

CAROLINE CALA



#BEST BABYSITTERS EVER!



Caroline Cala

**The Good, the Bad and the
Bossy (Best Babysitters Ever)**

«HarperCollins»

Cala C.

The Good, the Bad and the Bossy (Best Babysitters Ever) / C. Cala —
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Being a boss isn't all it's cracked up to be in the second book of the Best Babysitters Ever series. Perfect for fans of Dork Diaries. Just when Malia, Dot, and Bree (aka the Best Babysitters Ever) corner the babysitting market, their lives get even busier. Malia's evil older sister ropes her into a thankless internship. Dot must win the science fair. And Bree's brand new cat turns out to be a holy terror. Meow! Malia is frustrated by the group's lack of commitment until she has an idea so great it rivals the creation of the club in the first place: they can hire new babysitters and take a cut of their wages! It's all of the money, and less of the babysitting. This plan is too perfect to fail. Until – spoiler alert – it does, in the most hilarious way possible.

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**#BEST
BABYSITTERS
EVER!**

**THE GOOD,
THE BAD and
THE BOSSY**

EGMONT



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We bring stories to life

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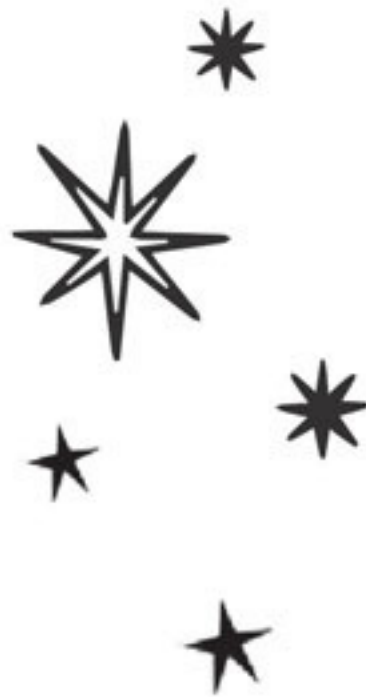
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CHAPT

MA

Sometimes, if she tried really hard, Malia Twiggs could remember a time when she thought boogers were gross. It's not that she currently *liked* boogers – she hadn't got an entirely new personality or anything – but in the months since starting her own babysitting club, she had definitely learned to make peace with them. It was amazing, really, the limitless boundaries of personal growth.

"Don't worry about a thing!" Malia yelled, waving across the yard to her best friends and fellow babysitters, Bree Robinson and Dot Marino. "I've got this situation under control."

The situation at hand was a crying Jonah Gregory, their four-year-old babysitting charge who had just tripped while chasing a butterfly. The damage seemed to be two skinned knees and a lot of tears but, thankfully, nothing else.

Bree offered a little salute and Dot nodded before they turned their attention back to the other three Gregory children.

Malia calmly guided Jonah across the yard and into the house. As a now-experienced babysitter, she knew exactly how to clean and bandage his scraped knees, tell a goofy joke to put an end to the tears, and, yes, do away with his crying-induced snot.

"BUT IT HUWTS!" yelled Jonah, who could not yet pronounce the *r* sound.

"I know it hurts, but look how brave you are," Malia said, expertly applying a Band-Aid emblazoned with smiling cartoon rabbits. "And now that you're all patched up, I have a surprise for you."

Jonah continued to pout.

"You get to have ice cream!"

At the mention of a frozen treat, Jonah's small, chubby face visibly brightened.

Babysitting had taught Malia many things, including how easily little children could be bribed with snacks, how willing they were to believe whatever an older person told them, and, last but certainly not least, how nice it was to buy things with your own money. But on a deeper level, babysitting had shown her what it meant to transform. One day, you could be a regular seventh-grader with no crisis management skills whatsoever, and then, before you knew it, there you were: herding four children around a home, all while making grilled cheeses, breaking up a fight, and negotiating nap time like it was nothing. For Malia (who, before the club, had always struggled with school and sports and every activity known to man), being good at something felt really, really nice.

Malia and Jonah made their way back to the yard.

“What? How come you get ice cream?” yelled eight-year-old Fawn, the oldest Gregory child, upon seeing Jonah’s chocolate-dipped cone. She angrily crossed her arms.

