jeweled shoes. Teetering on one heel, I start to fall, but I catch myself.

My arms flail, and my mauve phone is flung into the air, flying, tumbling, spinning in a high arc like glittery mauve fireworks.

Until it falls, diving down like a dropped bomb, spiraling down, down until it disappears with a splash into the dark waters beneath the bridge.

Chapter Sixteen

She thought that it was no later than eleven when she counted the clock striking twelve. She jumped up and fled, as nimble as a deer. The prince followed, but could not overtake her.
(Perrault)

Toffee's tiny body against my chest offers the only warmth on this bitterly cold night as I teeter down the road in high heels. The bright lights of King Mansion fade in the distance, and darkness surrounds me like a blindfold. Chills shiver up my near-naked skin. I would kill for the hoodie I left behind.

Freezing is almost a relief since it numbs my mind, making it harder to relive that horrible moment on stage or think of Derrick. The shock on his face...his voice calling after me.

"It'll be okay," I whisper to Toffee, cradling her close to me. She purrs and licks my hand.

I'm not sure how far I've walked – a hundred miles or

maybe a block – when there’s a familiar car honk and a blur of blinding headlights.

Blake.

I struggle not to cry at the comforting sight of his second-hand Honda Civic with the dent in the trunk and a cracked back window. The brakes squeak. He rolls to a stop. Wordlessly, I climb into his heated car where there’s a blanket folded on my seat, waiting for me.

Concern is gentle on Blake’s face, and although I can sense the questions that have been building up since my text, he only lifts his brow.

I shake my head. *Don’t ask.*

He nods and cranks up the heat.

After a few minutes, he calls my name and I blink out of my dark thoughts. “What?” I ask, my throat aching from swallowed emotion.

“I came here right away after your friend called,” Blake says.

I stare at him. “Friend?”

“Farley. He told me you needed a ride. I figured things didn’t go well for you tonight, and I’m sorry.” He gestures to a small wrapped box between our seats. “Maybe this will cheer you up.”

Nothing can cheer me up.

“I bought it a few days ago and was waiting for the right moment to give it to you.” Blake sighs. “But I guess the wrong moment will have to do.”

I look at the box wrapped in striped blue paper. There’s a blue bow, too, but it’s squashed and the tape holding it in

place has come loose so the bow dangles over the side of the gift like a broken wing.

“It’s not much,” Blake says. “Consider it a belated birthday gift.”

I rip off the bow and tear open the wrapping paper with my fingernail. When I lift the lid from the box, I find a cell phone.

“I couldn’t find the red color you wanted,” Blake apologizes.

“Mauve,” I whisper. “But black is fine.”

“Are you sure? I wanted to get you a deluxe phone with fancy features, but I had to settle on this basic model with a limited plan.”

I look down at the phone, an out-dated model that no one in my school would buy. A limited plan will mean keeping track of texts and call minutes. I probably won’t be able to connect to the Internet on it either.

“I’m sorry it’s not what you had in mind.” The shame in his tone cuts to my heart.

“It’s perfect,” I tell him.

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Good.” He slows to a stop sign and wipes his hand across his forehead. “I was afraid you’d think it was too cheap.”

“Not at all,” I say, surprised that I mean it. Even a cheap phone is a huge expense for him. I tap on the keys, getting used to the feel. Actually, it’s not bad, a little clunky but I like how it feels in my hand.

“There’s something special about your phone,” he adds.
“Your number is 555-3362.”

“So?” I look at him curiously.

“When I was keying it into my phone, I was looking at the alphabet letters and realized what the last five numbers spelled.”

“What?”

“Leena.”

My throat catches. “Mom’s name.”

He nods then turns away quickly to focus on driving.

I turn away, too, the tears I’ve been holding back streaming down my cheeks. I gently clasp my marvelous Mom phone to my chest.



Minutes later, Blake slows the car to a stop in our driveway.

Only then do I look, really look, at Blake and notice the dark circles under his weary eyes. We’ve both had really crappy days, and nothing I can say will make it any better. He’s losing the business, I’ve lost my dignity, and without the income from Bow-Wow Boutique we could lose our home, too, and become street people begging for scraps of food.

Blake tries to do the “dad” thing when we’re inside the house, and asks me if I want to tell him what happened. I shake my head, and he doesn’t press me. There are important things he needs to know, though, so after I’ve showered, slipped into comfy flannel pjs, and am feeling close to human

again, I sit beside him on the couch. I take a deep breath then explain that the Mayor never wanted one of our dogs.

“It was a prank to hurt me, but it hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

“So, that’s why no one showed up and the number Maud gave didn’t work.” He slumps against the couch cushions.

“I know who did it, but I can’t prove anything.”

He sips his steaming coffee then pats my hand as if I’m the one who needs comforting. “Damn. I should have remembered that when something sounds too good to be true it’s usually false.”

“That’s not what Mom would say. Remember her twist on that quote?”

He nods, smiling sadly. “‘If something’s too good to be true, it could be a great opportunity.’ Always the eternal optimist your mom.”

“She’d want us to fight for Bow-Wow Boutique.”

“I’ve been fighting, but it’s a losing battle.” He blows a loose strand of hair from his eyes then spits out what I already know.

Bad news: Bow-Wow Boutique will have to be sold. Immediately.

Good news: If it sells quickly, we can afford to keep our house.

Worse news: All the dogs will have to be sold.

“But not Toffee,” Blake adds with a forced smile as if this small scrap of news makes everything better.

“What about the stud dogs?” I point to Cretin, who sits loyally by Blake’s feet, hanging his head on his front paws, probably lonely with his pal Brutus out for stud duty.

“They’re the most valuable assets.” He frowns. “You won’t miss them.”

“But *you* will,” I say miserably.

“I’ll do what I have to do.”

I know his heart is breaking. He loves those snarky little dogs, probably for the same reason I can’t stand them. When I look at them, I see a rainy night and a car crashing out of control. But Blake must see something different, something to do with how much he loved Mom. It hits me that I’m blaming two small dogs for my mother’s death, and the future dog psychologist in me is ashamed. Dogs are only as well-behaved as their owners, and while Blake does spoil the stud dogs, I’ve never given them a chance. I’ve deserved all the growls, bites, and pee stains. Dogs can tell if you like them, and if you don’t like them, they won’t like you.

“We should get plenty of sleep. I’ll leave early in the morning to do inventory,” Blake says, and I see a shine of tears in his eyes. “It’s been a rough day, and tomorrow will be worse.”

I can’t sleep, tossing and turning, finding only small comfort in the warm blanket or Toffee’s soft body curled beside me. When I finally do fall deeply into sleep, I don’t dream of Derrick or anything; it’s like my thoughts are blank pages in a book that will never be written.

When I wake up, my pillow is damp. For a moment, I can’t think why. Then I remember. The remote control in Beatrice’s hand, Derrick’s shocked expression, the drowning of my mauve phone, and Bow-Wow Boutique closing. I glance at the clock and almost choke. After ten and I haven’t

fed the dogs yet.

I jump out of bed, slip into my work overalls, and waste about ten minutes searching for matching socks, ultimately giving up and going with one red and one white-striped sock. It's not like anyone is going to see me anyway, except the dogs and they won't notice mismatched socks. They'll just be glad I finally showed up with their food.

I've put on my boots and gloves and am tucking my tangled hair under a hat when the house phone rings. I dash out of the mudroom and grab the phone before the answering machine kicks in.

"Why aren't you answering your cell?" Rory demands.

"It's gone."

"You lost your phone?"

"Drowned it, and there's no chance of CPR. But I have a new phone."

"Is it the same glam shade of mauve?"

"No. Color isn't important." I suck in a deep breath, working up the courage to tell her about losing the business.

