

CHAPTER ONE

I watched the first steps that a child had ever taken on the moon, and shivers went down my spine. Nathan Grizzly, the stalwart astronaut, bounced out of the spaceship across the surface of the moon. In his hands, a flagpole. On that flagpole, a pair of underpants. They weren't just any underpants, though. They were the flower-print boxers formerly belonging to the prince of the United Kidzdom.

Grizzly plunged the flagpole into the ground. He winked for the camera and gave it a peace sign. With his tongue out, he created the giggle heard across the world – and I had just watched it on the theatre screen. I took another swig of my soda.

With the straw in my mouth, I saw Charmichael sitting in the popcorn. He was giving me that look again, though. Even with one button-eye, his annoyance rang out true. I knew that he didn't really care much for historical movies, but we both knew that he would have been even more bummed if I went to the theater without him.

The last time that I went to the movie theater without Charmichael, he wouldn't let me forget about it for weeks. He just sat there in the corner, staring at me. But I was the boss, and that meant he had to do whatever I

said. I had been looking forward to this movie for a long time. And besides, stuffed animal tickets were half-off today.

I couldn't stay too mad at Charmichael, though. I put him down on my lap and started to pet him. Running my hands through his soft plush calmed us both, and before long Charmichael was asleep. Well, he *was* asleep until an explosion popped across the screen.

Oh well, I thought. My eyes locked onto the screen, and I shoveled a handful of popcorn into my mouth. I barely noticed the chocolate dribbling down my chin. Green and red lasers blasted across the screen as Nathan Grizzly fought off six-tentacled aliens. I heard a couple of kids behind me whispering how unrealistic this was.

"That's not how it happened," they said. "There were no aliens!"

I didn't care if that wasn't how it actually happened – this was the best scene in the movie, and it wasn't like Nathan just pulled a giant laser out of nowhere to blast the aliens. We saw that he had one from the beginning. I smeared the chocolate popcorn across my face. The movie was so exciting that I actually missed my mouth. I grabbed the fold of my blouse and wiped my face clean in time for the final scene to start.

The movie cut to the White Castle, with the Americandy flag blowing in the wind. Everything was quiet. The camera zoomed into the window. The prince stared intensely out of it as his pet bald eagle came to

roost on his shoulder. There was a knock on the door, and both of them turned to it as a little girl came into the room.

"You'd better have a good reathon for being here," the prince said.

"Yes, Mr. Prince, sir," she said, looking down at him. "We did it. The pants have been planted."

"Then it's time. It's time to puth the button."

The prince glared at the little girl. I sat back in my seat, holding my breath. It was at that moment that all of Americandy could say, "Our prince is better than your prince." It was a historic moment that inspired many children to become astronauts. How would they set it to film?

The button was pressed, and a red siren blared. The little girl looked around the room, startled. The tension eased when a piece of confetti hit her nose. Balloons and streamers rained down from above. The two of them danced to the credits, and an applause erupted in the theater. I couldn't help but join in. People actually complained about that ending? It gave me everything that I wanted to see!

Sure, a few years later the United Kidzdom put our own prince's underpants on Mars, but there was no way that they'd be able to put that in the movie. The tagline was "the bestest prank of all time," and you couldn't really say that about a prank played on our country. Besides, we ended up having a base on Mars trying to get the underpants back. Not to

mention that that was like 100 years ago, and any day now we're going to figure out how to put underpants on Jupiter. It's only science.

I was hit in the back of the head with a cup of soda. Seconds later, I felt the goo dripping down my back. Candy and kernels of popcorn were flying across my eyes. The theater had broken out into a food fight, and I was in the middle of it. There was only one way to proceed. I grabbed my bucket and started chucking the popcorn.

A chocolate cluster flicked me in the face and fell into my purse. I reached down inside, and my spirits sank as I grabbed a long piece of paper. I had chores to do today, and I did want to get them done before my parents came home from school. Grown-ups were lost without a kid around to guide them, and I did not want to leave them home alone.

It was nearly one in the afternoon. I tossed my cellphone back into my purse and dumped the popcorn out of the barrel. It found a new place on my head as I was ready to charge. I stuffed Charmichael to the bottom of my purse. Things were going to get messy, and I could take comfort in knowing that at least one of us would make it out not needing a bath. Sure, tons of chocolate were dribbling down my hair, but that was already brown.

I stayed low as I charged out. That wasn't the best idea. The kid running to exit a food fight always became the first target. It was a

scientific fact. I soon found myself in the crossfire of wayward jellybeans and other lost candies. Then I slipped on a slick of chocolate fudge.

A kid walked up to me and sprouted a toothy grin. A soda sat in his hands. I put my hands up, but they were no help. Soda poured all over me until I was giggling furiously. He offered me his hand and pulled me up when the cup was empty.

"Okay, you got me," I said while wringing my blouse out. "Good one."

"I think that was a little cheap," he said. "Hey you know what? Get a free one on me. It's only fair."

"Nah ... it's no problem."

"Come on, be a sport!"

I rolled my eyes, but manners were manners. A discarded strawberry ice cream cone sat crushed on a chair in front of us. A smile curled my lips as I picked it up. He closed his eyes, and I drove it into his nose. When he opened them again, we gave each other a smile and a high-five. Then I left, thinking of strawberry ice cream. Maybe that's what I would have for dinner.

"Are you leaving already?" asked a kid in his teens, the usher. "You're going to miss the best part."

"I know, but I got things I need to do. Being a kid isn't easy."

"Don't I know it," the usher said. He took a family portrait out of his wallet. "I'd save the world for these guys. They're the best family in the world."

"Can't be better than mine!"

I stuck my tongue out at him as I walked away. That made what I said automatically right. He just shook his head. It's all that he could do because of how right I was. The only best family in the world was my family, and it was my job to keep the ship afloat. Well, that was more Timmy's responsibility. My responsibility was keeping the ship ship-shape. Not to brag or anything, but I did a pretty good job.

It was a happy feeling buzzing in my brain, but it seemed that not everyone was having such a good day. There was some arguing in the hall. A sister was jumping up and down demanding to be heard, while her brother plugged his ears.

"I want to see *Fairy Wishes!*" the sister said.

"We're seeing *Mooning the Moon,*" the brother said.

"Hey, there's no need to fight," I said. "*Fairy Wishes* is the much better movie."

"I'm not watching a dumb fairy movie," the brother groaned. "I don't want to see any movie with a dumb unicorn, either."

Fairy Wishes was not a movie about some dumb unicorn. Sure, there was a unicorn on the poster, but the movie was about so much more than that. It was the most hilarious comedy of the year. A lot of movies starred kids making three wishes, but this one started after all the wishes had been made, and the little girl had to deal with the morning after.

And sure, one of her wishes was for a unicorn, but the movie really shined with her other two wishes. I was straddling the line when I told him about the second wish: the girl wished to be a superhero, but I absolutely could not tell him the third wish. It was such a heartwarming ending. Even Charmichael cried! He tries to be so tough, but deep down inside he really is a big softie.

"A-alright fine. I'll see that dumb unicorn movie, but if I don't like it we're seeing *Mooning the Moon* right after."

"Fine by me," the sister said, and she ran off.

I didn't blame the brother so much. I wouldn't have seen it myself if Molly didn't prod me into it. I had plenty of dumb unicorn movies at home, and I didn't need to go to the theaters to see another one. However, *Fairy Wishes* was something special.

I looked at the posters to see what would be coming out soon. Most of them didn't interest me, everything from some generic monster movie to *Sparkle Princess Adventures*. I liked glitter as much as any girl,

but the comics got a little too sparkly for my taste. And then there were stories about trying to stop orcs from declaring war against the Province of the Pixie Sprites. The politics of being a princess were just exhausting.

"So that's one child ticket, and two imaginary friend tickets," I heard the cashier say. "That comes to 57 cards."

I cringed. Imaginary friends were so expensive nowadays. I had one a long time ago, but I just *could* not keep her around. They always ask for the most expensive toys and games, and if they aren't multiplayer they never let you play.

Not to mention, everyone felt okay charging so much for imaginary friends because they always got away with whatever mischief that they wanted. If you got into a street race with one, then you'll be the one that they pull over while your imaginary friend rushes to the finish line. Even if it was the imaginary friend who started the race. And then they'd just gloat in your face for hours and hours about winning.

"Um ... missy, are you alright?" a kid asked. "You've been standing still for five minutes. Do you need a doctor or something?"

"Sorry! I was just daydreaming ... about an old relationship," I said.

I ventured out into the world and was hit with a springtime breeze carrying all of the scents of Summerway. A gentle aroma of cotton candy

danced on the smells of flowers. It helped knock my head back to reality. I had work to do. I grabbed the paper from my purse. And then my cellphone rang.

"Bonjour, my dear friend. Do I have exciting news! I MUST tell someone anon. Shall we meet for lunch in an hour?"

That was definitely April. The list unfolded and fell to the ground, and then it started rolling down the street.

"Um ... I guess I could break for lunch in an hour. Is Lemonade Land alright?"

"Your brother's place? Sally, I could afford to take us anywhere in town! We could eat at Lucky Cheeses or ... ooh, there's this new Cribbabean place."

"You know that I can't stand Cribbabean food. Besides, I can't stay out too long. I've got a ton of work to do."

"My dear live a little. You're not gonna be a kid forever."

"Alright fine, I'll see you at Lemonade Land in an hour."

I hung up just in time to get out of the way. I stepped into the pony lane of the street. A kid galloped along on his stallion, and I just avoided getting trampled. But it was out of the way of one animal and right into the way of another. I came face-first into a giant kangaroo. It looked down at me. A golden medallion hung from its neck, inscribed with the word

"Jamie." A little girl stood next to her, holding a leash. She pulled, but not being strong enough to pull a stalled kangaroo, the leash pulled back.

"Sorry," the girl said. "Jamie doesn't watch where she's going sometimes."

"Oh, it's not a problem," I said, brushing myself off. "Nice choice for a pet."

I could imagine riding around in its pouch, all snug and safe. It would be a super easy way to get around, and on those cold days it would keep you all warm and toasty. On hot days, you could ride on the kangaroo's back leaving its pouch open for all of your stuff.

"Thanks," the girl said. "Kangaroos are my favorite animal. Jamie here was *destined* to be my pet. The shopkeep tried to get me to take a monkey or a baby elephant, but I said 'No! This is the perfect pet for me.' So ... what's yours?"

I pulled Charmichael out of my purse.

"That's not a pet, that's a stuffed animal."

I took Charmichael away from that nasty language. It was a good thing that he was still asleep. Stuff like that really hurts his feelings. He can't turn invisible like a "real" chameleon, but he has just as many thoughts and feelings as any other lizard. He's certainly more forward with his opinions than any other lizard that I've met.

We arrived at the store. I grabbed a cart and put Charmichael in the front. He was just waking up by the time we got to the door. It was a shame, too. He really hated this part. A girl stood out front, and I showed Charmichael's hand to her. She stamped it, leaving a tiny red circle.

Charmichael started crying. I cooed and gently explained that he needed that so the store wouldn't think that he belonged to them. If he didn't have that stamp, he might have found himself in a box to be sold by another kid, and we'd never see each other again.

I stormed inside and got to my list. The more that I looked at it, the longer and more intimidating it looked. This is what happened when you missed a week of shopping. First stop was the new Captain Commando action figure – definitely a Timmy addition. The next three additions were mine, but that wasn't really my fault. Nine times out of ten, it was my responsibility to watch all of the commercials and write down all of the cool stuff. Another girl and I reached for the same set of twinkle twirlers.

"Oh, sorry, you can have this one," I said.

"Thanks," she said, piling it into her shopping cart. "You know ... this shopping stuff is kinda boring on your own."

She looked at me, and grew a grin.

"Ooh, I know! This store has a race program! How's about it? Whoever completes their shopping list first is the winner."

"I don't know ..."

"Come on ... I double dog dare you!"

I stopped in my tracks. If I backed out now, there was no way I'd be able to shop here again. Any kid with honor did a double dog dare, and Sally Dunn was a kid with honor. We pulled our carts to the manager's office. The next thing that I knew, an employee was standing on top of a checkout counter with a cap gun in his hand.

"Attention shoppers! A race is about to take place. The first kid who gets every item on the list gets their photo on the wall and awesomeness forever! The loser gets a big fat wet willie, from me personally, the manager."

The other girl and I shuddered in unison. The thought of it didn't stop her from gloating about how she was totally going to kick my butt though. The cap gun popped and we were both off. I rushed down to the shelves, glancing at my list and back up. I was rummaging through them for a specific ghost toy, but the girl was getting ahead way too fast. I didn't have time to dawdle.

I grabbed a handful of ghost toys and threw them into the cart. I was going to win this no matter what. Kids gathered to watch us whiz through the store, shouting "Go! Go! Go." It made me smirk. I turned so

hard into the next aisle, everyone in the store could hear the skid marks.

There was no harm in showing off.

The other girl slipped, darting her cart ahead of her. I ran past her, and blew a raspberry for good measure. Near the bottom of my list was the new Sparkle Princess Adventures toy. I slid it into my cart. The things that I did for my brother. I wiped the glitter off of my hand and dashed to the finish line.

I ran past the checkered flag and up to the counter. The race was over. I had won. The employees held my arm high and showered me with confetti as they took my picture. It felt really special.

"Wow, that's a lot of ghost toys. That will be 247 Ginomon cards," the cashier said.

That was more than I was expecting. I opened my purse and popped open my card case. I pulled out a few. Some of them had golden text, but most of them had silver. The creatures on their art stared at me with longing eyes as they transferred hands.

"Woah, is that a Lightning Phoenix card? Hey ... after I get out of work, do you wanna battle?" the cashier asked.

"Sorry," I said as I scratched the back of my head. "I don't really play Ginomon. But um ... you can keep the change."

"You really mean it?"

"Mhmm."

I left with a sigh. Even if this wasn't for groceries, shopping was always a tedious adventure. An alarm went off, almost making me drop my bags of goodies. My hour was almost up, and I had to hurry. I ran, but I ended up bumping into another kid. He turned to me angrily as a brush fell to the sidewalk. Apparently I had interrupted his artistic endeavors. He was painting on the walls of the toy store.

"What's going on here!?" an employee demanded. All of the commotion must have caused her to run outside.

"Oh, I got bored and decided to make some art," the boy replied.

He picked up his paint brush, and returned to the drawings of houses and people, rocketships, and clouds. The employee stared at it, tapping her foot. She shrugged and gave a smile.

"That's looking pretty good. Gonna attract plenty of customers. Keep up the good work," she said.

"Just doing my duty for Summerway," he said. He gave a salute, smearing paint across his forehead as he did so.

I ran off, not having time for this. Before long, Lemonade Land was right across the street. Cars beeped as they zipped and zoomed. Even the pony lanes were packed. Ever since that dealership opened up a couple of months back, traffic had been a complicated affair. Kids rode them in

and out of traffic, and that was causing a mess. Not the good kind either. They had to completely redo the roads and kids were still getting used to it.

"Just what I wanted for a first ride," a girl said as her pony came to a stop.

"Just bought it, huh?" I asked.

"Yup ... and it's a him. I always wanted one! I'm *so* glad that Mayor Talula brought dealership to town."

"Are you kidding? I love ponies just as much as the next girl, but traffic has been a nightmare ever since that place opened. If someone ever runs against Talula, I'm voting for her."

"Good luck with that," the girl chuckled. "No one *ever* runs against Mayor Talula."

Maybe that would have to change. I dashed across the street when the traffic finally dispersed, struggling to keep the bags from spilling over. As I made it into the parking lot, April waved to me from the inside of her car. She opened the door, and neon lights flooded the parking lot.

Even for a simple lunch with friends, April was still dressed to show. She wore the newest deep blue princess Jafara outfit, doused with glitter and sequins. A green crocodile bag hung from her shoulder, and even with all of those plastic teeth, it was one of the cutest animals ever. I was as green as the gator staring at me looking at April's pony ear

headband. She was even wearing a cat-tail belt, one that I had been planning to get for weeks now.

She had even brought Molly, still in her greasy overalls with the tears on both of the knees and her tattered shirt. An expression of frustration hung on Molly's grimy face. She had just been pulled from work. And then we both found ourselves buried in a hug.

"Oh there you are! Alas, how I have missed you, my darling!"

"April, I just saw you three days ago," I said, struggling to catch my breath.

"Pish-posh. That's literally forever," she said. "Now come on inside, I have something exquisite to show you both."

Molly and I chuckled to ourselves as we followed April. We pushed the door open, but the bell's ring lost itself in the sound of general mealtime clatter. Kids talked about their day, trying to take as large bites of food as possible. Some slurped their drinks, and others blew bubbles into them. All of this was buried under the sounds of televisions on various channels. Timmy himself stood at the podium, waiting to take orders.

"Hey Sally, what's going on? Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Nope. Just got done shopping. Me and my friends decided to come here for lunch."

"Wait, you've been shopping ... and you brought the stuff here?"

Timmy said. He grabbed the back of his neck, looking down into the bags. I smiled.

"Don't worry, if anyone asks, they're mine. So, are you gonna serve your little sister or not?"

He laughed, clearly out of relief, and pointed me toward the table in the corner of the restaurant. It had the window with the best view, and it was always open to me and my personal friends. No one else was allowed to sit there, not even if the day got super busy. Being the sister of the guy who owned the restaurant came with all kinds of perks, even beyond the free food. I walked over there, and my friends joined me.

"Hey, can I change the channel on the TV?" Molly asked.

"Yeah, sure," Timmy said.

Molly flicked through the channels until she came to a Champion Pillow Fight match. There was a ding of the bell, and two girls dressed in pajamas stepped into the ring. One carried a blue pillow, and the other girl carried a red one. Molly shoveled appetizer chocolates into her mouth as she watched. And it was a messy fight. Feathers were flying everyone.

"I don't see how anyone could fancy something so ... bestial," April said.

"Says the girl dressed up like a petting zoo," Molly snickered.

"I'll have you know that what I'm wearing comes straight out of *Seven Magazine*. It is beyond compare! Oh that does remind me of what I wanted to show you."

She opened her crocodile bag and tossed out a copy of *Seven Magazine*. April pointed to the cover. I didn't see the big deal. It was just a photograph of that pop star, Julie Neptune. Then April pointed out the credit for that photograph – hers.

"You got to *talk* to Julie Neptune?" I said.

"Talk? No, I spent the day with her. We even exchanged Snatchemon."

She took her game out of her bag and showed us. A small blue fish flopped around on screen.

"Magiderp is the worst Snatchemon of them all," Molly said.

"Au contraire! *My* Magiderp has a special extraordinary power."

She showed us in power. As this Magiderp was close to defeat, it unleashed a super omega beam that destroyed whatever it went up against. It was only given out on a super exclusive one-night event – the kind that only celebrities get to go to. Julie didn't mind giving hers away because she had three of them. That wasn't all she gave away, either. Both Molly and I received autographed posters, each with a custom finger-painting of

Julie's own design. Timmy brought us our food, with a disappointed look on his face.

"Hey um ... I just got a call from Robert and Linda's teacher, Ms. Kathy. Did you know that she wanted to have a child-teacher meeting with us tonight?"

"Um ... no," I said.

"Well, Ms. Kathy wants us to come over to the school at five p.m. tonight."

"Oooh, scandalous," April said.

"What'd they do?" Molly asked.

"I don't know."

Besides not telling me that their teacher wanted to see me!

A twinge of anger shot through my mind. What did Linda do this time? Then I became a little sad. I could understand Linda not telling me – she doesn't tell me anything – but Robert? He didn't tell me anything?

"Hey um ... April? Can you give me a ride home? I guess I need to get ready for a child-teacher night."

CHAPTER TWO

"Do you want any help?" April asked as the car pulled up to the curb.

I shook my head no. This was something I needed to deal with on my own. I stepped out and took a deep breath. With bags in hand, I marched onto the front lawn. I struggled to put my smile back on, but there was no way that I could do that now. I had plans for all of the awesome things I was going to do tonight, but now I'd be stuck doing some boring child-teacher meeting.