“YEAH!” echoed Plum and Piper, the six-year-old Gregory twins. “Not fair!”

“Don’t worry, I brought enough for everyone,” said Malia, holding the box aloft.

“Not so fast. Everyone has to sit down before they can have some,” said Bree with authority. As one of five siblings, Bree was an expert at dealing with little kids and generally navigating chaos. Immediately, everyone sat, and Dot distributed the cones.

Malia also remembered a time – around the same point when boogers were enough to trigger a meltdown – when a gig like this would have driven her and her friends over the edge. But now they could watch four children and actually enjoy doing it.

As the small ones devoured their ice cream, Malia craned her neck to peer over the chain-link fence, trying to catch a glimpse of the neighbours. The house next door was small and blue, with a grey-shingled roof and some spindly evergreen trees dotting the back yard. To almost anyone, it looked like a regular old house. But to Malia, it was a place of endless wonder.

It wasn’t the home itself that was magical, but the people who lived there, particularly one Connor Kelly (aka the only boy worth loving). That house was the place where he woke up each morning and played video games and ate waffles. Connor’s jeans – the very same jeans he casually stuck his hands in the pockets of – were somewhere inside, along with his backpack and his T-shirts and his bike and his toothbrush. The toothbrush that touched his beautiful smile. Malia shivered. It was almost too much to handle.

“Any sightings?” asked Dot.

“Not yet,” said Malia. But there was still hope.

For years, Malia had watched Connor float through the halls of Playa del Mar’s public school system the same way her older sister watched the shoe sales at the local mall – with a laser focus. But now, thanks to the Gregory gig, the unthinkable had happened: Malia could observe him in his natural habitat. That is, if he ever came outside.

“MOM!” yelled the Gregory twins, at the sound of a car in the driveway.

Mrs Gregory appeared at the gate, where a peaceful, controlled scene awaited her. This was the magic of babysitting. By this point, Jonah’s accident seemed like a distant memory. Any traces of sugar had been discarded. This was a skill they had learned over time – the ways of the artful clean-up. In the early days, the parents might return home to find their children spinning wildly, like sugar-addled tops. But today, all Mrs Gregory saw were the smiling faces of her four beloved children and the three somewhat older children who had kept them alive and relatively happy for the last few hours.

“I’ll definitely be calling you again soon,” said Mrs Gregory as she counted out a stack of crisp bills. “My sister invited me to a luncheon next weekend, and we’ll need someone to watch the kids.”

“Of course!” Malia said.

“We’d love to,” Bree added, nodding so vigorously that her dangling iridescent gemstone earrings twinkled in the light.

As the girls started down the driveway, Malia saw something from the corner of her eye. It was orange. It was moving. OH MY GOD IT WAS HIM.

The orange blob was none other than Connor Kelly, sauntering down his front lawn. The only thing standing between them was the Gregorys’ chain-link fence (and about a stratosphere’s worth of middle-school politics, but really, who was counting?). Malia couldn’t breathe. Her excitement level was like she’d seen a pop star and a movie star and a YouTube star and an actual star from the sky, all at the same time.

“Hi!” Malia said, so softly she barely heard it herself. It reminded her of how sometimes, when she ordered at the school cafeteria, some boy would place his order at the exact same moment as she did, but speak way louder, and no one would hear her voice.

“Hi?” Malia squeaked, a little louder.

Connor didn’t seem to notice.

“Hi!” Malia said, at a volume that was unfortunately loud. This time Connor looked up.

“Oh, hey,” he said, brushing his floppy hair off his forehead.

A bird chirped. Malia swore the sun began to shine a little brighter. Or was she just about to pass out? HOW WAS HE REAL?

“Um, okay,” Malia said.

“Okay what?” Connor said.

“You know, just saying hi. Hi!”

“Hi,” said Connor.

In her frequent daydreams of this situation, Malia was bursting with topics to discuss with imaginary Connor. But now, faced with real Connor, she couldn’t think of a single thing to say. She glanced awkwardly down at her sneaker. Luckily, Connor interrupted the silence.

“So, I just found out I’m going to a concert,” he said.

“Right now?” Malia asked. Maybe she could go, too.