"You shouldn't have ditched the competition last night!" she interrupts. "You missed a major meltdown."

"I was already on meltdown overload. Or didn't you notice I ran off the stage in front of hundreds of people – most of them students and teachers from our school—practically naked?"

"You weren't *that* naked. It's not like anyone could see your nipples or undies. Besides, your little oops doesn't compare to what happened when Mayor King announced who won Talent-Mania."

I don't need to hear the gory details, especially when I have a kennel of hungry Q-Bees waiting. Tears well up as I think of selling the dogs. It shouldn't be hard to sell the pups, especially if we cut their price low. Bargain champion-sired Q-Bees, it makes me sick to think about it.

"ASHLEE!" Rory's shout startles me, and I almost drop the phone. "Are you listening?"

"Sure, sure." I sigh.

"Are not or you'd be begging me to tell you who won Talent-Mania."

"Beatrice," I guess with a heavy heart.

"She wishes!"

"You mean, she didn't?" That gets my attention, and I press the phone snug against my ear so I don't miss anything.

"You'll never guess who *did* win the contest."

I shake my head. "No idea."

"Hannah."

"Seriously? Beatrice's loyal clone?"

"Not so loyal anymore." Rory giggles. "Beatrice threw a full-blown tantrum when Hannah's name was called. She shouted that Hannah didn't deserve to win since she only entered because Beatrice told her to. Beatrice even accused Hannah of cheating, which isn't possible because everyone saw Hannah do these sexy moves while playing blue grass music on her violin with such passion like the violin was her dance partner. But Beatrice wasn't having any of it. She ripped the crown off Hannah's head and grabbed the first place trophy."

"No. She. Did. Not."

Never Been Texted

“Oh, yeah, she did, and it was deliciously shocking,” Rory says with a grin in her voice. “Can you believe mousy Hannah fought back? The only thing missing was a mud pit for a really messy girl fight. They wrestled over the crown and trophy while the crowd cheered them on. I saw Max collecting money and taking odds on who would win. Then some guys in suits from the mayor’s staff ruined the fun by breaking them apart. As they pulled Hannah away, she glared at Beatrice and shouted, ‘I’m through with your bitchy and bossy attitude. And FYI, the scholarship DOES mean something to me.’”

I remember the rumor about Hannah’s dad being in debt, and I nod with understanding. I’m glad the scholarship is going to someone who needs it. I just wish that someone could have been me.

“Guess what else?” Rory goes on excitedly. “EVERYBODY wants a Q-B.”

I almost drop the phone. “Huh?”

“I know you think all anyone cares about is how you looked standing on the stage in a bodysuit, but get over yourself already. It’s all about Toffee, not you. The audience loved her tricks and was talking about how smart Q-Bees are.”

“They were?” I reach out to feel the solid wood of a chair behind me and sink down.

“Love, love, love! All for your cute doggie. Teachers, parents, and kids were raving over Toffee’s epic cuteness and asking how to buy one like her. Reminds me of how when I post something clever on Facebook and no one comments

but when I post a cute picture of my cat I get tons of comments. Your dog upstaged you.”

I can’t help myself. I burst out laughing.

“So, you don’t mind?” Rory sounds surprised.

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all week!”

“You adorable little upstager,” I tell Toffee after I hang up the phone. I bend down to pick her up and kiss her wet nose. “You deserve a treat!”

Not just any treat, I decide, going to the pantry and reaching to the highest shelf where we keep Paw-Fection treats, the most expensive brand of canine cookies. They have a line of premium treats for cats, too, called Purr-Fection. I’m putting the package away when I hear a slurp-slurp noise from the kitchen and peek through the door at Cretin, who’s sipping from a dog dish of water. He looks up at me suspiciously then returns to lapping water.

I know he loves treats, but he doesn’t expect any kindness from me, which makes me sad.

I reach into the package and pull out a dog cookie. “Here, Cretin,” I offer, holding out my hand.

He growls at me.

“It’s okay, boy. I won’t bite.”

He eyes the cookie and sniffs. I crouch low, motionless, holding my hand out like a peace treaty. Sniffing, he moves a step closer and then stops. He’s drooling for the cookie but doesn’t trust me. Well, I know enough about dogs to realize trust isn’t earned in a day.

Speaking softly, I gently toss the cookie to him. He ignores it.

Never Been Texted

I leave the room but wait outside the door, listening.

After a few seconds I tiptoe back to the door, open it a crack, and watch Cretin gobble up the cookie.

I head out to the kennel, smiling.



I hum to stereo music as I roll up pee-drenched newspapers. It's probably weird, but I've grown to love kennel smells and enjoy the solitude of being with the dogs. They're all about unconditional acceptance. They don't judge me for how I look or what I say or my mistakes. They just wag their golden tails and love me.

They'll love their new owners, too. Buyers have to pass strict conditions to be approved. They aren't buying merchandise; they're adopting a family member and have to sign a "Caring for Your Queen Bee" contract. Only the best homes for my doggie darlings.

I'll miss them.

Wiping my eyes (not because I'm crying, because selling dogs is what we do and it would be silly to get all weepy), I get back to cleaning. I spread the cage floors with crisp newspapers then scoop exactly two cups of kibble for each dog. After the dogs chow down, I pet and cuddle and play. Sugar's pups yip after each other, nipping tails and playing tough. Sugar will be so sad when they're gone. Of course, Sugar may be leaving, too.

Honey loves to be scratched behind the ears, and when I

stop she nudges me with her cold nose as if to say “continue, please.” I usually shake my head and move on to the other dogs, but today I sink down on her doggie bed with her in my lap and scratch her itch.

I always save Daisy for last because she needs extra care as she grows bigger and bigger. She’s due next week, and it’s her first litter, so I have no idea how she’ll do. Most dogs are natural mothers and pop out the pups like it’s no big deal. But some get so scared they panic, and things don’t go well. One new mom refused to nurse her pups. She just left them and wouldn’t come back. We were able to bottle-feed two of the pups successfully, but the third, a sickly runt, died in my arms.

I pray Daisy won’t be sold before the pups come. She’s timid and wary of strangers. How can I leave her when she needs me most? I give her kisses and promises I may not be able to keep.

When I close the last cage door, I’m reluctant to leave, so I don’t. I find other things to do. I sweep the floor, wash countertops, walls, and doors so every surface shines. I organize the supply cabinet. When I can’t think of anything else to clean, I spritz the air with a can of spring mountain freshener.

It’s almost noon, and my stomach aches with a hunger that food can’t satisfy. I’ve been rushing around as if I can hide from my own thoughts, but even with the dogs for company, I’m feeling alone, and my thoughts drift to Derrick.

What’s he doing right now? I envision his castle home high on the hill where I humiliated myself last night. Shame

aches through me. I shouldn't have run away like I'd done something wrong. I should have calmly put on my clothes, called Beatrice out for ruining my act and snatched my remote away from her. But the "should haves" are only clear after the fact, and once again I let my emotions explode into disaster. I didn't even stop for Derrick, who was only trying to help me. Will he give up or keep looking for me? He won't have to look very hard. My real name is on the Talent-Mania sign-up sheet. Plus, most of the audience knows me from school. He can easily figure out where I live.

What will I do if he shows up? I wonder with rising panic and plunging hope. How can I face him after being exposed – literally! – on stage. I can still hear audience laughter when I close my eyes. I can't ever go back to school and may have to leave the state or country. I've heard Canada is a nice place.

I hear a car outside on the gravel driveway. Not Blake, I know for sure. He's stuck doing inventory until far into the evening, and his car engine rattles like it's full of rocks. This engine is so silky smooth I only hear the tires rolling on gravel. It can't be Rory because this is her Saturday to visit her father. I'm sure it's not...I mean, it couldn't be Derrick, not after the way I ran out on him. He wouldn't come here, would he?