I crossed the threshold and almost dropped my bags. A dragon was staring at me, intensely. I took another deep breath. It was just the banister. I told Timmy that this would happen if he went with the red dragon. Sure, it was smiling, but it looked like it was only doing that because it was going to eat someone. And to think that Timmy wanted to make it roar whenever the door opened.

I had to blow off some steam. I tossed my bags onto the couch, causing it to swing back and forth, and I crashed into the ball pit. I grabbed a nice green one and started tossing them around the room. I hit the television. It bounced off of the plate used to protect it, and I won five

points. I knocked the rocket ship floor lamp onto one of the beanbag chairs. That was another five points. I wanted a challenge. I looked to the closet door. My old drawing of a dog was waving back at me. If I could hit its paw I would get 50 points. I threw the ball, and it hit the ropes holding the couch to the ceiling. It rocked back and forth and the bags spilled out into the ground. I had lost all of my points.

I threw one over the shoulder, and it hit Timmy's poster of an Olympic sling shooter. That was something that I could fix. I reached into the bag of spilled toys and pulled out an Eternity Forever poster. With just a couple pieces of tape, it was now the top of the ever-growing pile.

The clock ticked on as I hopped across pieces of furniture. I bounced from the beanbag chair onto the table, and its swivel sent me flying. From there I launched myself up and just barely missed the ceiling monkey bars. I fell to the soft cushion of the floor below.

Meow! Meow! The cat clock read 2:00 p.m. I shook my head, and the thoughts of everything that I needed to do came flushing back to me. The most important thing was making dinner, but what Linda did weighed heavily on my mind. I pushed the pile of toys into the corner, where they joined last week's collection, and I set off into the kitchen. My eyes twinkled in the bright sun from the skylight.

I browsed around the room for jars of peanut butter and buckets of chocolate syrup. What could I make Linda do? I peered around the refrigerator. The old ice down the back of the shirt? Nah. This time she needed something special. The fuzzy zebra head on the wall looked down at me. Maybe I'd dress her up as one and force her to wear it all week.

There was the floor trampoline. Perhaps I'd make Linda start using the spiral slide that led to it on the way down and force her to spend the day with any crazy hairstyle that came out of it. No, that wouldn't work either. Giving her hair purple highlights was the only fun thing that she ever did, and I didn't want to ruin that. What did I want Linda to do? I sauntered over to the grown-ups' chore list. Two long sheets of paper hung down. There were already a few things written in fresh blue crayon on Linda's list.

"Play baseball with Timmy

Race toy cars with Timmy

Test Timmy's newest lemonade masterpiece

Make popcorn for the Ratman marathon

Watch the Ratman marathon with Timmy"

That wasn't nearly enough. I grabbed my green crayon and got to thinking. I wanted to have a tea party tonight, but if I made Linda go she probably wouldn't even dress all fancy. That was going to be a Robert chore for this evening. He *was* involved in this, too, so I wrote that down, right below *Play Baseball with Timmy*.

Maybe I'd have her join me, Robert, and Timmy on a kitchen camping trip. She'd be the one to set up the blanket tents while the rest of us roasted marshmallows on the stove. Then again, she'd complain about how much she needed her sleep, and it would ruin it for everyone else. And after the movie, tonight was a "playing astronaut" kind of night. I already had goosebumps imagining Robert spinning me around above his head under the stars. This went on until Robert's list was twice as long as Linda's. She was just so boring to play with.

A loud horn wailed outside. I dropped the crayon and barreled out the door. I bounced up and down on the porch as a bus came to a stop. My smile reflected in the windows, as I read "SKOOL BUS" in glittery rainbow letters. It had a new design today. Along with the painted slime drips that were always on the roof, heart and star scribbles were dotted along the engine, and blue squiggles were on the sides.

One by one, grown-ups stepped off, waved on by the bus driver when she wasn't fastening her braces. I eyed them carefully, looking for telltale signs. When my parents stepped off of the bus, I broke into a sprint.

Linda was the first off of the bus, and she broke into a larger hurry. Grown-ups could really run if they wanted to. She slipped by me on her way inside, but I noticed that her hair was disheveled with ends splitting. She didn't even have time to close her backpack. Papers were spilling out, all over the yard. Without sparing them even a glance, she brushed off her shirt and went inside. Then Robert stepped off of the bus.

"Robbie! Robbie! You're home!" I shouted, hopping up and down. The second that he took the final step off of the bus, I leapt up into his arms.

"Hiya Sally ... how's it going?" he asked. He looked toward the house for a second before turning back to me. "I've got a lot of homework to do, so ..."

"But Robbie – the buttercups are starting to bloom!"

"Can't you water them yourself once in a while?" he asked gently.

I got down and put my hands on my hips.

"Robbie, it's our garden! That means we do it together!"

"Okay, I guess that means that homework can wait for a few minutes," he said with a small chuckle.

I ran into the backyard, unable to contain the excitement. I had noticed the flowers that morning after my parents went to school. I stopped as I turned to the side of the house as a blur of green caught my eye. It was some of my topiary getting a little out of hand. I picked up the shears and trimmed down the mane of the bush pony and the tail of the giraffe. That last one was really getting out of control.

I looked around the garden with pride. Robert and I had been working on this all spring. We started when it was just warming up. I thought it might have been too soon, but Robert said that the time was right, and he does know a thing or two about plants. Last year we grew strawberries that tasted so delicious you didn't even have to dip them in chocolate – not that I didn't dip them in chocolate. At least, I dipped the ones that we weren't going to use for paint.

We'd spend hours on every Saturday morning spreading fertilizer all over the yard and digging deep into the ground, getting all nice and dirty. He concocted some mixtures to help the plants grow, and I spread it across the yard. He couldn't do it without me, and I couldn't do it without him. And our hard work was beginning to show off. Little yellow buds peeked out into the world.

Robert had gotten the water flowing through the hose. I picked it up, but the water dried up not long after I started spraying the crops. I hit

the nozzle a few times, but still nothing happened. There must have been gunk trapped inside. I took a look inside the hose, and then I got a spray of water straight to the face.

"Did I get you?" Robert asked, popping his head around the side of the house. "I guess that's your bath for the week."

"I'm gonna get you for that," I said, as a grin etched across my face.

We spent the next half hour turning our yard into a great water battle. I chased Robert down, and when I got close enough, I gave him a blast right to the back. Of course, he wasn't without tricks. He pulled a squirt gun from his backpack and turned the tides back on me. We ran through the gardens tackling each other with water. The only thing that didn't get wet that day was the plants.

"Alright, I think that's enough for today. I *do* have homework to do," Robert said.

"Wait!" I shouted. "Mud angels!"

I tumbled backward into the mud and waved my arms and legs. He simply smiled and said they gave the old grown-up talk that they usually did. He would have to pass, but he'd be in his room if I needed him. I didn't know what he was talking about. This was perfectly good mud! My

parents could be so spoiled sometimes. Didn't they realize that some people in the world didn't even *have* mud?

"And she makes it to second base!" I said, running around. "She rounds third! And she makes it to home plate!"

I slid on my knees and let the mud drag me to the home plate rock. A gentle breeze picked up, carrying a piece of paper with it. I plucked it out of the wind, eyeing its scribbles. The scribbles turned out to be Linda's name and a grade. It was a D- on a report from a laser tag battle. My attention turned to the other papers fluttering in the wind, but nothing really changed.

A finger-painting got her an F-. Of course it did. Who paints a nighttime sky without any aliens or cool planets? The grades kept getting lower. I caught a Z- on a food fight report. Or that's what it would have been if Linda had even attempted. With grades like this, how was Linda going to survive after graduation? What would she do?

I scampered back inside the house, only to be greeted with clanks and clamors from the kitchen. It only took me one guess to figure out what was going on. I snuck up to the kitchen door and saw Linda standing in front of the counter.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" I asked.

Linda turned around so fast I could see that she was smiling but stopped as soon as she recognized the voice. I tapped my foot and folded my arms, letting her know that I wanted an answer. Linda stood there choked up until I marched across the room. My dinner mixture was still sitting there. I looked for anything that she might have done to it.

"I ... uh ... Sally!" Linda said. "I was just checking to see what you were making!"

I stared into Linda's eyes, digging at the truth. Even now she wasn't telling me about the child-teacher meeting. Who knew what else she was hiding from me? Beads of sweat formed on Linda's nose. She gave a nervous chuckle. Then it hit me - she didn't know that I knew about the child-teacher meeting. I smiled and Linda eased back.

"Well, you could have just asked me," I said. *That's right, make it look like everything in the world is all fine.* "I was making some chocolate chip cake. And we're gonna have some cheese fondue on top, potato chips, taffy sticks, and it's all coming with a side of spaghetti!"

"That ... last one sounds alright," Linda said, biting the corner of her lip.

"That's because it comes with my super-secret ingredient!"

Boy was she in for a surprise. I rummaged around the fridge, giggling. I couldn't contain the suspense. I got my hands on the prize and

turned around. Linda couldn't even pretend to be excited about the key ingredient – super-double-triple chocolate sauce. She groaned. I felt my head starting to steam.

“We haven't eaten a meal that wasn't drenched in chocolate sauce for the past six months. Can't we eat something a little fresher?”

“Well maybe, but tonight I thought I would bring some extra food to our child-teacher meeting, and you know those teachers, if they don't get the four main food groups of chocolatey, fruity, salty, and cheesy, we'll never hear the end of it.”

The color drained from Linda's face.

“Ms. Kathy ... did tell you about the child-teacher meeting we're having tonight, right?” I asked as I grabbed the mix and poured it into the cake tin.

“Uh ...”

“No huh? That's pretty rude, don't you think? Not telling someone about something so important?”

“Um ... yeah ...”

Color returned to Linda's cheeks. I quirked my brow, shaking my head. She thought that she was getting away with it. Grown-ups always acted like this, like kids would fall for any dumb little lie. I decided then and there that Linda had to learn a lesson.

“So, Ms. Kathy isn't going to complain about *your* grades, right?”

“I know my grades aren't the best, but they are getting better.”

“Okay then,” I said, stifling a laugh. The crumpled-up finger-painting still sat in my pocket. “Let's make a deal. When I hear about your super awesome grades from Ms. Kathy ... we'll eat out tonight, anywhere that you want. Even at that new place that only serves vegetables.”

Linda took a step back. Her breaths slowed. I gritted my teeth. Did I go too far? Was she on to me? I've never suggested that we have vegetables for dinner before. After all, I was a responsible kid. I had to follow it up with something to throw her off of my trail. Then I saw them out of the corner of my eye.

“But if you're lying ... I'll make you eat your roller skates. You never use them anymore, so why not put them to good use?”

They sat by the wall, covered in crusted mud. I could almost see the smells wafting up from them. Linda was turning green, just staring at them. We were both silent. Linda's eyes didn't drift from the skates while I hoped that she would just tell me the truth. Linda stole herself and nodded, putting her hand forward. She was ready to make this a deal. I grimaced.

“Nu-uh, old lady. We make deals like *kids* in this house.”

I spat in my hand and offered it. Linda's hand started to shake. Touching someone else's spit was gross, so by doing this anyone could be

sure that the other person was one-hundred percent on board. Linda's hand met mine in a gooey mess. I broke into a grin, savoring every moment of this handshake. I could not wait to see the look on Linda's face with a plate of roller skates in front of her.

As soon as the handshake was complete, she hurried out. It was a good thing, too – I could barely contain my anger and disappointment. Although seeing her trip over the ball pit made it a little easier.

"Well, seeing as how we're eating at the veggie shack tonight, I'm gonna give this cake mix to Charmichael," I said, loud enough for Linda to hear.

Pulled him out of my purse and plopped him down into his high chair. I fastened his favorite bib, apologizing. He needed to eat quickly today. I dug a spoon into the mixing bowl. The concoction smudged onto his face and dribbled down onto his bib, as if he wasn't eating any of it. I sniffed the spoon. Something smelled off. I was just about to lick the spoon myself, but a jar of carrots rolled out from under the counter.

"Ugh, gross!" I spat.

I kicked the can away, cringing. I could smell the awful odor of carrots. What kind of crazy kid would invent a food that tasted as horrible as carrots? They *were* going to be for dessert one night, but instead they ended up ruining tonight's dinner.

Linda should have told me that carrots were in the mixture. She knew that Charmichael was allergic to them. Now he'd keep me up all night complaining about an aching stomach. I tossed the rest of it into the trash, grumbling. Timmy would be getting out of work rather soon. It was time to get the grown-ups into the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Robert came down the stairs on first call, but even on the third one Linda didn't come down. My knuckles tightened. I shouted up the slide, banging on the plastic. Still no response. A growl curled up in my stomach. I pressed the button next to the chore list. The sound of clattering cymbals and car crashes rang out throughout the house. With each beat, my face reddened further.

"Maybe she's not feeling well?" Robert suggested.

I tried to think of something to say, but my mind was clouded with anger. I just stared at Robert, only interrupted by the sound of a xylophone. I galloped into the living room to see a magenta high heel on the top step. The other high heel stepped on the stair below, making it glow bright blue and sending another xylophone sound throughout the room. One step at a time, the shoes went through every color of the rainbow and every tone of the scale until the woman wearing them had made it to the bottom.

"So ... are we ready?" Linda said, with a smile plastered on her face.

I reached down into my pocket to make sure that the papers were still there, and my imagination wasn't just taking me for a ride. The little

bits of mud-drenched worksheets danced around my fingers as Linda passed me by on her way out of the house. I shook it off and followed her.

It was hard to stay angry looking at the car. My smile reflected back at me through the shiny blue plastic. I slid my fingers across the hood, dodging the heart and butterfly stickers. I walked to the back and car and reattached the grown-up carriage. With a grunt, it was in place, and we were ready to go. I turned toward the front so quick, my ponytail whipped the car.

"Um ... we're not going too fast today, are we?" Linda asked.

"We want to get to school today, don't we?" I said, crossing my

arms. She grumbled as she got into her seat, and my grin was back as soon as it had left. With Charmichael safely buckled in the passenger seat, this girl was ready to fly. I slammed down on the pedal, and a lion's roar emerged from the engine. It was a beast in my control. I grabbed the gear shift and pushed from snail to turtle to rabbit. I was going to take it down to cheetah, but my parents were in the car, and grown-ups always complained about the slightest bit of excitement.

The car shot into motion, and I turned hard onto the street. The feeling of the wind whipping my hair around never failed to cheer me up. I even managed to avoid the fence on the way out, as the car's bumpers

narrowly missed it. It was strange how something so simple could turn a day right around. And then we hit traffic.

This trip wasn't completely lost. I dug around the glove box, pulling out my favorite *Eternity Forever* CD. I glanced in the rearview mirror. Robert and Linda were talking to each other in their own compartment and the window was down. I could listen to my CD as loud as I wanted, and no one would care. Unfortunately, not even the boy band's beats could save my patience. While I was sitting there, ramming on my horn, the pony lane remained empty.

I had had enough and turned onto it, blowing raspberries to those that I had past. A smirk crawled against my face with how clever I had been. But on that day no smile lasted. A siren wailed behind me, and the whole car was drowning in red and blue lights. I begrudgingly stepped on the brakes, and I did one of my least favorite things in the world: I waited.

A boy in a lime green uniform walked toward me with his red ascot blowing in the wind. His assortment of badges clinked and clanked against their sash, all except for one of them. A shiny yellow shield sat over his heart, reading "Summerway Scout Trooper."

His walkie-talkie yelled out random voices that I couldn't decipher, and that drew my attention to the handcuffs jingling on the other side of his belt. He stopped in front of my car, staring at me through dark

sunglasses. He crunched his final bite of chocolate chip cookie before speaking.

"You *did* know that this lane is for ponies and other transport animals, right?"

"Um ... my horn makes dolphin noises. Does that count?"

"Hey ... I know you," the scout said as he took off his sunglasses. "Bally Dunn. You're the reason that half of the station got their traffic stop merit badge. Well, here's one for old time's sake."

"You're writing me a ticket!?"

"If you don't like it, bring it up with town hall. Or you know, stop driving like an animal."

"Make me," I said, sticking out my tongue.

The scout shrugged and grabbed my wrists. I struggled as he pulled me out of the car. I gave a kick to the side, but that just gave him a chance to grab my leg. He turned me around and gave me a wedgie. It hurt — but not as much as the other kids looking on as they drove by. I grumbled as I took the ticket from him.

What was with the scouts always trying to ruin my driving fun? Even back when I was four and I had just gotten my license, the scouts were always doing this. It should have been a happy day. Timmy even installed pedal extenders so that my tiny legs could reach the pedals. But

the very first time that I crashed into that stop sign, the scouts were right on the scene. I didn't even knock it over that time.

I made sure that Timmy knew about this as soon as I picked him up from Lemonade Land. The words "bring it up with town hall" bounced around my mind. That sounded more and more like a good idea. If Talula didn't mess up the traffic, then I wouldn't have gotten in trouble. I played with those thoughts until a small castle peeked its way on the horizon.

Just looking on that small fortress on top of the hill covered me with goosebumps. As we parked, I looked up at the many spires. Each one of them gave me something new to look at, from the windmill swiveling in the wind to a golden telescope. A banner reading "Summerway Skool" hung down from an arch, each letter with a different color.

I almost couldn't wait for the first *real* time that I'd walk under that arch and be welcomed into the forest behind it. Maybe it wouldn't be so quiet. I could hear my shoes clicking against the cobblestone below. I looked around, trying to find some kind of noise or movement, but then I saw something interesting – scribbles carved into a tree, just behind a fence made of giant colored pencils. On closer inspection, the scribbles were a name. But it wasn't the only tree that had a name, all of them did.

"On our first day of school," Robert said, "we each planted a tree. And when you graduate, you get to write your name on it to show how far you've come."

"Where's yours and Linda's?" I asked.

"Further back into the forest," Robert said.

I kept looking at the trees on our way to the door. Some of the names were high on the tree. They must have graduated a long time ago. We stepped out of the forest and saw a great stone staircase in front of us, leading up to a doorway in the shape of a great smile. A long red carpet ran down the stairs, forming the creature's tongue. I walked in wonder.

I was hit with an explosion of color. The floor was colored up to be like a rainbow diving deeper into the school. Squiggles of artistry bounced along the walls, over lockers and around fountains. Any spare space was for cartoon characters smiling back at onlookers or posters taped to the walls. We followed the path to an intersection where a water jet erupted, nailing me in the face.

"Watch yourself," Robert said. "You never know what to expect here. Come on, Ms. Kathy's class is in the yellow wing."

The red and the purple parts of the rainbow broke down their own paths. The other colors led onward. So we had to follow the yellow color. As we passed by a mosaic bench, the silence disappeared – eaten by

barking. It grew gradually, soon followed by paws pecking at stone. I stopped in my tracks as a floppy-eared dog belted around the corner. It jumped up at me determined to lick through my face.

"Epth, okay! I get it! I get it!" I said as I tried to push him off.

"Rover! Rover, where are you buddy?"

A small girl turned the corner. As she spotted us, she stared like a squirrel caught in the headlights. She darted back behind the corner and then peeked back around as if we couldn't see her.

"Hey ... is this dog yours?" I asked. "Rover, that's a nice name."

The girl stepped back around the corner. She looked like she wanted to pop out of her skin and head into hiding as she walked up, a task made ever harder by her shoes blinking against the ground. Rover danced around me and my family and then sped toward the young girl. Rover spun around behind her and started pushing her forward.

"Um ... hi ...," she said.

"Hi Ms. Kathy," Robert said.

She turned to my parents and blinked.

"Oh hi Robert!" she said, flipping to a smile. "Linda, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing great!" Linda said, giving a little chuckle. "Let's get this child-teacher meeting over with."

"Come on, right this way," Ms. Kathy said.

She didn't take her eyes off of Robert and Linda until she turned around. I was tempted to say something to her, but with how she acted earlier I was afraid that she might have exploded. We turned into a big open hallway, following the rainbow road. Wooden bridges rocked back and forth above us. Linda's heels clicking against the concrete and Rover barking were the only noises that broke the air.