“No, in three weeks,” he said. “Veronica’s coming to the Arts Centre.”

Malia gasped. Veronica (simply “Veronica,” no last name necessary) was the biggest superstar imaginable. In the past year, she and her blue hair had skyrocketed to fame unlike anything ever witnessed before. Even Bree had virtually abandoned her love for Taylor Swift when faced with the glory of Veronica.

“Oh! Yeah, me too,” said Malia. The lie escaped before she could realize what was happening.

Truth be told, Malia had never really caught Veronica fever. She thought Veronica was just *okay*, with her endless rotating wardrobe and her larger-than-life concerts. But Malia vowed then and there that no matter what it took, she would be at that show. It was the event of a lifetime – not because of Veronica, but because of Connor.

“Yeah, Charlotte’s dad got a box for the concert, and everyone is going,” said Connor. “Aidan, Bobby, Violet, Mo . . .”

“And me!” said Malia, with perhaps a bit too much force. “So I’ll definitely see you there.”

“Yeah. Sounds great,” said Connor, sweeping his floppy hair away from his perfectly sun-kissed forehead.

“I can’t wait! I mean, to see Veronica. I mean, of course.” Malia started walking backwards, away from the fence. “Enjoy the rest of your day!” As she tried to scurry away before any more words could escape her mouth, she stumbled over a tiny shrub. She quickly popped back up and retreated in a manner that she hoped looked very calm but feared looked rather rushed and awkward. Malia returned to the sidewalk where her friends were waiting and hoped she wasn’t blushing too hard.

They walked in silence for another block, until they were sure it was safe.

“Oh my god,” Malia stage-whispered. She thought she might hyperventilate.

“Are you okay?” Dot asked.

“You guys. There is a Veronica concert in two weeks, and Connor is going,” Malia practically exploded.

Bree stopped in her tracks. “VERONICA?”

“Clearly, we have to go,” Malia concluded.

“Veronica?” Bree repeated. “Is coming. Here?” She clutched her chest, like she had just been told something very profound.

“Yes, she’s giving a huge concert at the Arts Centre,” Dot said matter-of-factly. “It was announced weeks ago.”

“THE Veronica. In Playa del Mar.” Bree was still trying to make sense of this.

“I think she’s incredibly overhyped,” Dot sighed. “I mean, I appreciate how she tries to stand for female empowerment, but her songs are very formulaic.”

“But you listen to her,” said Malia, shooting Dot a look. She knew for a fact that it was true.

“I like to stay up-to-date on popular culture,” Dot argued. “I am not, technically, a fan.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE VERONICA IS COMING HERE!” Bree exclaimed.

“Yes, and everyone will be there,” Malia added. “Including us.”

“We have to go! How much are tickets? How do we buy them? Can we do this now?” Bree spoke, rapid-fire.

“The concert will probably have a decent concession stand,” Dot conceded.

“And it will give me so much to talk about with Connor,” Malia said wistfully. “Something to really connect over.”

“How close do you think we can get? WHAT IF I COULD HUG HER OR EVEN JUST TOUCH HER HAND?” Bree continued to talk at a heightened volume.

“That’s exactly how I feel about Connor,” Malia said.

“Malia.” Bree stopped in her tracks, and grabbed Malia by the shoulders. “We are talking about VERONICA. Like, an actual angel that is coming to our town to grace us with her presence. This is so much bigger than Connor.”

“I’ll never understand what you see in him,” said Dot. “He seems very . . . one-dimensional.”

“He doesn’t even have any pets,” Bree added.

Malia just sighed. Ordinarily, her friends were always on the same page, but when it came to matters of the heart, Malia was used to being on her own. Love was so far beyond reason. It was meant to be experienced, not understood.

First, though, she would have to experience this concert. Malia didn’t care what it took. She would babysit every day – heck, she would babysit every hour – until that concert rolled around. She was going to be there, and it was going to be amazing.



CHAPTER BREE

Bree Robinson could barely remember a time when she had felt this happy, although she supposed she felt pretty happy a lot of the time. Still, the most wonderful thing was about to happen – something even more wonderful than Veronica coming to Playa del Mar. Bree had been granted permission to adopt her very own cat.