I go over to the reflective glass on the supply cabinet and check myself. My hair pulled back, dirt streaked across my face, and sweating like a marathon runner. I step out of my overalls and unwind my hair then fluff it out. Not perfect but less embarrassing.

I race outside to the driveway just as a silver BMW stops

and the driver's

door swings open.

Chapter Seventeen

And now her two sisters found her to be that fine, beautiful lady whom they had seen at the ball. They threw themselves at her feet to beg pardon for all the ill treatment they had made her undergo. (Perrault)

A girl steps out, long slender legs in skinny jeans and a silky rose camisole peeking from underneath a sleeveless fitted jacket. Her sleek mane of black hair is clipped back with diamond clasps, accenting her high cheekbones.

What the hell is Beatrice doing at my house?

“Don’t look so shocked,” she says with a lift of her dark brows, her tone mocking as if a visit from her is as common as the dirt her designer shoes are standing on.

As my shock wears off, dangerous emotions claw into my self-control, and I flash back to the hoop’s remote in Beatrice’s hand and her smug smile as she powered off my illusion. She ruined my best shot for a scholarship and

humiliated me worse than any of the rumors she'd spread. But that wasn't the worst part. The "prank" she and Hannah pulled on my stepfather was brutal, crushing his hopes for saving Bow-Wow Boutique. Sure, Rory said people wanted to buy Q-Bees, but she exaggerates a lot and there isn't enough time with the bank deadline looming tomorrow.

Hate isn't a strong enough word for what I feel for Beatrice. I don't just

want her dead; I want her tortured with sharp objects then tossed to blood-starved werewolves who rip her to shreds.

As I step toward her, my hands clench, daring her to push me too far so I can bare my teeth like a dog and sink my claws into her.

"Stop right there." Beatrice holds up her hand and I'm surprised to see her usually glam fingernails uneven like she's been chewing them.

"Leave before I do something you'll regret," I warn.

"I already regret plenty. Nothing you can do can make things worse than the tragedy that has become my life." She sighs with the self-pity of a martyr. "Or didn't you hear what happened to me after you left last night?"

I don't trust myself to speak, not without swearing, so I press my lips tight.

"I've been through a traumatic ordeal and am emotionally scarred." Her shoulders slump as if she's the center of a very weighty universe.

"*You're* scarred?" I flail my arms. "*I'm* the one who was humiliated and nearly naked after *you* shut off my power."

“I don’t have the energy to deal with your negativity.”

“And I don’t have the time to waste on self-inflated egos!”

“If you’re going to childishly hold a grudge, then there’s no point in my trying to talk to you.”

I glare at her. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“Oh, we do.” She glances over at the kennels with a disdainful pucker of her cherry-red lips. “I see things haven’t changed since my last visit.”

“The dogs still have better manners than you do.”

“My bad for coming here without calling,” she admits with a shrug. “But I figured you’d hang up on me.”

“Definitely.” I wish I’d hung up on Maud and saved Blake from crushing disappointment. I think of my stepdad, alone at Bow-Wow Boutique, itemizing collars and dog kibble and leashes for his last inventory

My fingernails dig into my palms, itching for revenge. Beatrice is only a few inches taller than me, but I’m tough and angry. I could take her down. Why’d she come here anyway? Not to gloat about the competition because we’re both losers and she lost more than a crown. She lost her best friend. Beatrice should be over at Hannah’s house right now begging forgiveness. What is she doing here? It has to be because of Derrick. When Beatrice heard me call Toffee by name, I could tell by her glare that she realized I was the “Jane” Derrick tried to find. She must have wondered why I lied to her. Does she suspect I have feelings for Derrick and he might feel something for me, too?

But Beatrice doesn’t ask about Derrick. What she does

ask leaves me open-mouthed, sure zombies have taken over the world and one of them has moved into her body.

“You want to buy a Q-Bee?” I study her, suspicious that this is some kind of trick. “Why?”

“I’m a huge dog lover.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Are you going to show me the dogs or not?” she snaps, and immediately I realize she’s the same bitchy Beatrice.

“We don’t just sell our dogs to anyone. You have to fill out an application.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She scoffs. “I’m doing *you* the favor. I heard you could use the money, and I can afford your most expensive dog.”

“Sure it’s not *Maud* that wants to buy one?” I say with accusation sharp enough to slice her smug lips off her lying mouth.

She has the decency to blush but not enough to admit her guilt. “Don’t be stupid. I have no idea who this Maud is you’re talking about, but I do know that everyone is talking about your, um, cute little dogs. Derrick seems very impressed by them, and he has excellent taste. So, I want one.”

“They’re very expensive.”

She pats a wallet-sized bulge in her pocket. “I have more credit cards than the library has books. Well, maybe not that many, but you get the idea.”

Oh, I get it all right, but I’m not selling any of my darlings to her.

“We don’t accept credit cards.”

“No worry. I brought plenty of cash. Don’t offer me a second-rate dog either. I want your very best Bee Sting.”

“Queen Bee.”

“Whatever.” She flips back her black hair, and tiny diamond earrings glint from her ears. “Are you going to sell me a dog?”

I wouldn’t wish her on my worst dog, but it’s not like money is falling from the sky. We need the cash. Even one dog sale could buy us more time and hope for saving the business.

“Fine,” I growl. “Follow me.”

“Right behind you,” she says in a self-satisfied tone.

I lead her to the kennel, glad I spent the extra time cleaning. Every surface shines, and the room has a sweet flower scent of air freshener. As the door bangs shut behind us, she sniffs like she’s expecting bad smells. I tense, waiting for her criticism.

“Quite an improvement.”

I grit my teeth, not dignifying her with the explanation that the last time she arrived in the middle of cleaning, so of course there were ripe odors and messy papers. Now, the kennel is at its best with piped-in music, shining floors, and fresh papers in every spacious cage.

Beatrice points. “Oh, are those puppies?”

“They aren’t ducks.”

“You have the weirdest sense of humor.” She bends closer to the pups. “How do you get their eyes so gold?”

“Contact lenses,” I can’t resist saying.

“Really?”

When I laugh, her eyes narrow and I have to admit it feels good to mess with her.

After this, she stops faking nice and so do I. *This is business*, I tell myself, which is how I manage to speak civilly without losing my temper. Beatrice isn't an easy customer. When the puppies excitedly jump on her, like they do to everyone who visits, she pushes them away, not hard but enough to get my blood boiling.

"They're just playing." I step protectively in front of the puppies.

"Can I hold one?"

NO! I want to say. It takes all my willpower to pick up a sturdy little male I think of as Tough-Guy and gently place him in her arms. "Hold him gently."

"He's soft like a plush toy." She grins until Tough-Guy licks her face. "Oooh, yuck! His breath is awful."

"I like puppy breath."

"You would."

"Puppies are high energy," I say. "Maybe you'd prefer an older dog."

Although it kills me, I lead her over to Sugar, the sweetest dog ever. Not even Beatrice can find anything wrong with Sugar.

"Her sire is a grand champion," I explain proudly. "If you're interested in showing her, she has great potential for winning. I know how much you like to win." Okay, I didn't need to add this last part, but it feels good.

Beatrice cringes but recovers, and a sly look glints in her dark eyes. She points to Toffee who has been following close

to my heels. “Isn’t that the dog from your act with freaky different-colored eyes?”

I glare at her.

“I’m not dissing your dog. She’s way talented.” Her tone implies *I’m* not. “But what were you thinking with that bodysuit? Couldn’t you afford a real costume?”

I don’t dignify her snark with a reply; instead, I strike back with a double punch to her ego. “Do you have Hannah’s phone number?”

“Why?” Her dark brows arch warily.