"You bring your dog to school?" Timmy asked.

"Well ... what else would I do with him during the day?" Ms. Kathy mumbled. "Rover gets real lonely."

"I wish I had a dog," I said, chipping through the ice. "I mean ... there are a lot of animals I'd like more, but I wouldn't mind having a dog."

Ms. Kathy turned to Robert, as if he was the one who said it.

"Well, if you ever do get a furry friend, be sure to bring 'em in. Rover would love to have the company, wouldn't you boy?"

Rover barked and licked Ms. Kathy in the face. She giggled and continued the walk down the yellow corridor. I gave Timmy a look, trying to make sure that I was understanding what was going on correctly. What was with this girl? Timmy just shrugged and continued his walk.

Finally, we made it to a door. "Miss Kathy" was written in bright pink letters, with a heart over the "i". The doorknob was shaped like a star.

As she opened it, a rush of warm air passed by. Ms. Kathy walked over to her desk – a big, long one in front of the room, with every other desk surrounding it in a semicircle. As Robert and Linda walked to their desks, I noticed a stack of apples on Ms. Kathy's desk.

"Are those yours?" I asked.

"No," Linda shot. "Those are for the *good grown-ups*."

Ms. Kathy turned around so quickly that her hair shot up. She gave Linda the most piercing gaze that I had ever seen. Linda choked up and slowly sat down on her desk. It was at that moment I noticed that Linda's desk was the only one that didn't have any special designs. Every other desk had some kind of painting or stickers plastered all over them. I sat on the one covered in kitty cats. Or at least I tried to. I had to sit on my knees to see above the desk. Timmy climbed up onto another desk and let his legs kick back and forth.

"So, why are we here?" he asked.

"Okay," Ms. Kathy said. She pointed to a sheet of paper hanging up behind her. "Here's Robert's latest finger-painting."

It was a picture of Robert and his family. I smiled. That was Robbie alright, making such a sweet work of art. No wonder it got an A+ and in pink glitter, too. Robert deserved every last sparkle.

"Now Linda, would you like to show everyone your latest finger painting?" Ms. Kathy asked.

My guess was that it was the very same finger painting that sat in the bottom of my pocket in its own muddy stew. Linda opened her desk and rummaged around. I could tell that she wasn't expecting to find it and was just making a show. After a minute or so of that, she closed her desk and she shrugged.

"Hmmm ... That's strange," Ms. Kathy said. "Maybe there's another way that we can do this. Instead of just telling you about Linda's boring old papers and grades, maybe it's best to show you what your parents have been learning."

I quirked my brow. Ms. Kathy was right. Grades were boring, even grades like Linda's or like Robert's. In fact, this whole child-teacher meeting was getting boring. Ms. Kathy opened a cabinet in the corner of the room and pulled out some brightly colored squirt guns. Wait ... those weren't squirt guns. Those were –

"Sally, Timmy. How'd you two like to play a game of paintball?"

Ms. Kathy asked. "We've got the whole school to ourselves. It's huge."

That was more like it. I snatched the green paintball gun out of Ms. Kathy's hands and smiled as the light bounced off of it. I held it up to the ceiling and squeezed the button, creating a small puddle. The pressure was

perfect. I noticed Linda's grin fade as she grabbed her paintball gun. She was sweating. We both knew that it was only a matter of time before she'd be covered in green paint, proving to everyone that was slacking in her studies.

"Alright," Ms. Kathy began. "It's going to be kids versus grown-ups. We'll give them a head start. I think that they're going to need it."

Rover barked, punctuating her. On Ms. Kathy's mark, Linda darted out of the classroom. Robert followed barely behind her. I waited in that room, gripping the paintball gun. Two minutes. Ms. Kathy might as well have given them a month and a car. By the time we got into the hallway, they could have been anywhere in Summerway.

I gnashed my teeth. This was one of the few mysteries that kids never could solve – why did time move so slow when people had to wait? The most popular theory currently in circulation was that time was just a big bully that liked to slow down and get in the way of people who just wanted to have fun or do the opposite and speed up to get people's fun over fast as possible.

"Linda isn't doing good in school, is she?" Timmy asked.

"Well ... Linda is a good grown-up," Ms. Kathy said. "I might have to launch a spitball at her every now and then to ... um get her

attention. But I've never been forced to use the 'kick me' sign, if you know what I mean."

"Not really," Timmy said. "Wouldn't it be easier to talk about this?"

"Time's up! Let's go!" Ms. Kathy said.

Rover bolted out into hallway. I blinked and Ms. Kathy was gone. If Timmy wasn't struggling to catch up to Ms. Kathy and her dog, I would have been left in the dust. Ms. Kathy was locked in the mission. She searched the hallways and peered into every classroom, from the arcade to the gymnasium.

Timmy was on the defensive. He aimed his gun back and forth, getting far deeper into the game than he should. If we were going to catch Linda, we would need to focus. Rover tapped on a locker. He had caught the scent. As soon as she caught view of the locker, Ms. Kathy groaned.

"Really Linda? Your locker? I hope you like being covered in paint."

"Do you know her locker combination?" I asked.

Ms. Kathy pressed the four colored lights that made up the lock, each of them beeping after she did so. Green, green, blue, red, yellow, red. The door swung open. Linda had kicked it, and she came out shooting.

Robert ducked around another wall and tried spraying. Knocked over, Ms. Kathy found herself covered in blue paint.

Timmy turned toward Robert, only to come face-to-face with a blue paintball. It was up to me. As Timmy fell to the floor, I shot Robert in the chest. I turned around. Linda was aiming at me. This was the moment. I pulled the trigger, and she joined the others covered in paint goop. I stood as the sole victor.

Linda tossed her paintball gun against the ground and stared at the floor. It made winning feel so bad – but why? I was right. I locked into Linda's locker. She wasn't hiding anything anymore. I saw what anyone else could have guessed – piles upon piles of bad grades. Linda looked to be on the verge of choking up.

"Come on Linda," Ms. Kathy said. "You had the whole school and you hid in your locker! And that dive ... this is why we teach you freeze tag. You're gooder than that."

"No I'm not," Linda snapped. "I don't even remember the last time that I passed a test. I couldn't win a simple paintball fight, and that's Fun 101. Have you seen my art? I have no imagination."

Was Linda talking to me ... or to herself? She was on the verge of tears as she spoke. The papers in my pocket started getting heavier. I

reached down and pulled out the finger-painting. I brushed off the mud and looked at it.

"You know ... this isn't too bad," I struggled to say.

"Oh please. It's one of the most boring finger-paintings in history."

"Nah, it's just missing something. Can I borrow a crayon?"

Ms. Kathy pulled a crayon out of her shirt pocket. She quirked her brow at me as I took it. I placed the painting down on the floor and scribbled in a monster. A big ferocious lizard monster chased all the people down, and suddenly the picture became beautiful in its own special way.

"See, now that's something that goes on the fridge," I said.

"But the styles are all mismatched and the aesthetics are all wrong. The elements are so mismatched!" Linda went on and on.

"Linda, Linda," Kathy said. "Look at the scene here. By mixing the city and the monster, something entirely new has been made. If you just stuck with one or the other, it would be boring. But when we look past the rules, we can really create."

"Oh please. Even if I wanted to create, I couldn't. I don't have any imagination anymore."

I took a good long stare at the painting. My lip curled. Ms. Kathy had just given Linda a last ditch effort to prove herself. Even when she had everything to lose, Linda could not muster the magic from inside.

"Maybe you just need some help," I suggested.

Timmy and Robert looked at me with shock. Ms. Kathy looked at me with confusion. Linda turned away completely. No one was happy with this idea, but it just made too much sense. Who else would be able to explore the deepest depths of imagination and fun, if not for me? I beamed across the room but was still met with nothing but blank stares.

"Come on, I'll tutor Linda," I said, faster than I could think.

"Maybe Linda could bring a friend or two over, and we could start like a study circle or something."

"Um ... Sally. I think that might be ... a bigger job than you realize," Ms. Kathy said. "I mean, I'm a teacher with years of experience and ..."

Ms. Kathy's words trailed off into nothing. I was too busy looking at Linda and watching every word strike harder at her core. As Linda walked away from the conversation, it became obvious that nothing in existence would excuse me for not trying.

"Come on. Gimme a chance! Anything you got planned?"

"I ... we have an exercise in imagination. Robert and Linda have to tell me about their latest super-secret agent adventure by Friday."

The gears spun in my head.

"By the time my parents come home from school tomorrow, my house will be filled with so many trip wires and alarms, they'd have an easier time breaking into Summerway Bank than their own rooms."

Linda gave me an uncertain look. With most of Tuesday already burned, that left us with three days to come up with something big. I had my work cut out for me, and that set the course for the rest of the day.

I yawned and looked to the cat clock on the wall. It was late, and I had almost burned through my entire green crayon drawing blueprints. I needed to make an early start tomorrow. With my paper in one hand and Charmichael in the other, I made my way to the bedroom. I felt a shiver of relief for each xylophone tone I made on the stairs as it sent the silence away.

I stepped into the soft plush carpet of the circular hall. The disco light in the center of the room flicked to life. Multicolored circles spun around the room in an energetic dance. I came to the door emblazoned with the words "Sally's room" above a mural of safari animals. The door swung open, revealing the glow-in-the-dark plants inside.

I flipped a switch, and high above a lantern turned on, extinguishing the leaves. The warm fuzzy feeling of the carpet tickled my feet like gentle blades of grass. As the door closed, the sound of crickets

became overlaid with monkeys and parrots rustling in the distance. I was at home.

I tripped over my toy campfire and fell onto the blanket tent in the corner. I shook it off. All I had to do was get to bed, and I would be feeling much better in the morning. I walked into my closet and stepped into a cave. Dripping water played in the wall, complementing the paintings on the wall rather nicely.

After my nightgown was on, I grabbed the brush out of its can of paint. Today I was feeling very "giraffe." With a few quick strokes, it joined the tea party that the panda and the horse were having in the Styrofoam stone.

I pulled a string hanging next to the window, and two large fern leaves curtained it. With a nod, I faced the plastic tree in the center of the room. I dug into a hollow and pulled out Charmichael's favorite book, *The Lizard of Oz*. And with him firmly grasping my back, I began my climb up the three, stepping on the little branches and holes that formed a ladder hidden from both the window at the door.

I hopped into my bed, making it swing back and forth. It was my hammock in the heavens. It didn't take Charmichael more than five minutes to fall asleep. I didn't blame him. It was a big day and tomorrow

would be even bigger. I turned to the branch by my side and its assortment of twigs. No one else would be able to guess, but they were secret levers.

Lever one locked the door, keeping me safe in my own private jungle. Lever two turned off the lantern. As the light died down, the plants below returned aglow as did the stars and planets painted onto the ceiling. Lever three, and small yellow lights blinked all around the room, surrounding me in a swarm of fireflies. Feeling a little more fantastical tonight, I pushed the level down all the way again. The yellow changed to pastel pinks and blues, transforming the fireflies into dancing fairies. With one final lever, the hammock returned to a gentle rock. My head found its way onto a flower pillow, I pulled up my pink silky blanket, and I was off to bed in paradise.

CHAPTER FOUR

My eyes blinked to life. Sun streamed through the ferns. I sat up and took a moment or two to yawn. And then I remembered – there was work to be done today! It was my responsibility to get my family ready for the day, and it was a big one especially today. I grabbed the vine hanging and swung around the tree. The wind shook the sleepiness from my head, and I landed in the treehouse in the back corner of the room.

“Are you ready Charmichael! Time me!”

He just stared me. This was clearly not a morning chameleon. Oh well, I’d just run for the fun of it. I broke into a sprint and dove down the slide face-first and ended up with a face full of stuffed animals and pillows. A quick somersault toward the closet, and I was ready to go.

Next stop – outfit. I was really feeling ballerina tutu today. That goes nicely with a butterfly blouse. I bumped into my jewelry box, as I pulled my denim jacket off of the rack. Festival beads poured out. They’d complement my outfit nicely. One green sock and one lucky yellow sock underneath a pair of sneakers, and I was ready to go.

However, Charmichael was trying to get back to sleep, that lazy lay-about. I reached into my toy chest and pulled out the bow and the

arrow with the sucker tip. I focused the arrow toward the bed, gauging the arc of the rocking. The arrow flew and plucked Charmichael in the face, sending into the ceiling before plummeting into my arms. If that didn’t wake him up, I don’t know what would.

“Hey everyone! Time to get up!” I shouted in the hallway. “It’s almost 8 a.m.! Don’t make me use the kitchen alarm.”

I banged down on my drum, jumping on the stairs until the grown-ups started groaning. It was a job well done. I took a ride down the slide and hit the ground running. Waffles plunked down in the toaster. Strudel flew into the microwave. And four bowls of Sugar Explosion cereal found themselves on the living room table, swimming in chocolate milk. It was almost everything that a family needed for a nutritious breakfast. And with ice cream and chocolate syrup in the folded waffles, it was complete.

The waffle tacos joined their friends in the living room, along with honey, maple syrup, and caramel sauce. I made my way outside, and just in time, too. A grown-up on a bicycle tossed a small booklet toward the house. It flew through the air and over the fence. I dashed toward it with the feeling of the wind surging through my body. I caught it before it landed in the mud – a nice spark of pride to start the day with.

Timmy had just found his way to the bottom of the slide as I entered the kitchen. I presented him with his pristine morning comics and,

as if right on cue, the stomping sound of two grown-ups tromping down the stairs echoed through the house. I got to work with the drink maker. Two deluxe hot chocolates for the kids and two cups of coffee for the parents.

I placed the platter of drinks down on the table and sat down next to Timmy. He read away at the morning comics, swinging back and forth on the couch. Robert and Linda watched the television while melting into beanbags, all over the perfect breakfast.

"And we interrupt this broadcast to bring you a special message," the newscaster said. "Foxnoids is my new favorite show! It's the goodest cartoon I've ever seen!"

"Can I see the news section?" Linda asked Timmy, bemused.

Timmy pulled out the back pages of the morning comics and handed them to Linda.

"Save the ads section for me," I told Timmy. "Be careful Linda. Too much news will make you paranoid."

Linda grimaced at me from behind her coffee cup. I felt myself tense up, but I decided to let it go. I would be able to get my revenge against her when I turned the house upside down. At that moment, I had to get the mail. I broke into a happy skip down the driveway. The smiley face was up. In the box there was a single letter in a bright red envelope.

I deflated as soon as I saw it. I reached for it, praying to Santa Claus that it wasn't for me. No such luck. It was addressed to a Ms. Sally Serenity Dunn, from the city of Summerway. I tore it open and a shower of confetti rained down to the ground. It was like putting ice cream sprinkles on rotten eggs. Even the letter itself tried to hide the bad news with a cute pastel blue construction paper, with balloons and ribbons and cartoon animals decorating the sides of it.

Ms. Sally Dunn,

Your home has randomly been selected for Party Duty this Friday, May the 20th. We expect you to open your home and your doors to the town at 6 p.m. exactly on the chosen day. We remind you that failure to do so would be seriously breaking the rules and blah blah blah I could not care less.

I had Party Duty at the worst possible time. There would be no way that I could set up the house to accommodate Linda's secret agent adventures and get the house ready for a party. As if the letter could not be more insulting, the mayor, Talula Heartly, left her signature fresh in purple pen on the bottom of the paper. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that she did this on purpose just to annoy me.

What was I going to tell Linda? I tried to think of something as I returned to the house. I tightly clutched the letter in my hand, hoping that I could make it disappear with the sheer force of will. When that plan proved a failure my only other idea was to avoid telling Linda about this entirely.

"Thursday's Party Duty will be at 97 Starry Street, hosted by Aggie Kletz, and finally Friday's Party Duty will be held at 132 Rocky Road, hosted by Sally Dunn."

With one breath, the newscaster dashed any and all hopes. Everyone stared at me as if they were expecting me to defend myself. I tossed the Party Duty notice and crashed into the ball pit, trying to forget my troubles.

"I wouldn't worry about this too much. I'm probably not gonna do it," I said.

"Sally, I'm not letting you do that. You'll get into HUGE trouble," Timmy said. "And besides, it's your civic duty. You can't just enjoy other kids' parties and then not host your own."

"But I already promised that I was gonna help Linda and I don't have time to do both!"

"Well, if you don't like it, you'll just have to bring it up with the mayor," Linda said, in an "oh well" tone of voice.

"You know what, that's not a bad idea," I said. "It's about a time I gave mayor HURTLY a piece of my mind."

Even though Linda gave me a shocked expression, I knew that for once she was right. I had some choice words for Talula Heartly that had been building, and it was about time to let her know exactly how she had been doing. As soon as my parents left for school, I tossed the Party Duty letter into my purse and left the house in a huff.

I slowed my car as the scent of the forest hit me. Even from a half mile away, I could see the Grand Tree of Summerway. Its canopy went on even farther, blanketing the center of town and the other massive trees that surrounded it. Almost every single one had been hollowed out into a skyscraper. Many had treehouses built around them connected in a network of rope bridges.

April always tried to drag me up there, going on and on about how great the smoothies were. They were made with fruits picked right off of the tree in front of your very eyes, she would say. I just didn't like spending time in places where grown-ups weren't allowed, with the exception of a bungee jumping trip every now and then. I didn't expect things to change. There was no way that those bridges could support a full-grown adult.

I turned past a fountain spewing chocolate sauce. Kids gleefully ran through it and played on the statues. I bit my teeth. Today was a business day. I had to keep repeating that to myself until I made it to the town hall parking lot. With my ponytail fixed from the wind damage, I was ready to tackle Talula. Until Charmichael started whining. His button eye gave me that look. He refused to wait in the car alone.

"Come on, this is something that I've got to do myself," I told him.

Charmichael was silent. I rolled my eyes and unbuckled him. A few steps away from the car, and I tripped over a tree root. It bruised my pride more than my body, but it forced me to look up. The Great Tree of Summerway sprouted out of the town hall, almost as if the tree and the building were one. I walked up the stone steps, face-to-face with a clock. Its squiggly lightning bolt hands ticked and tocked around the circle. Two flags hung on each side of the door, blowing in the Summerway breeze.

As I reached the top, my steps became shorter and more hesitant. I was getting closer to the part that I hated most about coming to town hall. Two wolf statues in mid-growl guarded the building. Their ruby eyes stared at me with a fiery evil look. Getting rid of them would be another thing to talk to Talula about.

I held Charmichael close as I passed the statues and plunged into the main lobby of the building. A wind pushed my hair back. The third

floor held open windows, letting songbirds flutter into the room and land on the Great Tree's branches that held up the room. The sunlight disappeared as wooden gates covered the windows. A kid behind the reception desk turned a crank built into the base of the tree. Rain must have been on its way.

It was difficult to see in the chaos of the room. Some groups of kids walked by with stacks of paper or clipboards, clearly on business, while others jumped and shouted to be heard by the first group. I managed to only just avoid a kid sliding down the staircase railing. Random papers scattered as he regained his composure. He scowled at me as he snatched them from midair.

"But I want to go in *now!* I don't want to wait!" a child whined.

"You know, it's that kind of behavior that earns kids a public wedgie," a scout said.

I would never be able to see Talula with all of this chaos unless I pushed my way through the crowd toward the reception desk. Most kids there were trying to hush the crowd or stop them from hopping the desk, but some were typing away on computers. I tried yelling to get their attention, but everyone was rushing to speak on top of each other, and my shouts fell on deaf ears.

Not even the scouts noticed me jumping and screaming. Perhaps there was one benefit of this chaos – no one would notice if I decided to explore a bit. Even the scout in front of the door marked “elevator” was distracted by a toddler on the verge of a temper tantrum. I tiptoed over to the door and pried it open, never taking my eye off of the scout or any other member of the crowd.

I was in the elevator shaft without a peep. The door closed behind me and the clamor of the crowd fell into nothing. So this was what Linda was always after when she was looking for a moment of peace and quiet. It felt kinda nice to have your thoughts flood back into brain. In the shadowy room I bumped into a tire and knocked myself onto the mattress floor.