Her mom had okayed it, on the condition that it couldn't interfere with Bree's ability to help out around the house. But how hard could a cat really be? You just had to feed it and love it and hug it and occasionally change its litter while holding your nose with one hand. A cat wasn't like a child, which actually required attention and sometimes even bribery. After babysitting, Bree figured, having a cat should be a breeze.

No longer would she have to feel insulted when Chocolate Pudding, the family cat, ignored her displays of affection. Her *own* cat would never do such a thing. Her own cat would love her and snuggle with her and be her very best friend. Her own cat might even wear a hoodie. With sparkles! Bree couldn't wait.

All day long, she could barely concentrate on school. This was her biggest life dream come true. (Well, technically her biggest life dream was the one where she discovers Veronica is her long-lost sister, and Veronica lets Bree borrow all her shoes and clothes and joins forces to help open a cat ranch, where hundreds of cats could roam and play in total happiness, forever. But this slightly more realistic dream – adopting a cat *of her very own* – was pretty high up there.)

But now the moment was finally here. Bree was on her way to meet her future cat.

Bree, Malia and Dot raced through the mall, with Bree leading the way, and Bree's mom trailing somewhere behind them.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to get a cat right now?” Malia asked. “I’ve booked us for four new gigs this week alone to help raise money for the concert.”

“It’s fine,” Bree said. “I can totally handle it. The cat will probably nap all the time, anyway.”

Nothing was going to rain on her cat parade. Not even Veronica.

They sped right by the other shops without so much as a glance until they reached the entrance to MeowTown, the neighbourhood cat café.

“YES!” Bree yelled, so loudly it might have been heard in outer space. She inhaled. It smelled like kitty litter and endless possibilities. She breathed in so deeply that some airborne fur went up her nose, and she sneezed. She was in heaven.

MeowTown functioned just like an animal shelter. It took in homeless cats, provided vet care and shelter, and offered the added bonus of letting the public hang out with the cats until they found forever homes. All of the cats at MeowTown were up for adoption, and the staff was knowledgeable about every cat’s story. Bree had been to MeowTown too many times to count, but she had never before gone with the mission of actually adopting one.

The girls scanned the café. There was an orange cat, a super-fat gray cat, a skinny black cat, a white cat with fluffy fur, and a trio of striped kittens. There was a cat with tortoiseshell fur, and even a Russian blue cat, which was called blue but was actually kind of grey. Bree stopped to say hello to each one.

“Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?” asked Dot. “I mean, did you do any research?”

“Research? On what?” Bree asked, perplexed. “They’re cats. I love them all.”

“But don’t they have, like, different temperaments or whatever?” Dot asked.

Was there any truth to this? Bree just shrugged. A cat was a cat. And a cat was wonderful.

Looking at face after feline face, Bree wondered how she would ever make a decision. How could she choose just one? It was like being asked to wear only purple or eat only gummy frogs for the rest of her life.

But then, she saw it.

All the way in the corner, a very creepy creature was huddled in the back of a hollow scratching tower. It didn’t have any fur, and its skin was pink and wrinkly. It had huge yellow eyes and enormous ears that stood tall on top of its head, like a vampire bat.

Was it even a cat?

All around her, the other cats were busy romping, playing and being petted by visitors. But the vampire cat-bat was all alone. At once, Bree’s heart broke. She knew how it felt to be ignored, when all around you everyone else was doing cute or impressive things and you seemed invisible. She often felt overlooked in her giant family, and it was a sad sort of feeling.

She and the cat locked eyes. Bree loved it immediately.

“Hi, little friend!” said Bree, by way of greeting.

She approached the scratching tower.

“Ew,” said Dot.

“I think there’s something wrong with that one,” said Malia.

“There is nothing wrong with her!” said Bree. She felt insulted on the maybe-cat’s behalf.

Dot crouched down so she was close enough to read the tag around the cat’s neck. “McDuffin. What kind of name is that?”

“It sounds like fast food,” said Malia.

“You know I love fast food, but that sounds like a mistake,” said Dot.

“I’m in love with her!” said Bree, clasping her hands together.

“You’re in love . . . with that?” asked Malia, wrinkling her face up like she smelled a fart. “Are you sure?”

“We’re not even sure what that is,” said Dot. “Is it a cat?”