“So I can congratulate her on winning first place. Sorry I missed hearing her play the violin.”

“You didn’t miss anything,” Beatrice snaps.

“I heard she was freaking fantastic.”

“Overrated.”

“She wouldn’t have won if she wasn’t amazing. You must be so proud of your best friend.”

Beatrice glances down to flick lint off her vest.

“Who knew Hannah had so much talent?” I add, smiling.

“Yeah, who knew.” Beatrice glowers, looking mad enough to burst into flames. “Let’s just get this over with, okay? I want your tiniest dog so I can fit it in my purse like that model with the pink hair. What about that one over there?”

She gestures to Cretin. I hadn’t even noticed he was following me since he can go from the house to kennel through doggie doors. And he is tiny, less than eight pounds, which is great for breeding.

“Not him,” I say firmly. I don’t care what my stepdad

said about selling all the dogs. He loves the stud dogs so they aren't for sale.

She kneels down to Cretin, and he snarls at her. "He has attitude. I like that. How much is he?"

"Not for sale."

"Everything has a price."

"Dogs are *not* things."

"Are you refusing to sell to me for personal reasons? You had no chance of winning Talent-Mania, so don't go all passive aggressive and take out your inadequacies on me. If I can ignore our past issues, then you can, too. I'm doing you a favor by buying one of your little mutts."

"Mutts!" I raise my knuckled hand, warningly.

"They're hardly even dogs. A real dog like Derrick's Pete could step on one of them and not even notice. Speaking of Derrick, back off."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do." Her mouth presses in a razor thin line. "He and I may have a misunderstanding at the moment, but no matter how much you throw yourself at him, he will never be yours."

"Is he yours?" I challenge.

"Always has been; always will be. When I leave here, I'm on my way to his house for some intense making up *and* making out." She smirks. "When I explain how my meltdown was Hannah's fault, not mine, he'll feel sorry for me and try to make me feel better. He'll realize how right I am for him and how wrong you'd be. He's probably still laughing at how ridiculous you looked in that bodysuit. He was never

interested in finding you, only your dog.”

He wouldn’t laugh at me. I’m sure of this. Well, almost. Beatrice has known him so much longer than I have, and his family loves her like a daughter. Did Derrick really like me or was I imagining it? He wanted to kiss me, and I know he wasn’t faking. There was something real and sweet and wonderful between us. But he must know who I am by now, so he could easily find out where I live if he wanted to. But why should he try to find someone who lied about her name and ran away from him?

Beatrice flips her black hair over her shoulders, her expression smug. “I’ve changed my mind about wanting a dog.”

“Shocker.” I roll my eyes.

“It’s ridiculous how everyone is raving over these over-priced furballs. I wouldn’t take one if you paid me.”

“I wouldn’t sell you one if you paid a hundred times their worth.”

“Which would be zero, because they’re worthless. Keep your stupid dogs.” She looks down at Cretin. “This one isn’t even friendly.”

“Dogs know who like them,” I slam back at her.

Cretin looks over to me then up at Beatrice.

He lifts his leg and pees on her shoe.

Chapter Eighteen

And no one took pity on her and she would go and weep at her mother's grave where she had planted a hazel tree, under which she sat. (Jacobs)

I blew the sale. I should be ashamed of myself, but I'm not. I reward Cretin with a canine cookie. It's not long before worries slam into me, though. How am I going to tell Blake I refused to sell a dog? Beatrice would have easily paid thousands, and that much money could have bought us time to figure out a way to save the business.

Sighing, I know I can't keep this from my stepdad. Might as well call him now and get it over with.

I head for my bedroom for my cell phone. Swirling my desk chair around to face the window, I sink into the cushioned seat and pick up my phone. I'm looking out at white cloud puffs and blue sky, yet thinking wistfully of mauve. Was there ever any real magic? Did I really believe

Farley was helping me like a store-clerk version of a fairy godfather? In the light of day and logic it seems ridiculous. Yet how else can I explain all the weirdness? Receiving Derrick's messages to Beatrice, the phone flashing with photos I never took and cryptic images from a strange guy who works at a store that doesn't exist. I can't think of any explanation, and maybe it doesn't matter.

Not anymore.

What matters is Derrick and how much I miss him. It's like a movie reels in my head with thoughts and feelings and images of him: Derrick drenched in a fountain, his gap-toothed smile, his passionate ideals, and how the light touch of his hand on my skin made me hot and dizzy in amazing ways. I want to be with him so badly, but Beatrice says she's the "right" girl for him, and maybe she is; they come from wealthy lifestyles, have a deep childhood friendship, and his family already loves her. They don't even know me, but Derrick does.

What Derrick feels is important, I think with a lift of my heart. I'm sure – well almost – that he has feelings for me.

While I look at my phone, a thought shoves into my head and refuses to budge.

Call him.

I know his number. Like I could ever forget. I'd rather be pro-active than non-active. If I have a chance with him, I won't slink into the background while Beatrice worms her way back into his heart. Kind, funny, genuine guys are rarer than comets and blue moons. Derrick is worth fighting for. If I hear his voice I'll know if he's into me. And if he's

not...well, it'll hurt for a few days or months or maybe always. But I'll move on with my life with no regrets because at least I tried.

All I have to do is press seven digits.

So why is my hand shaking?

Just do it already!

Tensing, I power up the phone. I stare at the screen. My heart pounds so loudly I can't hear my own thoughts.

You can do this, I tell myself. Calling is the bravest thing to do; only cowards do nothing, and I'm through hiding from emotions, hiding from life.

I take a deep breath then tap one number and another, until all seven line up on the screen like obedient soldiers.

All that's left is to hit the "call" button.

Why am I hesitating?

What's the worst that can happen? Derrick will hear my voice and shout "I hate you! Never call me again!" and slam the phone down. Ouch. Just thinking this hurts, even though I know he'd never be so cruel. I want to hear his voice so badly, to know that even if there's no romantic future for us, he's still my friend.

I hit "call."

One ring...two...

My hand on the phone sweats. Blood pulses to my head in a rush of dizziness. I'm shaky on my feet and reach out for a bed post to steady myself.

Three rings...four....

The fifth ring sends my call to an voicemail.

"I'm sorry but I can't answer your call right now,"

Never Been Texted

automated Derrick says. “Leave a message after the beep, and I’ll get back to you soon.”

I swallow a tsunami sized lump and try to think of what to say. Should I leave a message or hang up? What if he purposely isn’t answering because he knows it’s me? Is he angry because of last night? Has Beatrice convinced him to get back with her? Or is he just not into me?

I listen to the beep.

It’s so tempting to hang up.

But I find air to breathe and words spill out. “Um, Derrick.” I gulp. “It’s Ashlee. Call me.” I leave my number and hang up.



I watch the phone like a mother bird looking for cracks in a hatching egg. No movement. I count seconds as they flash across the screen. Waiting.

Derrick will call back, I try to convince myself. Even if he’s angry, he’s not the kind of guy who avoids conflict. If he’s not into me, he’ll tell me.

Seven minutes pass.

Nine.... twelve... twenty-three...

A half hour and still no reply, not even a text.

Beatrice must be at his place by now. Did she talk trash about me? “That girl was so wicked,” I imagine her saying with a convincing sniffle like she’s close to tears. She’ll tell Derrick I ordered her off my property and commanded my

dog to pee on her shoe. He'll feel sorry for her. If she starts to fake cry, he'll want to comfort her, which could lead to kissing.

I fling myself on my bed, closing my eyes tight to shut out the image of the guy I like kissing the girl I hate.