The nervousness was getting to me. I needed to get this over with as quickly as possible. I tucked myself into the tire and placed Charmichael securely on my lap. I took a deep breath and grabbed the rope with both hands. This part was all about timing. The button to the third floor sat there on the wall. I reached for it and missed, spinning the tire wildly – and of course I just had to hit the button with my back during this spin.

I heard something drop into the basement, and the elevator swing launched up into the sky. This would have been great if it wasn't spinning like the world's most deranged merry-go-round. I was just about ready to

throw up by the time I had made it to the third floor. I swung forward and exited the elevator shaft, happy to have my feet on solid ground.

I walked through the maze of halls, and a crash of thunder turned my attention to the walls and stained-glass windows. More than just decorations, they told stories of knights rescuing princesses from dragons, of wishing springs, of fairies granting good children wishes.

A dim buzzing filled the air in the calm that followed. Fireflies lit up the room dancing in their jars. They tapped on the glass of their tiny prisons creating a counterpoint to the wind chimes dangling every now and then. The rain tapping on the window glass completed the symphony.

Strings of electric lights ran against the other wall and highlighted the graffiti that covered it. Handprints were pressed against the wall in every color imaginable, and each of them had a name written under it. The ones with the freshest paint were dubbed “Melissa.” Timmy had an “employee of the week” wall like this back at Lemonade Land, but not even he had managed to cover this much wall.

The only untouched walls seemed to be those that held photographs of the previous mayors of Summerway. They were prominent, but as far as I was concerned, the little toddler boy with freckles and glasses was just as important as the young girl missing her two front teeth.

Talula Heartly was the mayor of Summerway and had been so as far back as I could remember.

At the end of the gallery I came to a large set of doors with "mayor's office" written in golden emblems. I pushed the doors open into darkness. Colossal windows stood at the far end of the room, but the now-pouring rain consumed the room in total shadow. A silhouette scribbled something in the murkiness.

A chill ran down my spine. My knees became weak in the looming shadow. I held Charmichael close to my chest. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. Two piercing blue eyes glared out of the dark, locking my legs in place. I dove my teeth down into my lips and closed my eyes. Even as the door slammed behind me, I could not move.

A bolt of lightning crashed outside, revealing Talula's scowl. It cast a spell of ice throughout my entire body. I couldn't do much more than stare at her. Any words died in my throat. Miles of golden blonde hair bobbed as she looked up and faced me.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked in a voice that sounded like sweet honey laced with bee stingers. It only further poisoned my nerve.

"I ... um ... no ... but ... I"

"Then what are you doing in my office?" Talula asked.

"I um ... I um ..." I could not stop stammering. Tears were forming, but I just could not stop stammering.

Talula swung around her desk, never moving from her chair. It was hooked up to a mobile that allowed her to freely move around the room. And she freely moved around the room to get face-to-face with me. Looking down at me. Looking through me.

"You um ... you um ..." Talula said, mocking. "If you haven't noticed, I am a *very* busy child, and I do have a LOT of work to do. And that's without *interruptions* such as these from kids like you who think that they can go wherever they want and do anything that they please."

I reached into my purse and pulled out the Party Duty notice. It was the only thing that crossed my mind. Talula's eyes slid down to it and then they lit up with fires of rage. I took a step back, or I would have if I didn't hit the door. Talula's glossy lips broke into a smile, a snakelike grin. I preferred her staring me down in anger.

"Let me take a wild guess," Talula said. She spoke as if she was ready to break into a gleeful giggle. "You want to get out of Party Duty, am I right? You have such a busy schedule – so much to do, but the days are too short. It's just a hassle really."

I nodded, sneaking in a smile. Talula's vanished. She sank into her chair and stared at me, twirling a purple pen in her hand. The situation got

more tense with each spin. I waited for her to speak through another clasp of thunder.

“So ...,” she continued, “you want to enjoy other kids’ parties and then selfishly not supply your own. You’re a good for nothing *brat*.”

The color flushed from my face as that ... word landed on my ears. I felt sick to my stomach. Anger battled against disbelief in my head. This was the mayor, someone elected to the office, and she called me ... that. How could anyone respect her for using such a filthy word?

“This is my town, and you follow MY rules,” she said. “Now go set up that party, and I’ll forget this whole intrusion.”

Rage seethed throughout my body. I clenched my fists so hard, Charmichael cried out in pain. There was no way that I could hold back anymore.

“It’s not YOUR town. Just because you’re its mayor doesn’t mean you own it!” I shouted. A miraculous argument.

“Oh, so it’s yours then?” Talula asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Maybe not,” I said, tongue out. “But with an attitude like that, I’m surprised you’re still in that chair!”

“Really now? I must be doing a pretty good job, since *any* kid can run against me at any time,” she snickered.

“Everyone’s afraid! The winner of an election can do anything to the loser. That’s crazy!”

“That’s the risk you take,” Talula said, “and that’s a risk I took when I ran for mayor. And because I won, Thomas Tinker got to dress up as a dog to be Summerway’s special little pet. I’d love to do that to you, if you’re so inclined ...”

“Well ... I – ”

“Let me stop you before you make the biggest mistake of your childhood,” Talula said, getting eerily serious. “You’re just a silly little girl living in a fantasy land, Sally.”

“I am not!” I whined.

“Silly Sally, Silly Sally,” Talula said in a sing-song way. “That *does* have a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? I think that’s what I’ll call you from now on. Ooh, I know, let’s have that changed to your *real* name. Wouldn’t that be delicious?”

Tears streamed down my face, but Talula would not stop taunting. I struggled to say something, but was too busy fighting my own mind. She ... couldn’t really do that, could she? The mayor had a lot of powers, but there must have been things that she couldn’t do!

“Stop it!”

"Face it," Talula said, flicking my nose, "*I* keep this town together. *I'm* the one who keeps the power going. *I* stop kids from getting into fights. *I* keep the people happy and healthy. *I* keep the traffic running. And if I wanted, I could turn kids like you into crybabies in five minutes."

"The traffic!?! Is that why we have ponies constantly bumping into cars? The traffic is a mess because of *your* pony dealership!"

Talula's lips curled into a snarl. She uncapped her pen.

"Alright, I gave you a chance, but ... you want to play. Well, Sally, I play rough."

Talula stood up, towering over me. With one hand she grabbed my shoulder and came at me with her pen in the other. I struggled to escape her grasp, even dropping Charmichael as I slapped and punched. Talula trapped me in a headlock as she drew the first marks on my forehead. I pulled and I pushed, but I could not make her let me go.

"Hold still," Talula snapped. "It'll be easier for both of us."

I had to comply to stop her from choking me out. I felt the pen stabbing my forehead for a grueling amount of time. As soon as I came to a stop, Talula started whistling a merry tune. Then I was finally let go.

I rushed to the window. A devastated Sally looked back at me. The words "Silly Sally" were written on her forehead in sparkly purple ink. Talula grinned behind her, the purple pen still twirling in her fingers. Her

other hand held a cellphone. The moment that I turned to face her, I drowned in a camera flash.

"The *perfect* reaction," Talula gloated. "This is one for the town archives. Hmm, maybe I can even put this on your ID. Kids will find this a delight."

I tried to ignore it. All of it. Getting rid of the words was a much more important task. And not letting her see me cry. I would prove Talula wrong. I would prove that she couldn't get to me. I spat on my hand and rubbed. The pen marks didn't even smudge.

"Now how good would the mayor's pen be if its marks could be removed just like that?"

"Is it gonna be like this forever?" I asked, my lips quivering.

"Gosh, I don't know," Talula said. She batted her eyelashes and shrugged her shoulders.

"Y-you can't do this to me!"

"So only you can do whatever you want? Don't think I don't know about your driving habits, Sally Dunn. You break into my office, trying to get out of your CIVIC DUTY without so much as a sorry for disturbing me. And then you come out and insult me. It's cute, really it is, but I don't have time for cute."

Each word stabbed at my heart, but nothing in even my worst nightmares could prepare me for what would happen next. Talula turned to the ground by her feet and her eyes locked on Charmichael. She picked him up, inspecting him. I could not breathe. Pulsing anxiety was the only thing that stopped me from passing out. Talula swung around the room again.

"Now this is an interesting creature. Is he yours?" Talula asked, as she puppeted Charmichael across her desk.

"Yes! His name is Charmichael! Now give him back!" I desperately cried.

I took a small step forward. She turned toward me with a piercing stare. Her polished nails tapped over Charmichael's arms. I stepped back. I could not risk anything bad happening to him.

"You really care about this stupid thing, don't you?" Talula asked. "Unfortunately, I don't think you're quite responsible enough to take care of it."

"GIVE HIM BACK!" I stamped my foot.

"Oh I wish I could," Talula said, holding Charmichael to her breast, "but kids that throw temper tantrums in public clearly aren't ready to have pets ... or stuffed animals for that matter. Tell you what through,

I'll give it back to you on one condition – be the bigger kid and apologize to me. Right now."

"Apologize? For what?"

"Hmmm ... it seems to have slipped my mind," Talula said coyly.

She grabbed Charmichael's arm and waved it at me. She taunted and teased him, telling him to say "bye-bye" I begged and pleaded for her to stop, falling to my knees. Talula ignored my tears and made Charmichael dance across her desk. I decided that I'd do anything just to get her to stop.

"I ... I'm sorry," I said. Anything to save poor, innocent Charmichael.

"For what?" Talula asked.

She spoke with a devilishly innocent tone. I blinked. She sounded like she really had no idea what I was talking about. She returned to humming her happy tune, a song that dug for my tears.

"I'm sorry for ... insulting you?" I guessed.

Talula looked like she was about to laugh, but that expression soon gave way to a scowl. I gave the wrong answer. But for the life of me I could not gather what she was after. Or for the life of Charmichael. She lifted him up and that evil Talula grin returned.

"It looks like you'll be staying with me for a good long time. Normally I'd be keeping you for one week, but Sally Dunn is a special kind of kid," Talula cooed. "I think she needs a whole month to learn some responsibility. You'll make a good souvenir from the day that I turned her into a helpless little crybaby."

She opened her desk and threw Charmichael inside. The slamming door echoed through the room, followed by the clicking of a key.

"Charmichael!" I cried. "I'm gonna get you back! I'll do everything in my power! Don't be afraid!"

I ran at Talula, but she grabbed my ponytail. She pulled. I swung, tapping her and scraping at her. She didn't even flinch. Everything built up and spurt out. Tears fell. I just didn't care anymore. Talula let me go and left me to rocking back and forth on my knees.

"Told you. Not five minutes," she said. Her expression was wooden and cold. "You'll get him back. One month."

"I told you! I'm sorry!"

"I'm sure. Get out of my office. NOW!"

CHAPTER FIVE

My daze took me back to the lobby. It only broke when the hustle and bustle of the crowd came to my attention. My thoughts wandered away from Charmichael and to the letters scarred into my forehead. I pulled my hair down, covering them the best that I could, but with how the light bounced off of the glitter I'd only be able to do this for so long.

With even the mousiest of sounds I knew that every kid in the room would all start staring at me and that would be it. My life would be over. Unfortunately, my ingenious plan of covering my face while walking had one fatal flaw – I couldn't watch where I was going. I ended up bumping into another kid, knocking the both of us over.

"Hey! Crazy girl! You almost trampled me!" the kid shouted.

"So-sorry," I said.

I saw it in his eyes as I pulled myself to my feet – the reminder of what I had just done. My face was exposed for all to see, and I had let this happen. The boy stared on for a few seconds. I saw him silently sounding the words out. I would have bolted right then and there if Charmichael wasn't weighing down so heavily on my mind. I found myself giving him a blank stare until he pieced the word together.

"Silly Sally?" he said with a snicker. "Is that your name?"

"N-no!"

"Then why is it written on your head?"

I caught the words on my throat. What was I doing? What would he think if I told him? *Oh, so the MAYOR wrote that there. Then it's GOTTA be true right? Why would our awesomest mayor ever lie?* He would go on and on, and any defense that I could come up with would crumble.

I ended up not saying anything at all. In seconds, that proved to be the worse option. Kids pointed and laughed. If it wasn't because of the words written on my head, then it was because of the tears. Even one of the stone-faced scouts couldn't stifle a chuckle.

"Oh! Does the crybaby want her baba?" a girl asked.

"No!" I shouted.

"Hey, it's okay. I used to cry all the time," a little boy said, trying to pat me on the head.

"Don't touch me!" I snapped back.

He threw his hand back as if I was an angry growling dog. And with that, a new rumor was born. Kids whispered, wondering whether or not I would start biting them. The laughing was driving me insane. I

needed to get out of there. I pushed through the crowd, slamming through the door and out into the pouring rain.

I slowed down a bit at the bottom of the stairs. I felt the raindrops bopping on my head. It was raining! And rain was made out of water! I bounded toward the car and faced to the sky. The water drizzled through the branches of the Great Tree and dribbled onto my forehead. I rubbed it in, staring at the rearview mirror.

The words "Silly Sally" stared back, unaltered. They taunted me, making sure that I could never forget. I was a silly little girl in a fantasy world. They burned it into my very soul. A silly little girl who would never see her beloved Charmichael again. My head crashed down on the steering wheel, and it was only then I knew how utterly alone I was.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I remember the school bus pulling up to the curb. Either my parents got out of school early or I had gotten home late. I couldn't let them see me. They'd think it, too. I splashed through puddles toward the door, holding my head down in shame.

I prayed that I could get to the house before my parents saw me, or that I could get hit by lightning and just be done with it – or something. I threw open the door and scurried up the steps to escape my parents.

"Sally, what's going on?" Robert asked, stopping me in my tracks.

"It's – it's nothing I –" I began, cut off by a hiccup.

"You've been crying," Linda said.

"It's just the rain," I lied.

"If anything happened, we can help you," Linda said.

A choked chuckle escaped my throat. Typical grown-ups. They always thought that they could help in any situation, but this was kid stuff. Grown-ups couldn't possibly understand. I was in charge and I needed to handle this. I turned around, showing my face clearly. Robert's eyes narrowed. Linda stifled a gasp. And the feeling of being right bathed me with a warm bubbling sensation that grew into a stewy boil.

"Who did this to you?" Robert demanded.

"The mayor," I spat, wiping away a tear.

I dropped to the stairs and was enveloped by the blue light. Robert ran up and wrapped me in a warm embrace. The tears shed open and free. I let loose every single drop of emotion within me until there was nothing left, rocking back and forth in a cold shell. Robert held me the whole time.

I told them everything. Mostly everything. I told them how Talula wrote the words on my forehead. I told them how she took a picture and utterly humiliated me. And then I told them about the ink. I kept rubbing at my head, but there was no way to get it off.

"I just want ... I just want to ..." I cried, but I stopped. I didn't have any way to finish that sentence. I didn't know what I wanted anymore.

"Let me see your forehead," Linda said.

She had just come back from the kitchen with a cloth and a small bottle. Despite all of my better judgment, I removed my hand from forehead. If Linda wanted to laugh at me, I would let her laugh. I didn't care anymore. The seconds ticked away and there was no laughter. I perked my eyes up, seeing her pouring the bottle into the cloth.

"This might burn a little, but it'll be over quickly," she said.

She dabbed the cloth on my forehead. It had a putrid odor, but that wasn't the worst part. The wet rag felt like it lit my head on fire. If the pain wasn't so distracting, I would have grounded Linda for the rest of her life. When the cloth was removed, I was on the attack. Before I could do anything, Linda opened her compact mirror and revealed my scowling face – with my forehead clean as the day that I was born.

"But ... how!?"

"Let's just say that chemistry set was a wise choice for a birthday present," Linda said, shooting a smile.

Grown-ups and their toys. I tried to return a laugh, but I just didn't have anything left in me. I held Robert tightly for a while, hoping to forget

everything else that had happened that day. I liked this moment. I wanted this moment to last forever, but it couldn't stay.

"I think that maybe Charmichael wants to hear about your day," Linda said, running her fingers through my hair. My eyes shot open.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I bellowed.

"Sorry ... for what?" Linda asked.

Linda looked at me for a second, and in that second I thought that my lie had worked. Then that knowing look in her eye grew. She could see through me like all, like she had psychic powers.

"The mayor ... Talula. She took him, didn't she?"

"I ... dropped him," I said, sobs causing my voice to skip.

"It's okay Sally, you can tell me. I won't be upset," Linda said.

"Yeah," I said, my eyes turning to the wall. I sniffled. "Talula took him after I said I didn't want to do Party Duty. She said that I wasn't responsible enough and took for him a whole month! She's probably telling him so many lies about me! She's gonna make Charmichael hate me!"

"Charmichael isn't going to hate you, sweetie," Linda said. "When I made him, I gave him a special kind of magic deep inside that made him love you forever, a love that will never fade. If Charmichael's going to hate

anyone, he's going to hate Talula for taking him away from his best friend in the whole world."

I stopped crying. It made sense. A lot of sense, actually.

Charmichael came from a special place, one of love. And I loved Charmichael every hour of every day. There was no way that that love could fade. Not after a month. Not even after a year. Not even after a million years.

"Come on, why don't we help you set up your party for Friday,"

Linda said.

"T-thank you," I hiccupped.

I was hanging up streamers in the living room later that day when there was a message on the news. That perky little voice piercing its way into my heart drew my eyes to the television. There she was, Talula Hurtly, sitting at the local news' station, ready to be interviewed, wearing that same *pwecious* innocent grin on her face.

Charmichael was sitting on her lap. The streamer fell to the ground as I stifled my gasp. Her fingernails sparkled as she pet him. I could imagine her digging those claws in at a moment's turn. Even through the television screen, I could see that Charmichael was not enjoying this.

Another little girl popped onto camera, causing me to fall over.

“Hey Summerway! I’m here with –” the girl said, before stopping. Her beret had become askew. She glared at it and adjusted it until it was back in place on the center of her curly brown hair. She proudly beamed at the camera, showing off her two missing front teeth.

“I’m here with the mayor of Summerway, Talula Heartly!” the reporter said with a wide smile. She dove into an expression of awe. “She’s got some big news for us! Like super-duper awesome news! Don’t touch that remote! I see you in the corner over there – drop it!”

The girl scuttled to the seat across from Talula. Then she gave a thumbs up either to the camera or someone behind the camera. I really couldn’t tell. I think that they meant to cut that part out.

“Thank you Ms. Harper,” Talula said with a sickeningly sweet smile.

“Ah please, call me Harper! So what’s the news you got for us?”

“Well it seems that a certain someone said that she did not want to throw a party, even though she was given a Party Duty notice *days* ago,” Talula said, waving her hand over her forehead in a melodramatic fashion.

“B-but Party Duty is serious business. SERIOUS BUSINESS,” Harper said, her eyes lighting up.

“It was just as much of a surprise to me as it was to you. I thought that kids loved to throw parties, but apparently not everyone thinks so.

That sad girl is the eight-year-old Sally Dunn. She was supposed to be throwing Friday’s party at 132 Rocky Road, but ... I don’t want to disappoint the townskids.”

“Is there any chance that she’ll change her mind?” Harper asked.

“I hope so,” Talula said. “Could you imagine such a world without Party Duty? Kids would have no place to blow off steam and just let loose. Be kids, you know. Or perhaps worse, kids would just be partying everywhere and everything would be chaos.”

“That sounds awful!”

“Indeed,” Talula said. She took a sip from a mug. “We have words for kids like her, but ... I don’t think it’s best to use it on public television. There might be grown-ups watching, and as soon as I say it they’ll be calling you all day.”

A cat’s meow brought me out of my trance. My cellphone was going off in my pocket. I wasn’t the only one watching the news that evening. Text messages filled my inbox, most of them from Timmy. He was going to be so mad at me, with how serious he was of me making a party. I’d be in so much trouble. I scrolled through the messages until one came in from April – *call me*. She picked up before the first ring was even over.

"Is a certain someone not throwing a party? Why wasn't I informed? Alas, I thought we were BFF's, but I suppose I was misguided..." April said.

"No! Don't listen to Talula! I am throwing a party! I'm setting up the house and everything!"

"I'm only joking. I thought that that tyrant may have been misinterpreting your words," April said. "Could you imagine? A kid refusing Party Duty?"