"It is the most beautiful cat," said Bree. The cat visibly brightened. Watching this cat, Bree suddenly understood how Malia felt about Connor Kelly. It was like seeing a unicorn in a forest, and then having all your friends insist it was just a regular horse. Why couldn't they see the magic?

Bree's mom, who had lingered silently a few feet away from the girls, finally spoke up. "Oh," she said. "That's, um, that's interesting."

Bree sighed. "Everything about her is perfect."

"I beg to disagree," said Dot. She began counting off the reasons on her fingers. "For one, it doesn't have any fur. Two, do we need to be concerned that it's standing like that? Like it wants to maybe kill us? Three, its expression is . . . highly concerning."

"No! Her face is sweet," argued Bree. "So sweet and wrinkly. She just needs lots of hugs."

"And a sweater," said Malia.

"Oh my goodness, yes! Or a hoodie!" Bree was already planning her extensive wardrobe, mentally putting aside some of her former dolls' clothes that might be a good fit. Bree had dreamed about dressing up her cat, but this hairless cat would actually require it!

"Excuse me, um, Bartholomeow?" Bree called to the nearest volunteer. "Can you tell me more about this one?"

The volunteer shuffled over to the scratching tower. He looked to be a college student, and his name tag read *BARTHOLOMEW*. (Though Bree had clearly misread it as "Bartholo-meow," which only added to her excitement.)

"This here is a sphynx cat," he said, "a very special breed."

"You can say that again," said Dot, prompting a giggle from Malia.

"Sphynx cats are highly social cats that enjoy more attention than your typical housecat," Bartholomew explained. "They tend to get along well with other animals, and they have LOTS of energy. They love to be held and snuggled, almost like dogs!"

Attention? Snuggling? Bree was sold.

"I'll take her!" said Bree, with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for people on game shows or reality shows or home makeover shows or really any kind of show where people win stuff.

"Um, perhaps he can tell us some more facts about this specific cat before we sign on the dotted line," Bree's mom cut in.

"Yes, it's best to be absolutely sure of your decision." Bartholomew nodded somberly. "We're looking to find each of these animals forever homes, and we wouldn't want to cause the cat any undue stress."

"Where did this particular animal come from?" Bree's mom asked.

"McDuffin was an owner surrender." Bartholomew frowned. "McDuffin is quite young, you see, but the original owner had change-in-life circumstances and could no longer handle pet ownership."

This prompted an "Aww" from Bree.

Bartholomew paused before adding, "And neither could either of the families who adopted him since."

"I'm sorry, did you say this cat has been returned *three* times?" Dot asked.

Malia and Dot elbowed each other.

"Now, not exactly. I mean, technically yes, but not for any real reason!" Bartholomew added quickly. "No, no, there's nothing wrong with McDuffin. McDuffin just has the worst luck."

"And the worst name," Malia added.

"And the craziest eyes," Dot continued.

"And the sweetest face!" Bree concluded. "I LOVE YOU, HONEY MUFFIN!" she whispered at the cat's face.

The cat hissed softly.

“Anyway, it’s best to make sure you and the cat have good feelings about each other,” Bartholomew insisted.

Bree turned her attention back to Bartholomew, and then to her mom. “Yes, I’m absolutely sure. This is the cat for me.”

Bree’s mom hesitated, then nodded.

“All right, let’s make it official!” Bartholomew clapped his hands and led Bree’s mom over to the front counter so she could fill out the adoption paperwork.

While her mom took care of the boring stuff, Bree picked out a rhinestone collar and a trio of sparkly toy mice. She got a little choked up, imagining her new best friend romping joyfully around her room with the new toys. Bree couldn’t wait for McDuffin to discover her wonderful new life. Just a few moments later, McDuffin was in a cat carrier, bound for the Robinson house.

“So you have a new baby,” Malia said, eyeing the feline cargo. “How does it feel?”

“I can’t believe it!” Bree said. “This is the best day of my life.”

“What are you going to name her?” asked Dot. “I mean, clearly you can’t keep calling her McDuffin.”

“I shall name her . . .” Bree paused for effect. “Veronica.”

“I’m sensing a theme here,” said Dot.