Turning over on my back, I stare up at the ceiling and count paint swirls until I decide I've waited long enough. I check the phone again. Nothing. The world could have ended while I'm lying here staring at paint; at least that's how it feels to wait for a call that may never come. Traitorous phone! I want to throw it against the wall, but at the same time I want to cradle it close to my heart. *He'll call*, I tell myself. *He will.*

The "waiting" countdown has passed the hour mark when there's a ring. I lunge off the bed, banging my knee on a bedpost. Rubbing my knee, I realize the ring didn't come from my cell, but from the house phone. Our number is listed and easy to look up, so it could be Derrick.

I'm out of my room, door slamming behind me, and sliding into the kitchen like a baseball player going for a homerun, grabbing the phone as it rings again.

"Hello?" I say breathlessly.

"Ashlee?"

"Oh." I sink into a stiff wooden chair at the table, clutching the traitorous phone to my ear. "Blake."

"Why didn't you answer the phone earlier?" He sounds so exhausted. "I've left a hundred messages."

I glance over at the answering machine where a red flashing light reveals a total of thirteen missed messages. Oops. I was rushing so much I didn't even think to check for

messages on the house phone.

“You should have tried my cell,” I tell him.

“Oh, yeah. Right.” He sighs. “It’s been so hectic I’m not thinking clearly.”

“Hectic? From doing inventory?”

“I’m running out of inventory.” His voice rises with excitement. “Crazy morning here! Before I even opened up, a crowd of customers was waiting at the door. Your dog show was a hit last night, and I’m swamped with people wanting to buy Q-Bees. Nine applications already!”

When I do the math (average price of a Q-Bee minus expenses then multiplied by fourteen), I’m too stunned to say more than “wow!”

My stepdad explains that he’s rehired his assistant, Claire, who’s already running background checks on prospective buyers, leaving Blake free to focus on the customers.

“Good thing you groomed the dogs yesterday. I’ll be sending out customers to look at them soon,” he adds in a voice so rich with happiness that I almost don’t recognize him. It’s been so long since Blake sounded happy.

“Great,” I tell him. “I’ll have everything ready here.”

“Just show them to the kennels and answer questions. They’ve seen photos and videos so it shouldn’t take long for each customer to select a dog. Most want puppies.”

“They always do,” I say, glad we’ll have Daisy’s new litter of pups soon. She’s due in eight days and has been acting fidgety and making a nest of blankets. I assure Blake will be ready when the first wave of customers arrives.

Rory wasn’t kidding when she told me Q-Bees were

suddenly popular. Once I check the phone messages, I find not only the missed calls from Blake, but seven calls from prospective dog buyers.

Queen-Bees are like rock stars!

The rest of the afternoon is a busy whirl of kennel tours, answering questions, and watching smiles grow big when a customer hears a Q-Bee purr for the first time. As Rory would say, it's an "awesome-sauce" moment!

Of course, I never stop thinking about Derrick, checking my cell phone and sighing as I slip it back into my pocket. The more hours that go by without a reply, the more my hopes sink. I try to guess what he might be thinking, but there's no way to know. And I have a sick feeling that Beatrice poisoned him against me.

Amber-gold rays of sunset are sinking over the horizon when Blake comes home. I'm heating biscuits in the oven and tossing mixed greens with veggies for a salad when I hear the door open and heavy footsteps. Blake joins me for buttery hot biscuits, salad, and iced tea.

We don't say anything for a while, and the only sound is our chewing and the clink of forks against our ceramic bowls. Finally, I can't stand it anymore and blurt out, "How many?"

"Eleven completed transactions, but it'll be a lot more once Claire finishes background checks." Blake shakes his head with a look of wonder on his face. "Even with all the people who left after they found out the price of a registered Q-Bee, there were still nearly twenty applications for purchase. Most of them will be back tomorrow to pick up

their dogs.”

“The most we’ve ever sold in one day was three.” I’m grinning as I take our dirty dishes and cups to the sink. “Wow.”

“Ditto, but man do I have tons of paperwork to do.”

“Finish in the morning,” I tell him. “You need to get some sleep.”

“Tonight I’ll sleep better than I have for weeks. I’ll dream of big checks and paying off bills. First thing in the morning, I’m going straight to the bank to pay them off in full. Bow-Wow Boutique will stay in business for a very long time.”

I grin. “Best. News. Ever.”

“Now I can afford to give you clothes and whatever you need,” he adds.

“A car?” I joke.

“Don’t push your luck.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.” I pause, thinking of something I’ve been wanting to ask him. “But I’d like to start planning for college. I know you don’t think much of my wanting to be a pet therapist, but it’s what I want to do. I know college expenses are really high.”

“Whoa.” He shakes his head. “Ashlee, whatever you want to be, even if it’s not something I agree with, you have my support one hundred percent. Even if we had lost the business, you still would have gone to college.”

“You mean with a scholarship?”

“With your college fund.”

“What college fund?”

“When your mom and I received money from the gas company, we put half of it in an account for your future.”

“You did?” I blink.

“Of course. We both agreed you’re our best investment.”

“But if you had money, why didn’t you use it to save the business?”

“It’s for your education,” he says firmly. “Nothing else.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m touched, but annoyed too because he should have told me this a long time ago. To be fair, though, I shut him out as much as he shut me out. From now on, I vow to be the best daughter ever.

“Bow-Wow Boutique is going to have a record sale year,” Blake adds as he refills his iced tea glass. “Thanks to you.”

“Not me. Toffee.” At the sound of her name, she jumps up on my lap. When Blake reaches out to scratch under her neck, she rumbles with purring.

“Talented Toffee,” he says, scratching Toffee’s head as he returns to his chair. “Turns out the dog with the most flawed markings is our MVD – most valuable dog.”

“And don’t you forget it.” I grin.

“As if you’d let me!” He gets that teasing look in his eye, and I know what’s coming next. “Ashlee, did you hear the one about the Dalmatian?”

“No.” I groan like he’s going to torture me.

“Why are Dalmatians no good at hide-and-seek?”

“I don’t know,” I say obediently.

“They’re always spotted.”

We both laugh.

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I'm feeling the opposite of laughter when I finally go to bed.

No phone message from Derrick.

I look at his number in my recent call list and consider calling again. Maybe he didn't check voicemail. But even as I consider this, I know it's no use. The spark of hope I've clung to all day burns to ashes. He doesn't care, not about me. Beatrice convinced him to stick by her and turn away from me.

No matter how badly I want to call or text him, I won't.

There's nothing to do now except go on with my life.

And forget all about Derrick.

Chapter Nineteen

Then the poor child had to do the most difficult work. She had to get up before sunrise, carry water, make the fire, cook, and wash. (Grimm)

Blake holds a briefcase in one hand and a cream-covered bagel in the other as he hurries to the door. “Whew! It’s going to be crazy again today.”

“In a good way,” I say with my best optimistic smile so he doesn’t guess how badly I slept last night and how I’m so sinking in sadness that simple things like getting dressed and coming down to breakfast zap my energy.

“You okay here by yourself?” Blake asks.

“Sure.” I nod.

“I’ll call before I send buyers to the kennels.”

“I’ll be ready for them,” I assure him, mentally clicking off a list of things on my “to do” list. I always create “pup parent” gift baskets for each new dog owner with samples we’ve collected from the businesses that sell us canine

products from kibble, flea shampoo, and squeak toys to canine couture items like woven leashes, quilted dog beds, and rain slickers with sheepskin linings.

It's early so I take my time getting ready, not really caring how I look but knowing appearance matters when greeting customers. I smooth on concealer extra thick to hide the dark circles under my eyes and add peach-rose color to my cheeks and a shimmer of cinnamon-frost to my lips. I brush my hair until it's shining like I'm getting ready for a date rather than mucky kennel cleaning chores, twist it into a braid, and cram on a sports cap.