"Um ... yeah," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "You thought that, but what's the rest of the town going to think?"

"I do have an idea," April said. "Why don't I get my camera and come over for a photoshoot, and we'll advertise your party. By this time tomorrow, your face will be everywhere – flyers, television commercials, you name it! Everyone shall know that not only are you throwing a party, but it shall be the greatest in the history of Summerway. It'll certainly be an embarrassment to that rotten Talula."

April was always one to reach for the sky. My cellphone vibrated in my hand – another message from Timmy. He'd be home early, in about half an hour. What would I tell him? He'd yell at me for doing something so stupid and risk getting arrested by the scouts.

"Um ... how about we do this at your house?" I said.

"Ugh, why my house? You know that I loathe being there," April said. "Besides, we need quiet to do a photoshoot."

"But I never get to go to your house."

"But it sucks!" April whined.

"Pretty please with sugar on top?"

"Alright fine."

I scurried outside. Anything to get out of the house before Timmy got home. I fiddled around in my purse, looking for the keys. Robert walked up, smiling. That was a relief. He couldn't have seen the newscast.

"Sally, I was hanging up some balloons in the backyard and I saw the buttercups in full bloom. Do you want to check them out?"

I bit my lips. That did sound like something I needed to see. I sighed, thinking about Timmy's texts. Thirty minutes *was* a long time. Long enough to do this. I nodded and ran to the garden. The wind pushed the little flowers to and fro, and I felt a dash of pride welling up. It felt special to see something that you planted and cared for grow into something beautiful. Having someone you care about help you do it felt all the better.

Then I noticed the "party time" banner hanging across the house.

"It's too bad they're gonna get trampled this Friday."

"Hmmm, I've got an idea," Robert said.

He plucked a lone buttercup and planted it in my hair. I walked over to the car and gazed into the mirror. It fit. There was something magical about seeing Robert standing behind me, smiling. It battled the fear and the sadness from earlier.

"Looks cute, huh?"

"Maybe I should keep it like this," I said.

"I'll put the rest in a vase and you can keep them in your room."

I gave him a hug, which was only broken my cellphone ringing. It was another Timmy test. I needed to get out of there. If he got back before I did, he would be so worried about me that he'd never let me leave the house ever again.

"Alright, I'm going to April's. Call if you need me," I said, almost accidentally.

CHAPTER SIX

April lived by the woods in uptown Summerway. The crickets had come out by the time I got there, and the sun had turned the clouds into every shade of cotton candy. I thought that I was getting lost with all of the strange twists and turns. It had been quite a while since I had been down that way. Before long, though, I saw April standing in front of the silver gate of her property. She was about to take a photograph of herself with her cellphone.

The world of high fashion always confused me, but glow stick earrings were the best clothing invention ever conceived. If I ever built up the courage to get my ears pierced, I'd never leave the house without them. The light bounced off of April's glittery top and her yellow rubber knee boots. All the while, butterfly wings strapped to her back bobbed in the breeze.

"Nice outfit," I said, hopping out of the car.

"Merci. It's necessary to wear something more casual once in a while."

I noticed the camera hanging from her neck.

"I thought that we were going to photographs at your house, not in the middle of the woods," I said, with a laugh.

"I told you, quiet is the best environment for taking photographs."

"Well this *environment* is going to get us eaten by mosquitos," I snickered.

I stuck out my tongue. April tells the best jokes sometimes. I didn't know much about photography, but I did know that lighting was important, and I didn't think that blinking fireflies would be enough. April rolled her eyes and walked to the passenger-side seat.

"Come on April, it's a nice evening. Let's walk back to your house," I said.

"My driveway goes on for quarter of a mile," she said. "And these boots have heels."

"You walked down here. Getting back shouldn't be too hard, right? Come on – tag! You're it!"

April swiped back at me but missed. I blew a raspberry and took a run down the cobblestone driveway, taking a break to swing around each lamp along the way. I needed to take in the atmosphere. Silvery blue fish jumped out of a nearby pond, and I wondered how April could possibly hate this place.

The Morrison lands went on for acres. It used to be a farm hundreds of years ago, according to April. The soil was still good enough to grow magnificent trees, like the blooming magnolias that dotted the driveway or the willows that dipped into the waters. I got a good look every few minutes when April stopped to complain about her feet hurting.

We came up to a two-story building at the end of the driveway. I knocked on the door until April caught up.

"Sally, that's the garage," April said, rubbing her boots. "The house is beyond the bridge."

It was a long time since I'd been there. I followed April's finger around the garage. A wooden bridge lead to a huge willow tree on an island in the distance. It wasn't as big as the Great Tree of Summerway, but it could have been a close second. The lights inside made it seem like the tree was containing a bonfire. I stepped onto the bridge.

"Hey! Wait up! Ouch!"

"If your feet hurt that bad, why didn't you drive down the road?" I asked.

"Well, let's see if I can recall," April said, placing her foot down on the bridge. "Allison took one of the ponies to a show. Thomas took the other one to a race. Petty, if you ask me. Gemma took the other-other one

to I don't know. Peter took a car to the theater. Jeffrey took another car to the mall. Kaylie disposed of my bicycle at the bottom of the lake – ”

“How many brothers and sister do you have?” I joked.

“Twelve, the last time I counted,” April said, passing by me. “And I believe that it's still the same number. Mom did say that the stork blacklisted our house.”

I walked along the bridge in quiet thought, unsure of how serious April was. April was hesitant to climb the rope ladder at the end of the bridge, so I easily raced past her. I grabbed the doorknob and felt a squish in my hand. My palm was now covered in red paint. April gave a small chuckle as she popped onto the balcony.

“Xavier thought today of all days it would be pertinent to paint the door. As if it was unlike every other day,” she huffed.

I wiped the paint off onto my shirt.

“No wait – ”

I froze my hand a little too late. A look of annoyance crossed April's face.

“Ugh ... Xavier has ruined countless shirts that way,” she said. “We're going to have to change your shirt. Red is tough a paint to get out of clothes. Practically impossible I'm afraid.”

April pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and opened the door. I smiled to thank her, but I was nearly pummeled into with my first steps inside. One of April's sisters just barely dodged me on her trek to the basement. Then I noticed the noise. It was almost like a marching band lived here. Considering how many siblings April had, that may have been the truth. Crashing plates played on top of the sounds of ripping fabric.

“Does someone here have Party Duty?” I asked, bewildered.

“I do wish!” April said as she walked down the stairs. “If that were the case, we'd manage to get some peace and quiet around here.”

The stairs spiraled down around a large lava lamp into a cavernous room. April's sister got one of her brothers to join along into a race. They spun around the stairs, doing a fairly good job of dodging the beanbag chairs and stuffed animals. They didn't do as good a job of dodging April, pile-driving her onto the floor.

“Hey sis, how's it going?” the boy asked.

“Can you please do this somewhere else?” April demanded.

“No can do,” the girl said, jogging in place. “It's too dark outside, and coach says that I've got to spend each and every second keeping in tip-top condition.”

“Wait, I know you,” I said. “You're Heather Morrison! One of Molly's favorite pillow fighters.”

"Want an autograph?" she said with a smile.

"That would be most joyous, but my bestie and I have much to do," April said, dragging me along and not even sparing her siblings a passing glance.

April stretched her friendship bracelet in her hand as she walked. Questions over what had just happened flooded my mind, but they melted as we entered her room. A half-domed ceiling skylight let me look straight up through to the crystal pond and watch the koi fish swim by it.

April walked by her oyster shell framed bed and sat on the recline in the back end of the room. She fiddled with her camera under the light of a jellyfish lamp, hidden from most of the world by its tentacles.

"What was that about ... in the hallway?" I asked, standing against the back shelf.

"Eh, once Heather starts prattling on about herself and all of her 50-odd medals, she never falls silent. It's almost as dreadful as Xavier. Yes, I know that your painting got accepted into a museum, now please Arretz!"

"You know I can't speak Prench, right?"

April didn't answer. She was too lost in her own thoughts. I noticed the *Seven Magazine* Julie Neptune cover from earlier taped up next to her vanity, buried with many other photos. They were celebrities,

inventors, athletes. I remembered April bragging about taking them all, and all of the glorious kids she got to talk to.

"Hey sissy?" I heard a voice from the hall. "Where's mommy and daddy?"

"At Vincent's concert!" April snapped.

"Are you ... okay?" I asked.

"I am extravagant today. Thank you for asking."

"You don't ... seem okay."

"I'm fine. Either make a scene or don't be seen," April mumbled, "and Vincent tends to throw a temper tantrum if he doesn't get his way."

"I wasn't asking about that. Don't you have anything nice to say about your brothers and sisters?"

"They have plenty of nice things to say about them."

I shot her a serious look, but she turned back down to her camera. I knew that she didn't really mean what she said. She must have been upset and distracted. Maybe coming here really wasn't for the best. My mind turned to Timmy with his restaurant and all of his accomplishments. I looked up to him a lot, but it wasn't hard for me to imagine that feeling twisted like it had been in April's mind.

"So are we ready to take a photo?" I asked.

April broke from her trance and immediately fell into another one. She turned to me with that glazy view that only April was able to get. She walked around, examining angles and ideas. Even if I tried to talk to her, she wouldn't answer me. She was too far gone in this mode to that, moving through every possible picture in her mind. At long last, April blinked.

"That red handprint on your shirt is nothing but an eyesore. You need a new outfit. Now," she said.

"Huh? Why? I don't mind it."

"Yeah ... but ..." April paused for a moment. "Hmmm, come with me."

April walked to the bookshelf. She tapped and pushed the little trinkets until she came across a small book. She pulled at and a latch unclicked. I was taken in by the presence of April's closet. It was as if April had taken every stitch of clothing in the city and placed it in this one spot.

"Now we have a selection," April said.

"Yeah ... a lot of them," I said. "By the time we go through all of these, I'll be too old for Party Duty."

"We won't go through every single one," April said. "We're looking for one. *The* one. One single solitary ensemble that says 'party girl.' That says 'fun.' That says 'responsible citizen.' Hmmm."

She threw a poncho plastered with owls over me. That look in April's eye told me that this wasn't the answer. Neither was the flower blossom dress. Or the checker-print skirt and chess piece top. This went on for at least an hour before April finally gave up. The largest problem, according to April, was that these were all old fashions, and this outfit had to be "new" and "fresh" and "exciting" and "daring" and a million other little words.

"Too bad one of your siblings isn't a fashion designer," I joked.

April stared at me for a solid minute, finishing off with a groan.

"Sarah's room is on the third floor. Let's go."

The two of us were off, jetting through the house. As we paced through the halls, my curiosity set itself upon the doors. What lay behind each of them, and who lived there? One door was covered with wild slashes of color – probably Xavier's room. I tried to focus in on everything, but April kept pulling me along. It may have been my imagination, but she almost broke into a jog as we passed by a trophy case. I couldn't help but stare at it as we moved on.

"Hey Sally, come on, snap out of it," April said.

April was already on a rock climbing wall, heading for the third story. As she turned around, I gave another side glance at the trophy case. April had never mentioned this thing before, and, with how much April

talked about her accomplishments, it made me guess that not a single one of them were hers.

We went through a door marked "Sarah's room" and stepped into a tornado disaster. Strips of fabric lay rolled across the floor and sprawled from pieces of furniture. The walls were covered with crude drawings of clothing. Curtains had several chunks missing from there. A little girl, five or six, was cutting a piece of cloth in the back corner of the room.

She wore a blue princess dress with a dark blue overcoat, topped with a bowler hat and a candy necklace. Each of her fingernails was a different color. With ideas like that, it was clear that she was the fashion designer of the family. The scissors cut a shape through the cloth, revealing the star-framed sunglasses behind them.

"Oh April!" Sarah said. She stood up and eagerly approached her sister. She held up her latest creation at arm's length. Her voice boomed with pride. "You ready to try out my clothes? Everyone loves 'em!"

"No," April said. "I *vastly* prefer the Lindsey Belle fashion line."

"You know she's like two years old, right?" Sarah said, crossing her arms.

"Indeed. It makes her ideas so unique. She can't be behind the times if she didn't exist before the times. Never mind. That's not why I'm here. I don't need clothes, but I know someone who does."

April stepped aside and let Sarah see me. Her eyebrows shot up. I was hard to tell what that expression meant, but she stared long enough for me to feel uncomfortable. I gave a nervous wave, but it didn't ease the tension.

"I know who you are," Sarah said. "Silly Sally, right?"

Those words shot at me like spit wads. The news had spread that quickly? I tried to say something, but the words couldn't escape my throat. April turned toward me, obviously unsure what to say. Sarah laughed. A chill went down my spine, but then something hit me. It wasn't an evil laugh. It wasn't a laugh that wanted to hurt me. It was a friendly laugh, one to get me off edge.

"I saw what happened to you at town hall today," Sarah said. Then she paused to blow a pink bubble. "Talula, right?"

I nodded and looked down.

"Just typical. Someone needs to take her down a peg. I can't see how a kid like that ever got to be mayor. Any enemy of Talula's is a friend of mine."

"Um ... thanks," I said, rubbing my arm. "April here was going to take some photos for me to use ... for my party."

"In *those* clothes?" Sarah giggled.

"Well ... that's why we're here."

"Alright, I get you. Hmm ... hey, I know. That shirt is getting my creative juices flowing. Maybe we can get Xavier to put some more handprints on it and make it a style of its own. The latest Sarah Morrison invention!"

April bit her lip. She looked to me pleadingly and held her arms close to her body. After overshadowing April in everything, her siblings were about to wrestle away her best friend. If I were to accept Sarah's help, April would clearly be devastated. I couldn't just say no, though. If April was right, I needed to wear better clothes for this plan to work. Then my brain lit up with an idea.

"Hmm ... I dunno," I said. "I *never* try out new fashions without consulting April first. She'll make the final judgment on this one."

"Fashion ... consultant?" April asked.

"Yeah, totally," I said. I wrapped my arm around her and gave a gentle squeeze. "April always knows what's in brogue –"

"It's vogue, Sally," April said.

"See, how much more she knows than me? The only reason I'm not dressed up like her right now is because I could never do that look justice. You don't brush a hair on my head without April's say-so."

April bit her lip again. A small smile crept onto the corner of her lip, and her eyes glazed over. She was looking at me, but she wasn't

really looking at me. I kept my smile, giving a hearty chuckle. Sarah joined me in the laughter, but neither of us were really laughing. April joined us, finally back down from Mars.

"Sarah, go get Xavier posthaste! We've got a lot of work to do."

Time turned into a blur when Sarah returned with Xavier. I was pushed back into a chair, and the three of them got to work. Sarah tangled with my hair, going through ponytails and pigtails and onto more exotic styles. With every one, April gave a disapproving glance, and Sarah was back to the grind. At long last, April smiled. Sarah didn't appear very keen to this style. She held up a mirror. I had three pigtails, all going down over the left side of my head. They bobbed up and down as I moved.

"The height of glamor!" April beamed.

"Are you ... sure?" Sarah asked.

I couldn't argue that I looked ridiculous. I took a deep breath, debating whether or not to smile. I already looked like the town fool and this wouldn't help. In April's own words, this face would be plastered all over the town. But I couldn't crush April's spirit or fracture her smile.

"This is why April is my fashion consultant," I said, with a thumbs up.

With the outfit on, I was against the wall. Xavier and Sarah stood watch with April did her work. I had to look "perfect," which meant that I

had to “stand back” and “stay still” and make sure to “smile” while “placing my left hand on my hip.” I was almost entirely through the entire Hokey Pokey by the time it was over, with April continually taking pictures on the way through.

When the photos were taken, I found myself alone. Sarah and Xavier had followed April in order to see them fresh and developed. I brushed my hair back into its natural state and did up my ponytail once more, then I returned the buttercup to its newfound home. What would people think by this time tomorrow? I gave a small chuckle, just thinking about how crazy it would get. I was then enveloped in a camera flash.

“Perfect,” April said.

April walked into the room, shaking up a polaroid photo – the one she had just taken. I had this innocent and natural smile in it. Robert was right about the buttercup. It was the best photo that anyone had ever taken of me.

“Dear, you looked absolutely ridiculous with the three pigtailed. I have no idea just *what* Sarah was thinking.”

“W-what’s going on?” I asked.

“You’re a terrible liar, Sally Dunn,” April said, her smile never wavering. “We’ve known each other for ... how long? ‘Fashion

consultant,’ why that’s a clever joke. We both know that Sally, do you think I dyed my hair blue because *I* think that it looked good?”

“Then why did you go on with all of this?”

“I ... was enjoying it, perhaps a little too much,” April said. “It’s not too often that someone picks me of all kids above ... you know. Thank you. Truly.”

“Just don’t try to do something like that again,” I said, with a wink. “I still want your help with this though.”

April nodded.

“Hey, April, there’s a couple of kids in a pickup truck full of party supplies. They told me that they were here for Sally.”

I whitened up. Timmy must have called up Molly for a ride. Why did I tell Robert where I went? Talking to Timmy right now was the last thing in the world that I wanted to do. I stood there shaking until a hand rested on my shoulder.

“Go on. Talk to him. He’ll understand you,” April said.

“Alright ... how do we get out of here?” I asked.

“Waterslide is the third door to the right. Should take us right out into the pond.”

The twisting tubes gave way to open air, and I splashed into the water. I saw fragments of the pickup truck as the fireflies blinked to life.

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Molly and Timmy had turned to us as soon as the splash shot through the air. Timmy yelled something to me, but I couldn't hear it over April's splash. I doggy-paddled to shore. From the ground, Timmy's face was obscured by darkness.

"Um ... wanna swim? The water's great," I said, shivering.

"I saw the news today," Timmy said. "I heard ... what the mayor said about you."

Crickets filled the silence. Timmy's knuckles clenched. The corner of his mouth broke into a grimace. This is what I had feared. I needed to say something, if only to prevent someone from getting hurt or Timmy getting in trouble.

"It's not true! I am throwing a party!" I said, getting to my feet. I saw tears coating Timmy's cheeks.

"What? That's not what I'm mad about. I heard what she called you. I saw her with Charmichael."

Timmy grabbed me out of the blue. After the surprise wore off, I realized that it was a hug. Timmy held me tightly. Unsure of what else to do, I returned the favor. Another tear ran down my shoulder.

"I was worried about you," he said. "I mean, I'm still worried about you."

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"It's okay," I said. "We're going to throw the bestest party that Summerway has ever seen and make Talula look like the liar that she is."

I don't think that my reassurance worked. Any attempts to comfort Timmy tend to be futile. I knew that he wouldn't rest easy until this whole ordeal was over with. Molly honked the truck's horn. We had a party to finish setting up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The clock read 7:30 as we rolled up to my house. The moon was already out, and we still had much work to do. Wednesday was almost over, and we had to have everything ready and perfect for Friday. Balloons hovered above the mailbox, and we had banners hanging above every arch, but I still felt like it wasn't enough. I walked inside to find Robert and Linda kissing.

"Ugh gross you guys," I said. "Do you have to do that in the living room?"

"I think that it's romantic," Molly chuckled.

"Whatever," I said. "The house looks pretty great, by the way."

Streamers were hanging from the monkey bars, but still it wasn't enough. I put my hand on my hip, thinking. Something wasn't sitting right with me. The party looked decent, but at the same time, it had this look of just being another bland, typical party. I had a "I threw this party because I had to" sort of look. It needed some extra pizzazz.

I brewed up some hot chocolate, the perfect tool for a long night of work.

"I just need to figure out something to up this party's awesomeness, you know," I said, taking a sip of the mug.

"Well, you must have it figured out soon," April said, returning her cellphone to her purse. "I called in a favor, and now you have a spot on the news tomorrow afternoon. The reporter decided that it was only fair to get your side of the story as well."

"That's amazing!" I said, rounding April in a hug. "Between the interview and your photo, everyone is gonna know about my party! But ... what's gonna make them come?"

"I reckon that I could get a bounce house," Molly said.

"Wait ... really!?"