It was only fitting. For years, Bree had tried to change the family cat Chocolate Pudding’s name to Taylor Swift and had been met with much resistance. But now she could name her own cat whatever she wanted. From this moment forward, Veronica would forever be known as Veronica.

“I suppose this Veronica doesn’t have a last name, either?” Malia asked.

“MEOW,” Veronica said, somewhat aggressively.

“Okay, then,” said Malia. “No last name necessary.”

“You guys, thank you so much for being part of my big day!” Bree said, getting a little choked up. “You’re going to be the best cat aunts ever.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” Dot smiled. “Although I’m not sure I’m cut out to be a cat aunt. But I’ll certainly try my best.”

“We should celebrate,” said Malia.

“Ooh, yes! Do you guys want to hit up the food court?” Dot asked.

“Yeah!” Malia visibly brightened at the mention of food.

“We should probably get going,” Bree said, tilting her head toward Veronica, who was now rubbing her bald, wrinkly head against the inside of the carrier door. “You know, introduce her to her new home and all.”

“Oh, right,” Malia said.

“Yeah. But you guys go on without me!” Bree said.

She gave each of her friends a one-armed hug with her right arm, with the cat case cradled in her left. There was something bittersweet about this moment. Of course she was sad to miss out on the food court, but she was embarking on a much bigger journey – the path of pet parenthood.

The entire car ride home, Bree whispered into the cat carrier, sharing her hopes and dreams. She told Veronica about all the beautiful toys waiting back at home, and how they would wear matching outfits and sleep in Bree’s big, fluffy bed. She told her about all the songs she would sing and the musical numbers Veronica could participate in. There was even talk of a sequined hoodie the perfect size for a cat.

At last, they arrived home. Bree could hardly believe this was it: the beautiful moment when they started their new life, together.

“And this,” Bree said, opening the door to her bedroom, “is your new home. What do you think?”

The cat did not answer.

Bree placed the cat carrier in the centre of her room and opened the tiny door.

“Welcome home, Veronica!”

The cat made no move to exit. She just sat there, scowling.

“Veronica! This is where you live now.”

More scowling.

Bree sat on her bed, waiting for the cat to emerge. But she showed no sign of movement. Bree tried to think of what she would do if a new babysitting charge was being shy. Maybe a game of show-and-tell would liven things up. She started wandering around the room, holding up objects.

She grabbed a stuffed giraffe off of a shelf. “This is Wallace,” she said. “I met him at a carnival when I was seven. He’s kind of a secret. I’ve slept next to him every night since I was in kindergarten and I’m not about to stop now. But now that you live here, if you want to cuddle with me instead, well, we can talk about that.”

Veronica blinked.

Bree grabbed a book from her desk. “This is my chemistry textbook. I’m not sure what it’s doing out on my desk right now, because I hate it.” She slipped it into her backpack, where she could no longer see it. “That’s better.”

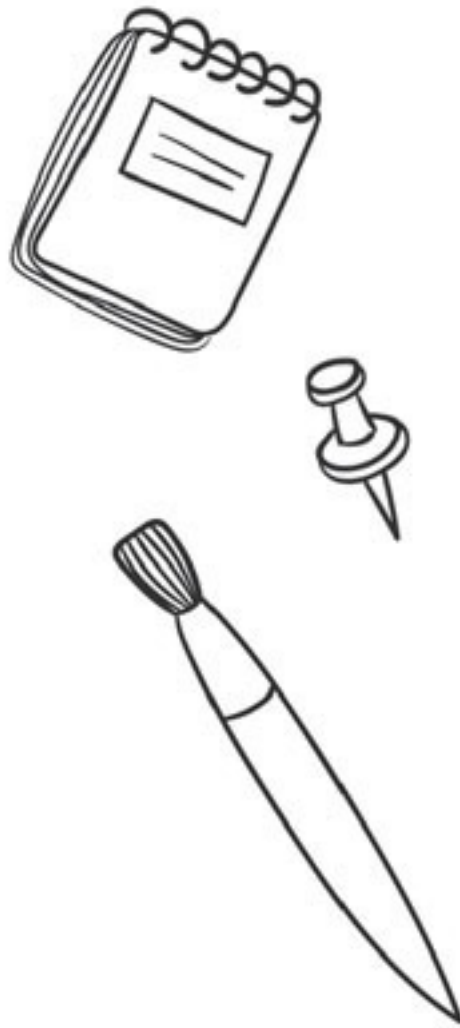
Next, Bree wandered back over to the bed. “This is my favourite pillow.” She held up a pillow that her seventeen-year-old stepsister, Ariana, had given her for her last birthday. It was navy blue, with lots of very shiny silver sequins sewed all over it, like tiny little mirrors. “Isn’t it pretty?” The pillow sparkled in the light.