I'm clean and presentable yet hurting inside so much and don't know how to make it go away. I need something comforting and don't have time to read a favorite book or watch a Disney movie. So I heat hot chocolate, squirting on whipped cream. I take my steaming cup to a cushioned chair by the kitchen window, watching prisms of sunlight streaming through glass on a fall day that feels like summer. I smile at birds flitting branch to branch and match cloud shapes to dog breeds. The heaviness inside me lightens as I slip into the quiet of my own thoughts and lick whipped cream off my lips.

It's not quiet for long because Rory arrives with a sinfully delicious bag of donuts from Crown Bakery and wicked gossip.

"Hannah and Beatrice are having a tweet war," she tells me as she plops a lemon custard donut on the plate I've placed in front of her.

I bite into an apple cruller and read the tweets on Rory's

phone, a few causing my eyes to widen. “Soul-sucking vampire?”

“That’s one of the nicer things Hannah says. Scroll down. Farther. Stop there. Can you believe she said that?”

“OMG.” I shake my head.

“Keep scrolling. It gets better.”

“Oh, wow.” I point to one line while shaking my head. “No one should post *that* in a public forum.”

“You’d think.” Rory shrugs. “But best friends make the worst enemies because they know all your secrets.”

“Is that a warning to me?” I tease.

“Well, there was that time when we were swimming in Codfish Creek and a fish bit you on your – “

I hold up my hand. “Stop right there. Don’t forget I know all your secrets, too. Like that piercing on your – “

“Yeah, yeah, and ouch.” She glances down with a grimace. “Just proves my point. We’ll have to stay friends forever.”

“I’m all for that.” I smile.

“You know something weird? I almost feel sorry for Beatrice.”

“Don’t.” The apple sweetness in my mouth sours. “She’s back with Derrick.”

Over donuts and hot chocolate, I tell Rory everything. She sympathizes and says all the right things, and while I’m still bummed that Derrick didn’t chose me, it feels good to vent. We hang out for a while, me talking and her supporting, until I look at the spotted Dalmatian clock over the fridge.

“Want to help me with my kennel chores?” I ask, even

though we both know she'll refuse. Her weak stomach doesn't mix with ripe animal smells.

Rory shakes her head. "Maybe next time."

"You always say that."

"Maybe next time I won't."

"You always say that, too."

"And yet you still ask." She jumps to her feet and says she has to go. "Mom ordered this cool stain glass kit, and we're going to try it out. Could lead to a great business."

"What about henna tats?" I gesture to my palm.

"Too much work for not enough profit. I couldn't believe how much Mom spent on all those henna kits. Ridiculous!"

Here we go again. I can't wait to see Rory's first piece of stained glass art.

"Got to run." In an unusual display of affection, Rory gives me a big hug. "Don't let Derrick get to you, okay? If he's too shallow to call, then you don't want him. I'll help you find someone better."

I nod, but my heart sinks because there's no guy better than Derrick. And I do want him, more than I care to admit even to myself.

Once she's gone, I head for the kennel. Decked out in my sports cap, overalls, gloves, and sturdy boots, I'm ready to tackle a hard day of work and an even harder day of good-byes.

The dogs jump excitedly and rumble with purrs when the door bangs behind me. Most of them will be going to new homes, which makes me happy and sad. I love them all

so much.

I'm even bonding with Cretin, who seems lonely with Brutus still away on stud duty. Cretin has picked Toffee for his "Brutus" substitute, finding a squeaky ball and bouncing it with his nose over to Toffee. They play fetch down the aisles of cages, and I have some quality time with the other dogs while I clean and fill food and water bowls in each cage.

Kneeling down so the two-month-old pups can crawl all over me, I tell them how exciting today will be. "You're all going to new homes with new families who will love you so much. I know you'll miss each other and especially your mom, but you'll be so happy with your new families that you won't have time to feel sad."

The puppies don't understand and they're in super-hyped play mode, yipping and tug-of-warring with a knotted rope while their mother curls up in the plush doggie bed and wags her tail. I pat her soft head and try not to think how much I'll miss her. Good-byes are always hard.

But there will be new pups in a week. When I go into Daisy's cage, she's fidgety and her food dish is untouched. I press my hand to her velvety belly which is taut and straining as if the pups inside are crowded and eager to come out. Daisy seems anxious, yet she wags her tail to show she's glad to see me. "Eight more days," I tell her, although I'm wondering if it will be sooner. I'm glad for new dogs to look forward to because in a few hours the kennel will be very empty.

Sure enough, my cell phone dings with a text from Blake while I'm starting on the "pup parent" baskets. The first

customer is on her way to take a puppy home. I haven't completed even one basket before the phone dings again. Blake, of course, reminding me to make sure all the vaccination records are in the customer packets. As if I'd forget something that important? Really, Blake, give me some credit.

He calls four more times before the first customer arrives.

After that, it's a blur of answering questions and giving advice on how to raise Queen Bees. Watching dog parents fall in love with a Q-Bee is wonderful. I make it clear that with Q-Bees it's not an owner-pet relationship but more like a parent adopting a child.

When the customer leaves with her fur-child, I get back to work. I still have six baskets to make and am sorting through boxes of sample dog treats when my cell phone dings yet again with a text message.

"Blake," I grumble as I reach for the phone, tired of being interrupted. I'll never get anything done if he keeps calling to tell me about a new customer or ask a question about the dogs.

But when I look down at the phone number, I gasp.

Derrick.

At first I can't think, like my brain has slipped from my ears and rolled out the door. But then my emotions grab hold and I hurt all over like I've been punched from the inside. If he cared about me, he would have called yesterday. Why is he texting now? To tell me he's back with Beatrice? It's a no brainer that he'd prefer stylish, eloquent, sophisticated

Beatrice.

I'm staring at the text but not really seeing the message. Slowly, the three words sink in:

Look behind you.

I turn around.

And there he is.

Derrick.

Here, in my kennel where walls echo with excited dogs yipping and purring like the heartbeat of my life.

I don't know what to say and can only gape at him.

OMG! He's soooo fine. Not in a princely stylish way of designer shirts and overpriced shoes, but a casual attitude of dark-black jeans with worn knees, a plain green T-shirt, and faded white sneakers. Yet there's nothing casual about the tight lines on his forehead, which slant down to his unsmiling lips.

"Ashlee." It's the first time he's ever spoken my real name, and the sound shocks through me.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Will I have the willpower to let him go if he's come to tell me he's gotten back with Beatrice? My pride kicks in, and suddenly I'm angry because why should I be the one waiting for him? He can't expect me to stick around while he makes up his mind. Okay, so I've done some stupid things, but he either likes me for who I am or not at all. I want to know where we stand now. I can't go through another day of waiting, not knowing, fearing the worst.

"What do you want?" I ask with my arms wrapped

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around my chest as if I need to hold myself together.

“To talk.”

“Why wait until today? I left a message for you yesterday,” I accuse harsher than I intend. “And don’t tell me you didn’t get my message, because you wouldn’t have known my new number if you hadn’t.”

“I got it, but things got complicated.”

Calculate “complicated” to include Beatrice in the equation. When I tense, Cretin, who has positioned himself like a sentry guard beside me, growls at Derrick.

I raise my brows, waiting for him to explain. He has more of a right to be angry with me than I do him, but I’m dizzy being so near him, wanting so badly to fold into his arms and hear him say he wants to be more than my friend.

“It wasn’t easy finding you,” he says.

“I’ve been here.” I gesture around the kennel of cages, raising my voice to be heard over the dogs. Q-Bees may not bark like ordinary breeds, but their yips can get really shrill.

“I didn’t know that yesterday morning when I tried to find you.” He sighs. “It wasn’t until after midnight that I saw your phone message—only by then it was too late to call back.”