She gave me a smile, complete with her missing front teeth. We were going to push the boundaries like no kid had done before. Robert walked into the kitchen to rummage around in the fridge. He pulled out a banana cream pie, and I had a plan to take it all the way.

"We'll have a clown!" I said. "That shows some class."

"Sally, you know that the circus doesn't let people borrow their clowns, right?" Robert said.

"Didn't you go as a clown for Halloween last year?" I shot back.

"Um ... yeah, but I don't think that I'd be a very good actual clown."

April flicked the pie pan up into Robert's face. Molly let out a gasp as banana cream dribbled downward to the floor. Robert removed the pie pan, with the most perfect expression. Even Linda laughed on her way through. If Robert could make a grown-up like Linda laugh, he'd be one of the best clowns we could possibly get.

"Don't mind me," Linda said. "Ms. Kathy gave me a star gazing report, so I'll be doing that. Gotta make ... 25 constellations. Come up with names and backstories. Shouldn't be too hard."

Linda looked at the papers in her hand and checked her camera.

"I don't remember getting that assignment," Robert said.

"That's because she didn't give it to you. I specifically asked Ms. Kathy for some extra credit."

That launched a smile across my face. Linda must have caught it out of the corner of her eye because she smiled, too. Linda was really trying. Maybe she didn't need my help for that secret agent project either. If it wasn't for this stupid Party Duty thing, then I'd be able to help her out. Instead, I had to make a clown out of Robert.

"Let's get you dressed up Robbie," I said.

I grabbed my father's hand and blazed upstairs, dashing past the warped mirrors that surrounded the slide into my parents' room. I hated going in there. It was so bare and bleak. There wasn't a single drawing on

the wall. There wasn't even a drawing *on paper* on the wall. Everything was so neat and tidy, it drove me crazy.

I'd at least be fixing the latter problem as I nosed about the closet. I tossed several suits and jackets to the floor. I hunted in between Linda's dresses, but that clown costume wasn't to be found. In fact, I couldn't seem to find any of Robert or Linda's costumes in there. Not even in the shoe boxes tucked away in the corner.

"Alright, own up," I said, tapping my feet.

"The costumes are in the attic," Robert groaned.

I gave him my "stern" look, pouting up my lips. It could leave a grown-up quaking in their boots.

"It's just that ... um ..." Robert said, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked directly at me. "We both know that the costumes you get me make me look ... um ... cute. Yeah, that's it. So, I got to thinking that ... what if other people thought that wearing the costumes made me look cuter than you? I didn't even want that idea to get in people's heads. So, I put the costumes in the attic so that no one would know about them."

I smiled. Robert could be so sweet sometimes. It was definitely a risk that the clown costume would make him cuter than me, but it was a risk that I needed to take. At any rate, it returned the skip into my step.

I popped my head through the trapdoor, flashlight in my teeth. The attic was a city of boxes, each filled with mysterious treasures of the past. It was stuff that my parents used to use, that my parents' parents used to use, and so on. I slid the light past an old rotting armchair and right into a mirror.

My eyes were already wide with fear, and sweat drops danced on my face. It wasn't my fault, though. Timmy and I used to spend a lot of time playing in the attic, but we had to stop because a ghost took up residence. Linda tried to explain to us that the ghost was just a heating vent, but that was stupid. *Of course* the ghost sounded like a heating vent. The ghost was *pretending* to be a heating vent to lure people into a false sense of security.

I had to be quick. If the ghost caught Robert, he wouldn't stand a chance against it. Honestly, without kids around grown-ups would be doomed. They never seem to know anything about ghosts or fairies or any of that kind of stuff. They'd find themselves cursed by witches or baked into pies. If Linda wasn't so close to the house, I would be worried that she'd fall victim to a wandering werewolf or something far worse.

I searched through boxes trying to find where Robert may have hidden the costumes. I pounced into a large box of old toys. I reached under a checker board and into a pile of brick toys. My hand swelled with

pain, and I remembered why I threw them in the attic. Then I heard the click. It was the ghost. He was waking up. I needed to hurry.

I saw a shiny red clown nose sticking out of the next box. This was it! I pulled it out and looked for the other bits a pieces. I grabbed something strangely silky in my hand. It was a purple cape, plastered with stars and moons – a magician's cape. Unlike the other costumes in the box, there was no way that this could fit a grown-up. It looked like it would be able to fit me.

"What's this?"

"Oh, that's Linda's old magician outfit. I can't believe she kept it all of these years," Robert said.

"Was it ... like her Halloween costume or something?"

"No. It was her job. She was a stage magician."

The howling at the back of the attic started up.

"Um ... we have to get out of here, now!"

"Ghost again?"

"Y-yeah. If he finds you here, you'll be a goner!"

I came down to the kitchen, cape in hands. The life of the room had dulled down without me there. April was busy searching through her phone while Molly swiveled back and forth on her chair. Timmy pouring a cup of hot chocolate was the only thing that could remotely be called

exciting, but that was only because he wanted to see how much whipped cream he could possibly stack on top of it before it toppled over.

"I thought that Linda was like ... a librarian or something boring when she was a kid. You're telling me that my stick-in-the-mud mother was something cool as a magician?"

"Oh, it's not that unbelievable," Robert said.

As if summoned, the woman of the hour found her way inside the kitchen. Her hands were filled with curled papers and photographs. A pencil rested behind her ear. Bags hung under her eyes, and it wasn't even nine yet. I'd believe that the frog I found in the yard last week was a magician before I'd believe that she was.

"Hey ... you found my old magician cape," Linda said.

"I'm sorry, Linda, but I just can't believe that you were ever a magician."

"That's because you've got way too much junk in your head," she said.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

At first, it meant that she was going to be grounded. Then she put her hand on my ear and pulled out kitchen napkins. As one tied to the next passed by my eyes, fear welled up. My friends began laughing. I didn't know if it was because of the magic happening or because I found myself

increasingly freaked out, waving my hands back and forth. I prayed for them to stop. What if this was a serious problem?

"Am I going to need to see a doctor?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Linda said. "I've gotten them all out. But you may want to do something about those tokens up your nose."

"I don't have any —"

Linda tapped the back of my head and two arcade tokens appeared in Linda's hands. I didn't even feel anything. This new ability either meant that I'd be getting free sodas for the rest of my life or my head was turning into metal. Did I make any deals with genies lately? Then came the clapping, begging for the show to go on.

"More! More!" Molly said.

"No! Stop it! What's your next trick? Turning me into a toad?"

"I'm sorry," Linda said. "Let me make it up to you."

She picked up the napkins from the floor and clapped on them. Then she opened them and revealed an origami flower. I found myself lost in a sense of wonder as she handed it to me. Maybe I was wrong about my mother getting devoured by werewolves out there. Then again, they were no ghosts.

"That was amazing!" Molly shouted, bouncing up and down on her chair.

"Well ... it's not every day that a child gets to see a live magician perform," April said. "We'd need to live in a city like Boondoggle Beach or Megaopolis for such a luxury."

An idea tickled my brain.

"Linda, you can do your magic act for the party!"

Linda paused, staring into space. Her entire expression faded. She gave a little chuckle, and she looked to Timmy as if she expected him to change reality. He shrugged and left Linda to turn back to me.

"Um ... I'm a bit rusty," Linda said. "It's been like ... over 10 years since I last did magic, and your party is on Friday."

"You were able to pull all of that stuff out of Sally's head," Molly said. "That worked fine."

"I ... um ... I don't even have my equipment anymore," Linda said.

"I can get you whatever you need," April said. "I'm sure that my brothers and sisters will be all too happy to help."

"I can't," Linda said. "I mean, it'd be weird, wouldn't it? Kids are magicians and grown-ups are only their assistants," Linda said. I swore that I detected a hint of sadness in her voice.

"No, there are a few adult magicians in the world. There's actually a really famous one – McCully. He's got a famous Dollywood show and

everything," I said. "No more excuses. If Robbie is going to be a clown, then you can be a magician. Come on, I'm sure you'll be great at it if you try!"

"A-alright, I'll do it. But just this once," Linda said.

I was all kinds of excited. This would wow and bedazzle everyone. Not only was I going to have a great party, I was going to have the bestest party that Summerway ever had. Who could top a party with a real magician and a clown? And I got to tell the whole town about it on live television tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I stood in the dressing room, arguing with April. This was the first time that I had seen with her so many hairs out of place and with bags under her eyes. She claimed that she had gotten up so early that she had accidentally put her mascara on the bottom, but I could see how stressed she was.

"Come on, Sally, you must wear this if you want to dazzle the crowds. Remember, if you don't make a scene, you won't be seen," April said.

She was holding the most exquisite dress that I had ever seen. The skirt was prismatic, like a rainbow, shimmering with a chromatic display of every color as it dangled in the light. If Sarah was working on this all night, there would have been a color for each minute of labor. It had the blue of tears poured into the hem, the red of passion above it, and on top the green of the envy of any kid who would look at it, with every color in between.

"I told you ... I want to show everyone who I am really am," I said.

"But you've got to show the people that you're not the plebeian that Talula said you were!"

"And I want to do that as myself," I said.

At any other time, or with any other person, I would have gotten angry. I didn't need the fancy dress or the hours of makeup to let the world see what kind of person that I was. I honestly felt a little guilty about even wearing that treasure. It was the kind of dress that princesses wore. But looking at April's tired eyes, I felt even more guilty in refusing it.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "Today I go as me, and I'll wear this at the party tomorrow. Wouldn't that be the better choice? You can't wear the same outfit twice, right?"

"Of course! And they'll get a point of comparison!" April said, more to herself than to me. "It's a perfect plan! They'll see you as you, and then when the party comes around they'll see how much better you can be — sorry."

"It's all right. Just try and get some sleep tonight."

There was a knock at the door. We gave each other a blank look. It was my time to go on. This was it. This was my chance to let the world know that I was more than a silly little girl living in a fantasy land. It was my chance to prove that I had the best party Summerway would ever see. April nodded. I was set to go.

"Ms. Harper is ready to see you," I heard after another knock.

It was a little boy in a cowboy hat. He led me through the frenzy that was the news studio. The halls were in constant commotion with kids zooming back and forth, and it only got louder as we passed by the sets.

"And it's going to be a wild storm this Saturday!" the newscaster said.

A boy turned on the fan off camera, and winds swept the stage. A girl climbed a step ladder and adjusted the sprinkler. Seconds later, a downpour fell on the weatherkid. Even the camerakid banged on pots and pans to simulate the sounds of thunder.

The makeshift storm whipped the weatherkid's overcoat this way and that, but they still must not have been satisfied with it. Papers were thrown into the fan and the debris spread all around.

"Our forecast for puddles is fantastic. Make sure to bring the parents along. Good mud shouldn't go to waste!"

He was hit in the face with a white powder, much to his surprise.

"Hey you guys, I said mud. Not *snow*!"

"Sorry," the sprinkler girl said.

We moved onto the next set before I could figure out how that story ended. This one was for Story Hour. An older girl read aloud to the camera, stopping every so often to show pictures to her audience. As we

got closer, I noticed that it was the exact same edition of the comic book delivered to my doorstep earlier that morning. I couldn't help but stop and stare.

"Now let's turn to page 36," the girl said.

"Great idea, isn't it?" the guide said. "So many more kids have started reading ever since Talula added this show and made the morning comics free."

"Um ... yeah ...," I said as we approached Harper's studio. That couldn't have come from the same Talula that wrote those words on my face and turned me into a laughing stock.

"And now it's time to meet Friday night's party planner!" Harper shouted.

Lights blasted me in the face as I stepped onto her set. The crowd went wild with applause, even as I awkwardly stumbled around for my seat. The lights went down, and I saw Harper moving her hands around. She was instructing her team off-set, with much more control than the weather kid.

"Everyone give a nice sunny hello to Sally Dunn!"

I could see the crowd now. I tried to smile, but there were so many pairs of eyes peering down at me. Inspecting me. I had never felt these emotions before. The colors flushed from my face as I sat down. I tried to

focus on Harper, but my eyes kept turning back to the crowd. How many of these kids remembered yesterday's incident? How many of them thought that I was just "Silly Sally"?

"How are you doing Sally?" Harper asked.

"G-good," I mustered.

"Wanna give the crowd a big hello?"

I gave a nervous little wave.

"Well um ... you know what? I think we should get right into it," Harper said. She pulled a notepad out of her pocket. "Ms. Talula said a lot of stuff about you yesterday. Like a *lot* of really big stuff, so when I heard that you wanted to go on the news, I thought that it would only be fair. Do you remember what she said?"

"Yeah ... um ... she said that I hated Party Duty and –"

"It's not true, is it!?" Harper asked. She danced in her chair as she spoke. "Who am I kidding? Of course it isn't true. Every kid loves Party Duty! Kids love goin' to parties, and kids love throwing 'em!"

"Right!" I said. It was the first easy word in the conversation, and it looked as if the door was open for more. "I don't know what Talula was talking about. Me hating Party Duty? I'm a party animal! I'm planning on making the biggest party that Summerway has ever seen. It'll be so big that ... we're gonna need to make a holiday to remember it."

"Sounds like it'll knock our socks off! Whatcha got planned?"

"I'm gonna have all of the bestest snacks. We got a clown, and a bounce house, and I even managed to get a magician!"

"Woah! A real live one with the cape and the sparkles and everything?" Harper asked.

"Well, she isn't a zombie."

The crowd laughed.

"That would be silly ..."

That word changed everything. The laughter from my zombie joke didn't fade away. It even seemed to grow. The kids were all chuckling and chortling. They were all laughing at me. I knew it! This must have been a plan from the start to mock me some more. I couldn't breathe. I tried to huff and puff, but I was all choked up.

"Is something wrong?" Harper asked. "You're acting kind of funny."

"Oh, you WOULD think that, wouldn't you!?" I snapped.

Harper quirked her brow at me. I looked to the crowd. They had stopped laughing and started watching intently. How many of them saw my screw-up? I scratched my nose. Sweat? I was really sweating? It must have been the lights. They burned my skin.

"Um ... s-sorry. It's ... uh ..."

I kept on stammering.

"Kinda nervous around crowds, huh?"

That answer had always been no. What was going on today? I couldn't breathe, and there were all of those eyes. They brought me right back to yesterday in town hall. This was why chameleons were my favorite animal. They could turn invisible whenever they wanted to. I'd give anything at that moment to disappear. That got me thinking about Charmichael.

I tried to speak, but any words that came out fell together in a mish-mush.

"Cat got your tongue?" Harper asked. "Don't worry. The kids here aren't going to hurt you or anything ..."

Whenever someone tells me not to think of elephants, the first thing that I think of every single time, without fail, is elephants. I wasn't thinking of other kids hurting me before that, but after Harper said that they wouldn't, that worry was the only thing going through my mind. I needed to get out of there before they threw rotten tomatoes at me.

"Hey ... where are you going!?" Harper asked. "We've still got like an hour to go!"

I gave her a blank empty stare. She sighed and turned back to the audience.

"Well ... um ... that was our guest Sally Dunn. Always on the move. Everyone want to give her a big round of applause? No ... um ... okay then."

The hallways turned into a maze. Every time I went around a new corner, I came face-to-face with someone's eyes. They watched me as I ran. They watched me as I dodged. I just had to get to the dressing room with as few people seeing me as possible. And then I bumped into April.

"Just what is the meaning of this!?" she said. Her fists pulsated.

"Just forget it April," I said, wiping away a tear. "I'm going home. I can't do this."

"Whatever do you mean 'I can't do this'?" April asked. "Sally, you must throw that party or great misfortune will befall you!"

"Then you throw the party. I'm not going to be there. I-I can't," I said, pushing past her.

I stormed off before she could have said anything.

I made it to the pier on the lake before I stopped crying. I kicked my legs over the water as I watched the clouds roll by. Distant cars fell into a lowly buzz. I closed my eyes and wished to become one of the birds flying above. I could leave my troubles miles below. The wind would tickle in between my feathers, and I would feel true freedom. Most

importantly, I would no longer be Sally the human, the girl who lost everything.

“Thought I might find yeah here,” Molly said. “April’s been lookin’ fer yeah everywhere.”

Her pigtailed bobbed in the gust as she stared at me. She tilted her head and gave me a quirky look. I didn’t say anything as she walked across the pier. I didn’t say anything as she sat down next to me. And I didn’t say anything as she put her arm around my shoulder.

“You feelin’ alright? I heard about what happened on Harper’s show.”

I said nothing. I did nothing. I just sat and waited for my life to be over. There was no way that Molly could out-wait me. She started fidgeting before long. She tried to keep looking at me but ended up getting distracted. She moved her legs around. She played with her hair.

But she was a lot more clever than I gave her credit for. Molly started humming this annoying tune. It wormed its way into my brain, and she wouldn’t stop.

“Cut that out!” I said.

“Hmmm?” Molly said. “I don’t reckon why I oughta. I mean, if we’re not havin’ a conversation then why shouldn’t I hum? Or maybe I should start a whistling.”

That was worse. I covered my ears, but nothing I did could stop that incessant tune. I even started shaking. When enough knock-it-offs had gone by, I had no choice but to push into the lake. It was a trap – she had pulled me along with her and we both plummeted into the waters below.

“So, are you gonna tell me what’s goin’ on?” Molly asked, splashing me.

“Okay! Okay! Just stop that!” I said.

I crawled up onto the beach and grabbed the head of a washed-up duck boat to catch my breath. Molly wasn’t too far behind. She wrung out her pigtailed, but she didn’t stop looking at me. She was now expecting some kind of answer, and she would not be deterred.

“My mind’s just been ... all messed up since I ... lost Charmichael,” I said.

“Sally, I watched the news, too,” Molly said. “Charmichael ain’t ‘lost.’ He was stolen. Stolen by a bully. And yer about to give that bully the satisfaction that she wants.”

Crickets buzzed in their bushes, punctuating the moment. I could taste the silence, like a thick sticky syrup. I ran through every little thing that had happened, and I couldn’t deny that Molly was right. I closed my eyes and planted myself in the sand.

"What have I done?" I asked. "Even if I throw the party, I already blew Harper's interview. Everyone problem thinks that I'm a party-hating mcgruffin!"

"Well we can't change that, but you ain't lost everything," Molly said. "You said about the magician and the clown fore you ran off. All's not lost."

Molly wasn't wrong. And I still had the rest of today to prepare for tomorrow night's party. In April's words, that was "literally forever." But how? How could we convince every kid in town that I wasn't completely crazy? What if what happened to me on Harper's show, happened to me again during the party? Those eyes burned themselves into the back of my mind.

I passed these concerns along to Molly as we walked home. We strolled along the city streets in our own bubble of silence in an ocean of commotion. Traffic whizzed by, sweeping us in the wind and the dust. Kids working on skyscrapers above us shouted and yelled to each other. It all mixed with ponies whinnying as they were forced to make tight turns. But one voice stood out on top of everything – one that sounded like a mixture of honey and bee stingers.

"And remember to drive safe on the streets of Summerway – with your brand new ponies!"

Talula spoke to the town through a video billboard. She petted a pony that walked onto the camera, casting a smile down to the city. It was almost as if she was blind to the car crash that happened right in front of the billboard. And that car crash was undoubtedly caused by her pony dealership plan.

"I just want to slap that smile off her face!" I said, seething.

"Violence won't solve nuttin'" Molly said. "She'll get hers soon enough. When you have the best party –"

"Bestest party," I corrected.

"Right. The bestest party that Summerway ever had. Didn't Talula say that you weren't gonna have no party? All you gotta do is have one, and she'll look like the liar she is."

Yeah, all I needed to do was that party with the magician and the clown and I won. Didn't Talula even say that I hated Party Duty altogether? When I had the bestest party that Summerway had ever seen, Talula would be humiliated. It returned a skip to my step all the way home.

"It's too bad there ain't no one running against her," Molly said.

"That'll be the day," I said, adding a sigh.

April stood in front of my home, tapping her fingers against her arm. She scowled at me. I turned face, ready to run back to the pier. Molly

looked me straight in the eye. She gave me a smile and a nod. I had to move forward.

CHAPTER NINE

“Sally Dunn,” April said. “Just *what* were you thinking!?”

“I – I – I – ”

“Is something amiss?” April asked, stepping forward. “Sally, you had me worried sick when you ran off! Why did you do *that*? In front of everyone!”

“I reckon it’s the ‘in front of everyone’ thing that caused her to run off like that,” Molly said.

“Why ... that’s absurd!” April said. “This is Sally we’re talking about. It’d be silly to – ”

I buried my head into my shirt as soon as that word was uttered. April’s crystal blue eyes peered down at me. I could feel the accusations behind them, drilling deep down into me. I stepped back, and April flinched. Her eyes dropped the accusation and sympathy filled the void.

This was all because of that one word. That awful no-good word. Silly. Silly used to mean things like running around in the rain with your tongue out and flapping your arms like a chicken, not caring whether or not you’d catch a cold. Then Talula came around and gave that word a new horrible meaning.

My friends helped me into the kitchen and lowered me down into a chair. That interview went so badly. I was going to be known as the weird kid in town. When people came to my party, they would all laugh at me. If they even came at all.

We talked back and forth, trying to find a new way to approach the problem. I came up with a thousand new ways to avoid having this party at all, but April and Molly reminded me time and again that I'd be in huge trouble. Not only would I end up in time out for who-knows-how-long, but the kids would hate me even more.

The problem only got more complicated when my parents came home from school. Linda burst through the door first, as per usual. If she carried that kind of speed and agility into a paintball match, she would have been doing much better at school. Instead, an alarm went off in her backpack.

It was a loud, horrendous ringing that stole the attention of me and my friends. It was almost like a tiny mosquito buzzing inside your ears.

"Linda! Cut that noise out! I can barely hear myself think!" I said.

"Sound?" I don't know what you're talking about," Linda said.

She poked her head into the kitchen, dumbfounded by the sight of me and my friends frantically covering our ears. Surprise ran through Linda's eyes as she jumped to life. She started looking over her person.

Linda patted down every pocket until Molly pulled out a letter gently tucked into the back of Linda's backpack. Molly pushed the emblem on the envelope, and the sound stopped. Recovering from her daze, she looked at the label.

"Why in tarnation would yer teacher be sending out a message with a kidpitch alarm?" she asked.

"Why indeed?" I asked, taking it from Molly.

I clutched it in my hands. It was a letter from Ms. Kathy, addressed to "the kids of Linda Dunn." The annoying part of this was that Ms. Kathy was so confident in the fact that Linda wouldn't give the letter to me or Timmy that she had to sneak it into the house in a way that grown-ups couldn't detect. I *hated* kidpitch alarms, but in situations like this, I had to admit that they had their uses.

As I tore open the letter, I noticed Linda starting to cringe. A twinge of anger ran through me, and it built a smile. My friends were here, and my mother had done something naughty. Wouldn't it be funny if I read it aloud and told them exactly what she was trying to hide? I dramatically cleared my throat and started reading.

"Dear Sally and Timmy Dunn,

I must apologize for the alarm that I had to put in this letter, but I have reason to believe that the last letter I sent never got to your house. Or any of the letters before that one. I am reporting that an assignment I gave Linda – finding shapes in the stars of the night sky – has not been done. While Robert had managed to find dozens of shapes in the night sky, Linda didn't even find one –

“Sally! I can explain why I didn't do the assignment,” Linda said.

“That's great,” I said, through clenched teeth. “Now can you tell me why you keep on lying to me!? That assignment last night wasn't extra credit at all, was it?”

“No,” Linda said. “I told Robbie to do his after you went to bed to look like I was doing better than I was. Please, don't punish him. It was all my idea.”

“Fine then. Go to your room. You're grounded!”

Linda looked down as she left the kitchen. It was a little too quick for the act. Then I saw the light red rectangle hanging out of her pocket as she marched into the living room.

“Cellphone,” I said. “Gimme.”

She slowly reached into her pocket and pulled the phone out. I stomped over and snatched it right out of her hands. I looked her straight in the eyes and pointed up the stairs. I didn't give another glance as she walked up them. Each xylophone tone came slower than the last. That was good. She'd be able to see me walk across the room, duck down, and throw the phone in the “grounded grotto” – a small cubby hole in the back wall. If any grown-up tried to reach for anything in there, their hand would get stuck.

When Robert entered the house, I looked him in the eye. I tried to be angry and intimidating and all of that stuff that a good kid is supposed to be, but I just couldn't. I couldn't look at him with anything other than tears and hurt in my eyes. I was getting used to Linda lying to me, but why did Robert start? Without a word, we both left the room.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “At the very least, the party's going to have some fun new activities. Perhaps we can play ‘throw pies at the grounded grown-up.’ Or maybe I'll just read the letter for everyone to hear”

“Come on Sally, you can't be too hard on her,” Molly said.

“Maybe if yeah talk it out –”

"Talk it out!?" I shouted. The letter started to crumple in my hands. "I'm her daughter, and that means she's supposed to do whatever I say! Just because you don't have any experience with this –"

I stopped. Molly stared at me. April almost seemed taken aback. What was happening to me?

"Sally, yer angry. Yeah need to calm down," Molly said. Her eyes bobbed to the floor. "There's gotta be a reason she's doin' this to yeah. Do yeah really think yer mother likes lying to you?"

"I – I don't know," I said.

Molly looked me straight in the eyes.

"Yes you do."

I nodded, crying once again. Molly put her arm against me once again. If Linda didn't want to lie to me, then why was she? I needed to know the answer. The question beat me down. I made my way up the stairs. There was my parents' door – the largest one, at the end of the hall. My hand hovered above the knob. What was I even going to say?

"So you know, too?" a raspy voice said.

I turned around to see Timmy straight in the face. He still had his briefcase in hand. Wait ... how did he know?

"I've been talking with Kathy," he said. "Linda's never going to be able to hide anything from us ever again. Neither will Robert."

"My pare – I mean ... Robbie doesn't hide anything from me ..."

"Like the star charts, right?" Timmy asked, crossing his arms.

The hallway never seemed so big before. Not even when I was a toddler. Even though we both wanted to say the same thing, we were lost in a vast chasm of silence. Disco lights danced around the room, changing our faces from blue to green to red, and in each color we looked the same – sad. Even the warped mirrors didn't change our emotions.

"So ... how do you want to punish them?" Timmy asked, finally.

"I – I'll take care of it myself," I said.

"You sure you want to do that?"

"No."

He shrugged and walked back down the stairs, leaving me to the door. I took a deep breath and let the wind flow through my body. I relaxed and closed my eyes. One knock. There was silence. Two knocks. There was silence. Three knocks. I heard a voice.

"Hello?" Robert asked.

My eyes shot open. That's right, he was there too. I needed Linda alone to talk to her about this. All of these feelings scrunched up my face. Well ... if they were willing to lie to me, I didn't see any reason why I couldn't lie right back. Fair was fair.

"Um yes Robbie. April's ready to get you fitted for a new clown costume. One that's even brighter and colorfuller than before! You shouldn't keep her waiting."

"Wait ... why?"

"Because," I said, putting my hands on my hips. He was lucky that I wasn't going to make him wear it to school tomorrow. *Hey ... there's an idea.*

The door opened, and for a moment, Robert just stood there. He looked down at me, and I looked down at the floor, shielding my eyes from him. He kept on standing there, looking at me. I was about to snap. I needed to snap. But I couldn't.

"Sally – what happened to the flower in your hair?" he asked.

The flower? I reached up to my head. The buttercup was missing. I hadn't even noticed it all day. A heavy feeling dripped throughout my entire body. I could have lost it anywhere: at the show, when I ran away, floating in the lake.

"Pirates stole it," I said, without hesitation.

He didn't say anything back. I stole a glance as he went down the slide. I wanted to give a smile. But I couldn't. Robert wasn't going down the slide because he thought that it was fun. He was going down the slide simply because it was the fastest way to the kitchen, and that didn't count.

Linda stared out the window, up toward the evening sky. It was just turning purple. Specks of stars had just barely broken out for the night. She decided *now* to look for shapes in the nighttime sky, after she already failed the assignment. How typical.

A floorboard creaked.

"This is my room," Linda said.

"This is *my* house," I said.

"Timmy's name is on the deed."

"Yeah well, it's *my* drawing of a house on the back of it."

And to end this annoying argument, I stuck my tongue out. Linda rolled her eyes in the window's reflection. She didn't even turn to face me while I was talking. I wanted to get angry at that, but for some reason I just couldn't. What I said to Molly and what she said to me kept bouncing around my brain.

"I assume that you're here to give me my punishment," Linda said.

"Just so we get it over with, I didn't do tomorrow's secret agent assignment, either. So, hit me with your worst."

"I ... don't want to do my worst," I said. "I mean I do ... but I don't. If you weren't going to do the assignment, then why did you stand outside for an hour, looking at the sky?"

"Sally, come here. I want to show you something," she said.

I walked across the room. She signaled to the window and pointed toward the sky. The sun had just disappeared behind the forest, and now the stars were bursting to life one-by-one. It was the most magnificent time of day.

"Last night I didn't see any shapes in the sky," Linda said.

"You know we have a computer right? If it was too cloudy or something –"

"No," Linda said, turning to me. "That's not what I meant. What do you see when you look up at the stars?"

"Let's see. There's a bunny, and there's a bird. Those are easy ones. Ooh, there's a monkey over there."

"I don't see any of it," Linda said, her voice cracking. "They're all just dots. Huge burning dots that have sent their light billions of miles – for nothing."

"Maybe you've just got to try a little harder," I said. "See, there's the tail and –"

"Try harder? After everyone went to bed, I stared at the sky for much longer than Robert. The sun was coming up when I went to bed, and *nothing*. Not one microscopic little shape, beyond squares or other polygons. I don't know what I was thinking. I told you, I don't have any imagination."

We didn't say anything for a while. I looked around the room. It was almost as if people didn't even live here. Not a single drawing, scribble, or dot on the walls. Papers were stacked neatly on the desk, and even the pencils had been arranged in a neat little order. A math book lay open. No wonder she was having trouble figuring this out – that stuff rots your brain. The only thing remotely out of place was the box of costumes I made Robert remove from the attic. A grin came across my face.

"Sally, why are you throwing costumes everywhere?" Linda asked.

I didn't answer. I just pulled out piece after piece: fairy wings, tutu, princess dress, bunny ears. When everything was on the floor, I still couldn't think of something perfect enough. Maybe it was time to prove that Linda did have an imagination after all.

"It's time to make outfits for school tomorrow," I said. "So go ahead. You can pick anything here."

"Sally, do I really have to do this?"

"I want you to start succeeding in school, so do it or I'll do it for you. Ooh, this ogre mask looks nice," I said.

"Fine. I'll pick ... this and this," Linda said.

She picked up the princess dress and the fairy wings. Grown-ups could be funny sometimes. They tend to think that they're so much smarter

than us kids, and when they do they fall for our simplest tricks. I took the dress and looked at it with a fake curiosity.

"Hmmm ... Robbie will sure look interesting in that," I said, smirking at Linda. "But I'll be sure to let him know that when he's picking out *your* outfit."

"You can't make Robbie wear –" we both said in unison.

"Jinx! No talking for one hour!" I said. "And I'm not making him wear this. You are."

After I dressed Robert up, he was all too eager to look through the costumes and find a good look for Linda. She watched us from afar. With each selection she looked more tempted to talk, but even grown-ups knew that going against a jinx was something that you *never* ever did.

"Oh I almost forgot," I said. "Linda said you'd look great with this wand."

"Oh, you don't say," he said.

I blew Linda a raspberry as Robert took to work looking through the costumes. That fairy wand must really have been magic because it helped him find the perfect selections. Linda would have to wear a big goofy polka-dot bow on her head, with an equally ridiculous looking patchwork shirt. The tutu was a classic selection, and it wasn't complete without mismatched socks over squeaky rainboots. The oversized heart-

print underpants completed the set, but Robert added an elephant's trunk in an unprecedented selection. I couldn't deny that Robert had an imagination.

Linda was growling, but fully dressed.

"Maybe if you didn't lie so much, you'd be able to talk at all," I said. "Now say cheese!"

I caught both of their dumbfounded faces on my cellphone. My parents didn't even look this incredibly cute on Halloween. This photo was a keeper. Maybe I'd even get another one with Timmy in the mix.

"See Linda," I said, showing her the photograph. "This is what imagination can do. And it didn't take Robbie very long at all to come up with something new. All you gotta do is throw together old bits and pieces."

The cellphone beeped.

"Oh, and it looks like your hour is up. Don't worry, you can change before your magic act tomorrow."

"I thought I was grounded," Linda said, through clenched teeth.

"You know, the whole 'don't leave the room unless it's for school' kind of thing?"

I gave a nervous chuckle.

"I know I'm mad, but it'd be cruel to ground you from a party," I said. "Especially one where you're the headlining act."

"I'm not going to do it, Sally. I ... can't, even if I wanted to. Just like I can't see stars in the sky."

"W-what do you mean!? You were doing tricks fine in front of all of my friends just yesterday!"

"That's different," Robert said.

"Oh you butt out of this!" I said. "Linda, if you don't do your magic act ... I'll - I'll make you wear that every day for the rest of the school year!"

"Okay," she said simply.

I was lost. This couldn't be happening. Did she know what she just did? I told everyone in town that my party would have a magician. It was the one thing that I did before I crumbled, and now that magician wouldn't be there. This was almost worse than not having a party at all.

The rest of the school year? Linda would be lucky if she wasn't wearing that until the day I had kids of my own. Unless the town did something terrible to me first. Not only was it another lie, it was like she was lying to the entire town - through me!

CHAPTER TEN

"She what!?" April demanded.

"She said that she isn't gonna do it!"

I could hardly hold myself still. Molly rocked back and forth in her chair. She made a little clicking noise, clearly deep in thought. April was on the other end of the spectrum, stomping back and forth across the room, almost knocking over Timmy as he poured his evening hot chocolate.

"The *indignance!*" April shouted.

"Spare us the fancy 10-card words," Molly said. "She said she ain't gonna do it, and ever after makin' her wear that outfit, it's clear that there ain't nothing any of us can do."

"Je ne comprends pas ..."

April covered her face in her hand. She smeared her makeup all over without a single care for it. A loose strand of hair on the top of her head swayed back and forth, as she rambled on in a language that no one else could understand.

"Sally could be in some serious trouble if we don't procure ourselves a magician by this time tomorrow!"

"I'm ... sure we can figure something out," I offered.

April just stared at me, for a long while. Her mascara dripped across her face, smearing her nose. If she wasn't locked in a grimace, I would have chuckled. She shook her head, making even more hairs spring lose. Then she stomped outside.

The three remaining kids sipped hot chocolate, while Robert drank his coffee. All of us tried to come up with an answer. Despite how crazy April was acting, she did have a point. I wanted to come up with an idea, and the silence from everyone was not helping.

"So, what are we going to do?" Timmy asked.

"We should give 'er a few minutes to blow off steam and then one of us can –" Molly said.

"No, I mean about the magician. April was right. Sally could really get into some kind of trouble if she doesn't give what she promised," Timmy said.

"My girl's smart, she'll think of something," Robert said.

"Does that costume make yeah feel awkward?" Molly asked.

"Oh this?" Robert asked, grabbing the folds of his dress. "Nah, I've been to enough tea parties to be used to it by now."

He gave Molly a curtsy that sent her into the giggles. It loosened the mood, but something else was going on in my mind. Why was April

going so off the handle about this? Sure, her friend was going to get in trouble, but she went even more crazy than Timmy. I needed to find out.

I stepped outside. Even as the door closed, April didn't turn to me. She just looked out onto the street and watched kids return home on their cars and animals. I heard a snuffle. Was April crying? No. That wasn't possible.

"I ... just wanted to be a part of something big," April said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

I sat down next to her, and we watched the cars go past for a while. Headlights crossed our faces, casting us in light. Every time one did, April closed her eyes. She waited for the vrooming engines and the whinnying horses to pass before she dared open them again. And even then, it didn't work. Moonlight reflected off of her tears. I gave her a hug, in some hope that it would make things better. She gave me a little bit of a smile, but it quickly faded.

"I *really* thought that this would be it. The thing that I'd be known for," April said. "April Morrison, key builder of the greatest party that Summerway had ever seen. Perhaps ... I'm the silly one. Pardon."

"It's ... no problem. I'm getting over it," I said. "But April, you don't need to be known for anything."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have brothers and sisters who are famous athletes or artists. So great that *your own* parents forget your name half of the time. It's not like I wanted to be the kid who invented the car or the kid who made sugar healthy. But I wanted to do something."

"You did do something. You became my friend. My bestest friend. I could live without a car, or even being able to eat as much candy as I want. But I don't think I could live without you."

"You are so incredibly sweet," April said. "Oh dear ... I've forgotten that this was *your* party, didn't I?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure that everything will work out fine. And if it doesn't, I know I've got you and Molly by my side."

"Through thick and thin."

We watched the moon until the nighttime chill forced us inside. April combed her hair down as walked through the living room. Looking around, it almost felt like strolling through a birthday wonderland. The little setup that we were able to do went a long way with streamings strewn across the wall and balloons bobbing, each with an appropriately ridiculous face drawn on them. With piñatas dangling from the ceiling and games hung on the walls it would be perfect for any party – except for the one that promised a magician.

No one had a solution to our missing magician problem, and it was late. April and Molly had to leave for the night.

"You know what bugs me?" Molly said. "Talula lies about you not havin' a party, and how many wedgies do you think *she's* gonna git for it?"

The mere thought of the townskids' wrath made me fear for my bottom. If I couldn't come up with a magic act, tomorrow was going to be a hard day.

Timmy drove May home, and that left me alone downstairs with Robert. I poured myself another hot chocolate and broke open the cupboard. This occasion called for rainbow sprinkles on top of my whipped cream.

Robert cleared his throat.

"Sally, I'm sorry for lying. It's just, Linda's my wife. You know?"

"*You* know," I said, in between hot chocolate sips, "I tell every kid I meet that my parents are the best in the world. But maybe lying just runs in the family."

"I know that you're mad, and you have every right to be. But you need to know that Linda really has been trying. She's been trying all week."

"Trying doesn't stop wedgies. Or wet willies!" I said.

The silence returned.

"I heard about your interview with Harper today," Robert said.

"If you make fun of me, I swear that I'll –"

"I'd never make fun of you," Robert said as he took a seat. "It's just that ... it reminded me that you're not too different than Linda."

"And they called me 'silly,'" I said.

"What happened when they did?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, and I filled my mouth with hot chocolate so I wouldn't have to.

"Well, if I'd have to guess, I'd say that what happened to you happens to Linda every time she tries to perform her magic act, ever since she grew up. She could do it in front of us because we're family and friends. But in front of everyone else, she just locks up."

"Then why did she say she would do it?"

"She was trying."

Harper's interview ran throughout my mind. I wasn't sure that I would ever be able to forget it. I remembered each and every pair of eyes. Those piercing eyes. I was going to make Linda face that, and I didn't even know it. Teardrops fell into my hot chocolate, breaking up the reflection of my face in shock. I barely even noticed Robert locking me in an embrace.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. Don't cry," Robert cooed. After a pause, he added, "Could I offer you some more tea?"

"No you can't," I said through my sobs.

"Why not?"

"Because Princess Robert has been kidnapped by the evil dragon."

"Okay, go get your knight costume so you can save him."

I don't know how long we played into the night. I got lost in sword fighting evil skeletons that looked a lot like our furniture, and climbing up the treacherous mountains of our stairs on a quest to slay the evil dragon, and the stunning revelation that the dragon wasn't evil at all.

All of this kidnapping business was just a big misunderstanding. The princess and the dragon were getting married. The only reason everyone thought that the princess was kidnapped was because neither of them told anyone. It was a beautiful wedding with cookies and jelly beans. I don't remember much after they had their third child. I must have fallen asleep.

I found myself laying down on the couch the next day, wrapped in a blanket. The surprise made me rock it back and forth, and my eyes filled with sun in the commotion. Time. It was the first thing that ran through my mind. I needed to talk to Linda before she went to school!