“You could have texted,” I say, lifting off the sports cap. My braided hair slips loose, falling around my face.

“I couldn’t say what I need to in a text.”

I stiffen, sure now he’s going to tell me how great things are going with Beatrice. His expression isn’t giving anything away, and I long for that lost moment in Pete’s dog run where we almost kissed. *Please, let him step closer and open his*

arms for me. Don't say you prefer her. Give me a chance.

“What do you want to tell me?” I spit this out like a challenge for him to speak honestly even if his words might cut like blades through my heart.

“I had this whole speech planned, but now I can't remember any of the words.” He's holding a medium-sized paper bag, which rattles as he shifts uneasily on the concrete floor. “I thought things were going great with us, until you ran from me. Why didn't you stop?”

“I wanted to, but I was too ashamed to face you or anyone.”

“Because your performance got messed up?” He scrunches his forehead like he's puzzled.

“More than messed up.” I groan.

“But it wasn't your fault. Beatrice shut off your power.”

“You saw that?”

“I saw *everything*.”

My face reddens.

“I didn't mean it that way,” he says quickly. “You were off that stage too quick for anyone to see...well, you know what I mean. I grabbed the remote from Beatrice then picked up the sweats and hoodie you'd left behind and ran after you. But you were too fast.”

“Sorry.” I mean it. If only I'd waited for him, that night would have turned out so differently.

“Here.” He shoves the paper bag at me. “Everything should be there – the remote control, your clothes, and what's left of your cell phone.”

My eyes widen. “You fished it out of the water?”

“All the pieces I could find.” He hangs his head. “Sorry I couldn’t fix it.”

I look inside at metal pieces of mauve. Instead of sadness, though, I’m feeling warm inside. The image of Derrick wading into the moat and picking up phone pieces is priceless.

There are so many things I want to say to him, and they tumble through my mind like clothes on spin dry, falling over each other. I’m grateful and touched and liking him dangerously too much. I hold back, afraid of being hurt again and not sure what he’s feeling or what he wants from me. There’s still Beatrice, too, lurking like an unseen shadow between us.

I’m trying to figure out a tactful way of asking how things stand between him and Beatrice when I hear a shrill yelp.

“Daisy!” I drop the paper bag on a stool and sprint down the aisle to the last cage.

“What is it?” Derrick asks as his sneakers slap on the cement behind me.

I’m already in Daisy’s cage and kneeling on the fresh newspaper. Only the newspaper isn’t dry. There’s a huge straw-colored puddle dripping from Daisy’s doggie bed where she’s shivering and panting. “Her water broke!”

Derrick gasps. “Are you saying she’s going to – ?”

“Yup. Daisy’s going to have her pups.”

Chapter Twenty

When he saw her face, he knew that she was the lady of his love. (Jacobs)

Should we call a vet?” Derrick asks, kneeling beside me. “No.” I glance down at my cell phone, noting the time and calculating that the first pup should arrive within a half hour. I consider calling Blake but hate to interrupt his already busy day when I can deal with this on my own. It’s not like I haven’t seen litters born before.

“I’ve never seen an animal born,” Derrick says with marvel in his voice. “The closest was finding a nest of mice in a kitchen drawer, which didn’t turn out well for the mice.”

“Do you get sick at the sight of blood?” I ask, hoping he’s not a puker.

“No. Exactly how bloody will this get?”

“Not much.” I shrug. “Mostly we just wait and watch and let nature take its course. Daisy will do all the hard work.”

“Her stomach looks so big for a little dog. Are you sure you don’t need a vet?”

I hesitate then answer honestly. “I’m never sure, but over ninety-eight percent of dogs deliver their puppies with no problems. I’m usually on top of it days in advance, taking the dog’s temperature and watching the cervix for dilation, but Daisy is a week early and things have been crazy around here.”

“Crazy?” He glances around curiously. “Except for Daisy, everything looks calm enough.”

“Since Toffee performed last night, lots of people are buying Queen Bees. I just hope none of them show up now.” I’m patting Daisy’s damp fur as I talk, watching her shiver and strain. She’s really close, and I realize I’m holding my breath.

“What can I do to help?” Derrick asks with a helpless flip of his hands.

“Talk to me. Tell me about yesterday. You said you tried to find me.”

“Yeah. I talked to the Talent-Mania organizer and learned your full name but not your address. So I called Beatrice to find out, only she didn’t answer.”

I think back, wondering if that was when Beatrice was at my house. While gently stroking Daisy’s fur, I ask him what happened next.

“A Google search, only that was a big nothing, too. The closest was an 87-year-old Ashlee living in Alaska. So, I did the only thing I could think of.”

“Relax, Daisy,” I say in a calming voice as she spins in a

frantic circle, panting heavily. She stops moving and nips at her blanket, then drags it to a dry corner of her bed.

“What’s she doing?” Derrick asks, alarmed.

“Making a nest.” My heartbeat slows back to normal. “Good girl, Daisy,” I say softly as she plops on the blanket. “I’m here for you. It’ll be okay.”

Derrick leans over, pats her gently, and then looks back at me. “Everything’s okay with her, isn’t it?”

“She’s fine. All we can do is wait. Go on. Finish your story.”

“Where was I?” He sits cross-legged beside me. “Oh yeah, since I didn’t know how to find you, I got in my car and drove back to where we first met.”

“Stone Face Fountain?”

He nods.

“You weren’t there, so I kept driving until I ended up at Shakespeare’s Theater, which was just starting. I figured someone there would know where you lived, and I didn’t have anything else to do, so I took a seat and watched.”

I’m hunched over Daisy, patting her fur and whispering encouragements, but I pause to ask, “What was the play?”

“*The Carver’s Son*, about a lonely man who carves a son out of wood.”

“A retelling of *Pinocchio*,” I guess.

“Yeah, although with the birds and goats at the beginning I didn’t catch on right away. It was amazing how the wooden boy seemed to spring up like he was alive. I didn’t feel like I was just watching, but like I was the boy and suddenly alive. I don’t know how Shakespeare does it.”

“No one does, and that’s what makes it so fun.” Daisy is pushing hard, very close now, but I don’t want Derrick to stop talking. “Then what did you do?”

He glances uneasily at Daisy before answering. “Shakespeare disappeared after he took his finale bow. Since I couldn’t talk to him, I asked some of the kids if they knew you. They all did, and they think you’re cool. But no one knew your last name. One girl said you lived in a green house with dogs, but that wasn’t enough to go on. So, I went to – “

“It’s coming!” I cry out as I move back to give Daisy space. I’ve seen puppies born many times, but it’s always amazing when suddenly *whoosh!* A dark blob of puppy in a jelly-like sack slips out onto the blanket.

“That’s a puppy?” Derrick asks.

“Daisy will tear away the sac and lick the puppy clean now,” I say and watch expectantly. But instead of turning to attend her puppy, Daisy slumps on the nest like she’s going to take a nap. I wait a few seconds, hoping her mom instinct will kick in, but she’s not doing anything.

“Daisy! Get busy!” I order, carefully nudging the puppy near her mouth. She blinks up at me with liquid gold eyes but does nothing. I’m cursing myself for assuming this would be an easy delivery and not calling Blake.

Derrick asks what’s wrong, but there’s no time for talking now. If the puppy isn’t released from the sac, it could die. I gently tear open the sac with my fingers and clear fluid from the pup’s nose and mouth. The tiny pup wiggles, and I’m glad to count four legs, two ears, and one tail.

“Can I help?” Derrick is practically begging, and I know

he's frustrated sitting by without doing anything.

"My phone. On the floor." I'm rubbing the pup now to stimulate breathing, my own breaths coming out ragged. "Blake. My dad. Call him."

My gaze never wavers from the tiny dark pup, and now I can see its closed eyes and shiny nose. The rubbing is working because his (or her?) stomach rises and falls with breath. Daisy is showing interest now, too, nudging the pup and pushing my hand away until her rough tongue is licking the sac away. The pup wiggles closer to its mom.

"Whew!" I exclaim, my hands still shaking.

I look over at Derrick, who is setting the phone back down, and he nods at me. "Your dad is on his way."

"Thanks," I say.

I turn back to Daisy, relieved to see the pup nursing.

"What's Daisy chewing?" Derrick asks, pointing to a dark slimy blob hanging from Daisy's mouth.

"Afterbirth...yum," I say with a wicked grin. "You should try it sometime."

"I'll pass. So, is she done now?"

"Nope, from the size of her belly she has at least one more pup. Maybe two. Queen Bees have small litters, usually two to four pups, not like large dogs that have huge litters."

"Pete came from a litter of thirteen pups." Derrick pushes a squeaky dog toy out of the way as he scoots near me. "I chose him because he was the smallest."

"Pete's the runt of his litter? Hard to believe."

"Real life gets weird; that's for sure," he says, and I notice how close he's sitting beside me. I long to inch closer

so our legs touch then reach out and curl my fingers in his hand.

“Finish your story,” I tell him. “We have ten or twenty minutes before the next pup. Where did you go after Shakespeare’s Theater?”

He taps his chin with his fingers, thinking. “Well, I drove past the park where we watched frog races, but it was empty. So, I headed over to Swap Market. I was sure someone there would know your address. This couple I asked knew who you were, but the wife insisted you lived on Maple and the husband swore it was Elm.”

“Birch Street,” I say.

“Yeah, that’s what the kid – or maybe a short man – told me. But not until I paid him two swap-its.”

“How did you get swap-its?”

“I don’t sing or dance or train dogs, but there are things few people know about my family.” He lowers his voice like he’s divulging royal secrets. “While my dad comes from a long line of politicians on his father’s side, no one ever talks about his great-grandmother.”

“Was she a murderer or a bank robber?”

“My father would prefer that.” His brown eyes twinkle. “Great-Great Grandma was the bearded lady in a traveling circus.”

“A beard?” My voice rises, startling Daisy, who is starting to pant again.

“A fake beard, but it was made from real hair. When it attracted fleas she threw it out and switched to a magic act and did sleight-of-hand tricks. When I was a kid, I wanted to

be in a circus, too. I tried to grow a beard, but as you can see I still don't have one." He pats his smooth cheeks. "I ordered a magic kit and taught myself basic tricks. That's how I earned swap-it's."

"You did?" I exclaim, disbelieving.

He nods proudly. "I bent pencils like they were rubber, and made coins disappear then reappear in pockets and behind ears. The kids loved it."

"I would have loved it, too," I say softly.

He gives me a thoughtful look then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a nickel. "Now you see it." He waves it in front of my face with one hand and snaps his fingers with the other. "And now you don't." He finishes with both of his hands palms out to show they're empty. Before I can ask where the nickel went, he reaches out for my hair, my skin tingling as his fingers brush across my neck. Then he whisks his hand back to show the shiny nickel.

I'm staring, but it's not the coin I'm focused on. It's Derrick. My skin still rushes with heat from his light touch. He stops moving, catching my gaze in a serious expression. I'd give anything to know if he's thinking about me because all I'm thinking is about how funny and sweet and wonderful he is. But I hold back, a sentry of my own feelings.

"So you found out my address, but you didn't come over," I say accusingly, gathering up my pride like a shield.

"I was going to until I remembered your bag was still in my bedroom." He points to the bag he brought to me. "I drove home, planning to get the bag and bring it to you, only I found Beatrice waiting for me. I didn't want to see or talk to

her again after she sabotaged your act. I was ready to really lay into her until she told me she'd just come from your house. I didn't believe her and asked her to prove it by telling me your address."

"Which she knew because she'd just left my house," I murmur.

"She said she went there to apologize for her mistake with your remote, but she walked in on you making out with your boyfriend."

"That's a total lie!" I exclaim then lower my voice so I don't disturb Daisy and her new pup. "There's no boyfriend."

"I didn't think so, but she can be convincing." His face reddens, and he glances down. "I didn't want to believe her, but if she was right, it would be awkward if I went to your house. I needed time to think."

"Why didn't you just return my call?"

"It sounds stupid, but I couldn't find my cell phone. I thought I left it in my car, but it wasn't there. When I was getting ready for bed, I heard beeping and found the phone beneath my pillow. No idea how it got there. When I powered it on, a face flashed on the screen – the same young looking guy who told me your address. Weird, huh?"

"Weirdness happens," I say with a smile.

"Anyway, by then it was midnight. Too late to call you."

I open my mouth to tell him that it's never too late, but when I glance down at Daisy, she's trembling and straining.

"Another one!" Derrick cries.

A door bangs. I look up to see my dad entering the kennels. I shout out to him and he rushes over, kneeling

down beside us. “How’s she doing?”

“Okay, I think.” I’m biting my lip and watching nervously but relieved now that Blake’s here.

Seconds later, puppy number two slips out smoothly, and Daisy immediately chews off the sac and licks the pup like she’s done this many times before. Within minutes, two adorable pups are nursing on their mom. And soon another pup joins them. Two females and one male. Daisy looks so content as she nurses her three adorable pups.

“This is cause for celebration,” Blake says, leading us into the house. We’re sitting at the table when I catch him giving Derrick a curious look, and I realize I haven’t introduced them. I quickly do it. If Blake is surprised to find Mayor King’s son at our house, he doesn’t show it. Instead, he says today has been so amazing we should have a party tonight, and he’ll bring Chinese food and ask his assistant, Claire, to join us. He suggests asking Rory then slyly looks over at Derrick and says he’s welcome to join us, too.

“I’d like that,” Derrick says, and the way he’s looking at me gives me a warm, delicious feeling.

Blake hurries back to Bow-Wow Boutique, and it’s just Derrick and me in the kitchen. There’s this silence, no one speaking as we watch each other.

“So, it’s just us,” I finally say, feeling a little awkward but a lot happy.

“Just us,” Derrick echoes, smiling.

This is what I’ve been waiting for, the two of us alone (except for Toffee and Cretin curled by our feet) without any interruptions. Yet my heart flutters like a tiny bird that

suddenly has wings but doesn't know how to fly yet. I can't think of what to say. I stand up abruptly from the table and push my chair away. "We should go check on the pups."

"Your dad said the dogs are fine."

"I know they are. It's just that..."

"What?"

"I'm not so sure about myself." I lean against the back of the chair, my knuckles pale. "Why did you really come here?"

"To see you." He says this so simply and honestly that I feel buoyant.

"What about Beatrice?"

"Beatrice who?" He slices his hands through the air in a cutting gesture. "I mean it. And what about you? No more running away from me."

"I promise," I say with a crisscross of my hands over my chest.

"There's only one thing left to do." Standing from his chair, he pushes his sandy-brown hair from his brown eyes. When he takes a step toward me, I don't run away. I meet him halfway.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a piece of paper. I recognize it immediately. "Here, this is for you." He holds out a swap-it.

"I don't have anything to trade."

"But you do." His hand lifts to touch my hair then gently trails a finger along my cheek bone and down to my mouth.

I lift my lips for our first kiss.

And it's magic.

about author
Linda Joy Singleton

When Linda Joy Singleton was young, she enjoyed visiting a dog kennel with her best friend Lori. This memory plus her love for writing magical mysteries inspired the “Canine Cinderella” twist in NEVER BEEN TEXTED. When Linda isn’t writing, she loves walking, playing on her iPad, cuddling her two cats and her tiny dog Lucy, taking trips with her husband David, playing with her grandkids, and of course, reading.

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