I took my cellphone out and groaned. It was already well past 11. My parents had been in school for over an hour. I called Linda's number anyway. A jazz tune played from the grounded grotto, and I fully

remembered why I was even trying to call. I shook the tiredness from my head, and that made me fall off of the couch. It wasn't my favorite way to wake up in the morning, but it worked.

"Oh Sally, you're awake!" Timmy said. "Awesome."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"Because my sis has Party Duty today, and it's my responsibility as her big brother to make sure everything goes perfectly, and that includes a well-balanced breakfast."

There was a moo.

"And that must be breakfast now," he said.

Timmy opened the door and was handed a pizza box. I followed him to the kitchen, where a fresh cup of hot chocolate sat in my spot, covered with whipped cream, rainbow sprinkles, and chocolate chips. The morning comics were placed neatly by its side. The pizza box contained the bestest surprise.

"French fry pizza?"

"Your favorite!"

I charged at my seat. The cheesy potato goodness took me away, but the worry in the pit of my stomach kept me grounded to reality. After I swallowed my third slice, I asked Timmy a question.

"So ... Robert and Linda already went to school?"

"Yup," Timmy said. "And don't you worry, I made sure they went in their grounded costumes."

"Ugh Timmy, why did you –"

Another moo interrupted me. I looked at Timmy. He was just as confused as I was.

"They know that parties don't start until six, right?" Timmy asked.

"Yeah, but I think that kids might be a little over-excited to see ... a magician," I said.

I got out of my seat and marched to the door. If it was time to face the music; I'd do it with strength and courage. I deserved whatever was coming to me. I grasped the knob and flung it open, ready to take on the outside world. I was graced with April and her army of siblings.

"Dear!? Did you just wake up?" April asked. "Come on, we've got a party to get ready for. And a party host to get ready for it."

I don't know what April was talking about when she said that "we" needed to get ready for a party. Maybe I needed to, but she certainly didn't. She wore a vivid green dress with several frilly layers of hem. A black-and-white striped tie made the perfect stylistic belt, matching well with the blue-and-orange polka-dot knee socks. All of this was accented with the brightest red shoes – light-up ones; the only kind you could wear at a party. And to top it off, she wore a crown with the finest plastic jewels. She'd be

the second coolest looking kid at my party after I was in the dress that Sarah carried along.

"You brought the whole family it seems," I said.

"No, unfortunately. Only about half of them could make it. But I still think we have the assets to pull this party over the top," April said.

"Now come on. Sarah and I shall dress you up, while they bring this party to the next level."

After what must have been hours, I stepped out of my room. April wouldn't let me see myself once during this whole process. She pulled me through the hallways by the wrist, and I got glimpses of myself in the warped mirrors. They all gave me enough clues to bate my breath, but none of them gave me the full picture. We stepped down the stairs, and the xylophone tones attracted everyone's attention to me.

"Woah ..." was the first thing that I heard. From Timmy.

"I'm quite the artist," April said.

"Come on! I wanna see myself!" I said.

April rolled her eyes and pulled a compact mirror out of her purse. I almost touched my face, but April grabbed my wrists once more. I couldn't help but curl my glittery lips into a smile with what I saw. The sparkly fingernails that I could see before had already gotten me excited, but April had gone the extra mile with everything.

They had painted a green star across my right eye and woven glow wand clips into my hair, lighting my face up like the night sky. All of this compounded with the stellar dress itself to make me feel like Princess of the World.

"April ... it's perfect!"

"My favorite part is the buttercup in your hair."

I turned around, and Robert was standing in the threshold. The first thought that came to my mind: I *really* needed to make that door louder to stop people from sneaking in. The second thought: yeah, the look wouldn't be complete without it. The third thought:

"Where's Linda?" I asked.

"Oh, she's on her way inside. She'll be here any second unless you wanna catch up with her."

"There you are Robert!" April said. "We can get you out of that costume and into your party outfit after I'm done with this one here."

She turned toward Timmy.

"What about me?"

"Your face, dolt. You haven't even painted it yet," April said.

"Can you make it look like battle scars?"

"I see you more as lightning bolts ... and maybe a heart on your cheeks. It's what I see deep inside you."

"Wait, what!?" Timmy asked. He accusingly turned toward me.

"I am only jesting," April said, with a giggle.

I bolted outside. There Linda was, walking toward the house in her grounded outfit. The one that I made her wear. I closed my eyes as she got closer, and I waited for her to get really, really angry. I waited for a shout or a yell or a bellow, but they never came. Instead, I heard a crunch. I opened my eyes. Linda was eating an apple.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked. "I didn't think that Timmy would have given you an allowance this week because –"

"Ms. Kathy gave it to me. She thought that I came up with this getup myself. Gave me an A and an apple for being so creative," Linda said. "It's kind of funny, but I think I'll get changed now."

"Into your magician outfit?" I asked.

"No Sally," Linda said.

She climbed the stairs, trying to move as fast as she could without it looking like she was trying to move as fast as she could. I saw that look in her eyes. The very one that I had. She was waiting for me to explode and get angry.

"I'm sorry," I said. Linda stopped immediately.

"Sorry?"

"I'm sorry that I was so mean. Robbie told me everything. Mom ... why didn't you tell me that you had stage fright? I would have listened!"

Linda turned to me and gave me a good long stare. Her lips bounced, and she kind of hummed to herself. She almost spoke, and then she stopped. She opened her mouth, and then she stopped again when nothing came out. When she opened her mouth once again, she looked away.

"I didn't want to disappoint you. Robbie told *me* everything to. That you tell everyone you meet that we're the best parents in the world."

"Not just the best! The *bestest!* And that's because you are! You know ... most of the time," I said, rubbing my arms. "When you're not lying and getting bad grades and hiding stuff from me."

Linda sat down on the porch steps, and we looked at each other eye-to-eye.

"I *am* sorry for doing that. Robbie and I. We're not perfect people. But we try to be, for you and Timmy. And sometimes, I guess it backfires."

"Linda, you don't have to be perfect to be the bestest," I said, giving her a smile. "Just do the bestest you can. That's all I want. That's all anyone wants."

"Not Ms. Kathy. Got an A on the outfit, got an F on the spy assignment. Um ... you don't hear any ringing do you?"

"Uh ... no. Not yet at least," I said. "You know, if you tried as much doing your classwork as you tried running from it, you'd have graduated by now."

"Yeah, I've done the math," Linda said. She took another bite from her apple. "But I told you. I can't -"

"Then I'll help you. I'm sorry that this party stuff snuck up on me, but next time for real," I said.

Linda nodded at me. Then I handed her something. It lit up with a happy little jazz tune.

"My cellphone? Am I ungrounded?" Linda asked.

I nodded.

"You might want to call Janet. I hear there's gonna be a hot party tonight, and everybody's gonna be there," I said.

"Well, she's a little busy tonight, so I don't think she can make it. But ... thank you Sally."

"Don't mention it. Now ... change out of that ridiculous outfit, and um ... paint your face. Can't go to a party looking like *that*."

Linda got up and resumed her trek inside.

"Oh and ... Linda. Save that core. An apple tree would be perfect in the garden. You can get some good ideas at school."

After that, I got antsy waiting for the guests to arrive. I spent most of the time with Molly as she made sure the bounce house was up to snuff, but April took her away and ran her ears off about how she had to dress up, or at least wear something other than her torn overalls. They eventually compromised with glow-in-the-dark hair ribbons and a bright blue cape.

Then the doorbell moaned. The clock showed 6:00 p.m. exactly. The meowing echoed throughout the house, casting a nervous mood over everything. I marched through the kitchen, passing by Timmy. Despite being dressed up for partying delight with glow sticks as a necklace, bracelet, and legwarmers all over a dark skull t-shirt, he couldn't help but look at me with concern. I smiled. He needed to know that I would be fine no matter what would happen. I needed to know that, too.

"Hello everybody! Are you ready to party!" I said, flinging open the door.

No one could have predicted the immense size of this crowd, especially after Talula said that I wasn't even going to have a party and after I ran away from Harper's interview. Every face looked on with curiosity. Some of them must have been surprised that there was even a

party to be had. They must have been waiting for me to fail. I even heard snickering in the background.

No. I wasn't going to let this crush me. I needed to say something.

"H-hey! Are we all ready for a good time!? Come on in and enjoy yourself!"

I stayed calm, and I kept my smile. It worked. As soon as I stopped talking, the guests poured into the party. They eyed the video games and my music player as if they were afraid to touch them. This was a bad sign. I ran to the kid by the stereo.

"Do you think that a grownup owns that thing or something? Turn it up! Let the whole street know that you want to party! Let the kids on Mars know!"

A little kid turned the stereo up to five. I rolled my eyes.

"Oh come on, I can still hear myself think!"

I was a respectable kid, and any respectable kid makes sure his or her stereo was turned up to 11. The kid's smile grew while the device hopped up and down. More kids joined him, dancing to the music and giving out the right kind of laughter. It made my ears ring, but if a little hearing loss was all that it took to make my guests happy, then all of this would be worth it.

I took a turn to the kitchen. All of the snacks were lined up in neat little rows. Every type of cake, from cup to double-decker, lined the tables and counters next to a basin of soda. The kids *were* enjoying them, taking small bites, but it wasn't enough to call this "the greatest party in Summerway." I grabbed a cream pie and tossed it. The kid it hit stared at me.

"It's not a party until you get frosting in your hair," I said, winking.

He nodded and turned to the table. To even up the odds, I handed two younger kids a plate of cupcakes. I knew their grins – those were grins of a head filling up with ideas. They ran off to the backyard, squealing with delight. Everything was going great until I heard another moo while the stereo was changing songs.

I made my way through the crowd. I couldn't leave any guests waiting – but my stomach sunk when I opened the door. Talula stood on my porch. Her outfit may have changed from her skirt suit to party clothes, but she still wore that stuck-up sneer.

"When I heard that this party had a clown, I didn't think that it would be you," she said.

"What are you doing here!?" I demanded.

“Party Duty parties are open to all,” she said, feigning offense.

“Aren’t I a part of ‘all’? I think that I have just as much a right to be here as anyone else. Especially if I want to make sure that a little rule breaker is filling her obligations.”

“I swear to Santa, if you use that pen again –”

“Relax silly,” she said, and she flicked me in the forehead. “I’m here to enjoy myself. Maybe I’ll sit back and enjoy the magic act.”

The corner of my lip twinged. It must have because Talula’s eyes turned toward me like a snake striking at its prey. I thought that she was going to smile, but she held her expression of utter stuck-up snobbishness. And then I noticed something – or someone – by her side. That made her smile.

“Oh, I see that you’ve noticed my good friend Charmichael,” she said. “He’s been such a well-behaved little lizard lately, I thought that it would only be fair if I treated him. I hear that he’s quite the party animal.”

She giggled – at her stupid pun or at my expression, I couldn’t tell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I sat on the couch, watching Talula as she walked among the crowd. She talked with a kid, probably hyping up this magic act to him. Charmichael swung back and forth in her arms. I couldn’t stop staring. He was right there. I had to run up and rescue my poor little friend. Before I had a chance, the kid broke away from the conversation and ran toward me.

“Sally! Sally! Is the magician really going to explode into stars!” she asked, bouncing up and down.

“I um ...” I sputtered. “Are those kids playing Turbo Kart?”

I ducked into the crowd as soon as she was distracted. With Talula back in my sights, I darted for her, but ended up tripping over some kids crawling around on the floor. This caused me to bump into another one, knocking his soda into his face. Seconds later, I had a brownie in my face.

Chasing down Talula at that moment would have been incredibly rude, so I made my way into the kitchen and found the nicest piece of cake I could. Just as the kid was about to sit down, the cake found its new home on his head.

I didn't even have time to laugh before he took it up a notch and sprayed me with a chocolate squirt bottle. This became the perfect opportunity to change the game. I allowed him to "chase" me outside, and I hid in a bush. I wiped my face off with the shirt of my dress while he started seeking.

Talula was in front of Robbie, holding a balloon animal. She inspected it with both of her hands. Charmichael sat in her purse. Talula remained impeccably clean despite the chaos. There wasn't even a piece of candy or a single chocolate chip on her.

After she finished looking at the balloon, she tossed it behind her where some kid could easily step on it and force it to pop. Whatever game she was playing, I certainly didn't know its rules.

"Why did you tell that little girl that my magician was going to explode into stars?" I asked, pulling a leaf off of my head.

"Hmmm?" Talula said. "Was I mistaken? Does your magician not do that? The last magic act I saw did that."

"All magicians aren't the same."

"I do suppose some magicians are higher quality than others. Alas. So, when do the games begin?"

"Games?"

"Pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, musical chairs, freeze tag. It's something that everyone can enjoy," she said. "A kid who doesn't know what a game is. How quaint."

My face flushed red. I hadn't thought of them. I just assumed that everyone was going to do whatever they wanted on their own. Talula tapped her foot, and that made it even harder to think. She did have a point, didn't she? You could not have a party without games. Or at the very least, it wouldn't have been the bestest party in Summerway without them.

"They're about to begin shortly," I said. "I just need to get them ready."

I zipped around the crowd on a search for April. She had been engaging in a back-and-forth with Sarah, and it was getting heated. There would be no way for me to chisel into that conversation. I saw Molly sitting quietly by the bounce house. If I didn't know any better, I would have guessed she didn't think that the party even existed.

"Molly! I need your help! Talula says that the party needs games," I said.

"Well it ain't Talula's party, now ain't it?"

"No – but she is kind of right. It's not going to be the bestest party in Summerway without games! I don't have a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey set, and I don't have enough chairs for this many kids."

"We could distract 'em with a water balloon fight," Molly said, "while you think of a game that everyone can play."

I gave her the okay, and Molly and Robert took the balloons to the hose. I needed to find a place to think, and anywhere downstairs was too loud to do so. My house had become a zoo. Some kids danced. Some kids hung from the monkey bars. Others tossed the plastic balls back and forth. I groaned, knowing how long it would take to put them all back in the pit.

The party had even managed to spread to the second floor, where kids danced under the lights of the disco ball. Other kids were knocking them over in a race to get to the slide, as if they didn't have one in their houses. I opened the first door that I could get my hands on, and fell into one of the of the most alien things that I had ever encountered – a quiet that I actually liked. It didn't last for too long.

"Sally, is something wrong?" Linda asked.

Linda sat at her desk, reading a book. I saw the concern in her eyes, but then I noticed something more. Linda had painted up her face just like I asked her to, despite not even going to the party. I must have stared at her for a long time because she repeated the question again.

"The mayor – Talula is here! And she's got Charmichael! And she says that I need to make up a game, and –"

"Woah, slow down. One thing at a time."

"Okay. Talula came to the party. She even brought Charmichael! And she said that we need a game, one that everyone can enjoy. She's just doing this to humiliate me again."

"Do you really think so?" Linda asked, her lips curling.

"Why else would she be here?" I asked. "I need help! After what happened at town hall and what happened yesterday on the news, I can't let that happen to me again."

"Maybe it can't," Linda said.

"Are you crazy!?"

"Here me out," Linda said. "Do you know why being forced to wear that costume every day didn't make me do my magic act?"

"Because of your stage fright," I said, looking away.

"Yes, that was a part of it, but ... you were going to make me wear that outfit today no matter what. Who would really care about it if I wore it on Monday, if I already wore it today?"

Linda gave me a smile, which I quickly returned. A beautiful idea had formed. I left the house on a search for Talula. She sat on a bench, wringing out her hair. Her face was bare of expression as she did so. Her icy eyes targeted me once again, but this time I wouldn't be prey for the snake's strike.

"I suppose this was a decent appetizer, but I don't think that it's satisfactory. When do the *real* games begin?" Talula asked.

"Right now. Talula Heartly, I challenge you to a daring contest!"

"I see that you're still just a silly little girl living in a fantasy land," Talula began. "How is a game between two kids supposed to be one that *all* can enjoy?"

The crowd started laughing. No, I couldn't let this happen again. I had to move forward and strike the attack. It was the only way to end this once and for all. I put my hands on my hips and shot Talula a smile.

"Well, I thought that the kids around us could give us some suggestions, and we *both* do the dares. Whoever does more of the dares, wins. How is that enjoyment for everyone?"

"I'm not getting involved in this."

"Oh darn then," I said, snapping the trap. "I mean, we're all going to miss the chance to see our mayor doing silly things ... like the rest of us. Maybe she's just too good for us little people."

There was finally a crack in the mask. Talula took a step back, looking into the crowd. I took a refreshing glimpse as well. There were expressions of longing and expressions of anger. Talula looked frightened, but only for a second. She gave a small chuckle, and then smirked again.

Her smile said that she'd be happy to do it if it could save everyone's fun. Her eyes said she had been had.

"Maybe if someone didn't say how *great* these games were going to be, these kids wouldn't be so excited to see something happen," I said.

I stuck my tongue out for good measure. I could feel the anger as Talula clenched her fists.

"Very well, I shall engage in this daring contest with you Sally Dunn," Talula said through clenched teeth. "And I shall enjoy every second of it."

"I dare yeah two to act like a chick'n," came Molly's call from the crowd.

I didn't give Talula a second to squirm her way out of this one. I folded my arms and flapped around, squawking. I even went so far as pretending to peck the ground. There was a giggle here or there, but that wasn't what anyone wanted. They waited with bated breath for Talula to engage. I took a pause between a squawk and shot her a smirk.

"Is this your plan to humiliate me?" Talula asked.

"Plan? What kind of plan would I have? I'm just a silly little girl living in a fantasy land, remember?" I said. "Then again, maybe I'm not the real chicken here."

The crowd laughed, and it was the best kind of laughter, too. They were laughing *with* me. The tables had turned. I saw the beads of sweat running down Talula's face. She took a deep breath and started squawking. The laughter of the crowd swelled as Talula stamped around the yard. The camera flashes were all too satisfying.

"Wait! What kind of chickens don't have feathers on them?" I asked. "I'm just so *silly* sometimes! My friend April has brought a bag full of them! Come on everyone!"

Kids dashed to April's sack of feathers and started throwing them at us until we both looked appropriately ridiculous. I kept squawking with excitement, forcing Talula to do the same. As long as I was doing it, she could not stop.

"W-why don't we move to the next dare?" Talula asked.

"I dare you two to pour chocolate syrup on your hair!" Timmy shouted.

"Wait, that's not fair! Sally's hair is -"

Kids grabbed us by the arms and pulled us down to chairs. Talula struggled to escape, but it was to no avail. I smiled to her as Timmy carried along two buckets, dripping with chocolate syrup.

"Relax Talula," I said. "It's just chocolate, and we're at a party." I gave her my "ferocious" look. "You don't hate parties, do you? Oh yeah, I forgot. I'm the only one around here who hates parties."

The chocolate drenched us in a delicious gooey mess. Talula took deep breaths and wiped her newly dyed hair away from her face. She turned to me, and I almost fell off of my chair. She tried to use her freeze ray eyes once again, but smudged makeup and the chocolate stains and the hair in her face made her look too ridiculous to take seriously.

"Sally Dunn," Talula said, scowling. "You are never going to get that stupid lizard back as long as I am mayor."

The crowd and the camera flashes disappeared. I was alone in a void. I took a step back, and Talula noticed. She smiled. The silly little girl had finally had a taste of reality. I wasn't the only one she would do this to. Some of the other kids brought stuffed animals to this very party.

"Then someone needs to run against you," I said, through clenched teeth and with clenched fists. "And that someone is going to be me."

Talula's eyes widened in an instant.

"Y-you must be joking. If ... no, when I win, I can do anything to you. I can jinx you for life if I wanted!"

"And that's why I have to do this. You're only mayor because you scare kids. But I'm not afraid of you anymore. Talula Heartly, I challenge

you for Mayor of Summerway. I hear that the election will be in one month, from tonight.”

For the rest of the party, everyone had moved from screams and shouts to whispers and gossip. I don't remember moving from that chair for the rest of the party. I had a hard time processing that someone was running against Talula Heartly. And then I had a hard time realizing that *I* was that girl. Just me, Sally Dunn.

THE END