“MEOW-MEOW!” Veronica came bounding out of the case. “MEEEEEEEEEROW!” The cat headed straight towards her, a look of pure fury in her giant yellow eyes. Bree had never seen anything move so fast in her life. She was so shocked, she dropped the pillow.

“MEEEEEEEEEW!” Veronica landed on top of the pillow, where she began attacking it with her very sharp claws. Mirrored sequins flew into the air, along with clouds of stuffing. It was the most destructive thing Bree had ever seen. She stood there, stunned.

Bree had loved that pillow for as long as she’d had it, and she’d loved cats for, well, her entire life. She had pictured a very different homecoming. Instead, she stood helplessly, watching as her perfect day was destroyed in seconds.

She had expected to spend this day petting Veronica, dressing her in various dolls’ clothes while softly singing her songs from *Cats the Musical*. Veronica, clearly, had a different idea.



CHAPTER

10

Dot stared into her beaker with the same intensity her mother (a practising clairvoyant) used to gaze into her crystal ball. Most likely, it was growing up in a home surrounded by crystals and candles and charts about meridians and chakras that had pushed Dot toward her love of hard data and irrefutable facts. While she excelled in all subjects, from literature to algebra to Latin, science was her thing. Dot preferred the school's science lab to all other places. To her, there was nothing more satisfying than being surrounded by test tubes and chemicals and scales, conducting experiments that would ultimately lead to only one right answer.

Today, her chemistry class was working on a very simple assignment, the distillation of wood. Dot already knew the outcome: after the wood was heated, it would decompose, forming charcoal and vapours. Still, she completed every step, charting her progress along the way.

Dot was glad that today's assignment was such a simple one because she was tired. She had spent the previous night babysitting for the Gomez family, new clients they had taken on to help drum up money for Veronica concert tickets. Dot didn't like to take jobs on school nights, especially two nights in a row like she had this week, but she supposed it was worth it until the concert.

To be very clear, Dot did not care about Veronica. She hardly ever listened to her music, except sometimes ironically. Okay, fine, Dot could admit that some of the songs were catchy, and even that they had the ability to put her in a sort of infectiously good mood. There was a time and place for Veronica music, like when attempting to exercise or perform a mindless task. But Dot was most excited about the concert itself, because the venue had excellent junk food – popcorn, funnel cakes, and the best chicken fingers you could imagine. Her mom hadn't made any progress on her rules

against allowing gluten or animal products or processed sugar into the house, so Dot needed to seize every opportunity she had.

“Looking good,” said Mr Frang, nodding as he passed Dot’s lab table. The head of the science department, Mr Frang was a tall man with a grey beard that reminded Dot of an elf. It was obvious that Dot was his favourite student, though she knew he tried to act impartial.

Dot squinted her eyes, concentrating with laser focus, but her mind wasn’t on today’s experiment. In truth, it was somewhere else entirely: thinking about the upcoming science fair.

The middle-school science fair was a very big deal, as it was the gateway to everything important in the science community. The winner of the school fair would go on to compete at the regional level, followed by the state level and, eventually, against the entire nation. Students who competed at the national level were scouted for special programs and awards, and were often the ones who were awarded scholarships when the time came to apply for college.

Dot knew she was only in middle school, but still, she liked to plan ahead. Despite her mom’s psychic abilities, it would be hard for her to afford college tuition, and Dot was determined to work it out on her own. This was just one of many factors that made it particularly troubling that she hadn’t yet come up with a winning idea.

Luckily, the other students at Playa del Mar weren’t particularly competitive. She could already predict what everyone else would do. All the usual suspects would be covered: a homemade radio, a chart of the various types of fingerprints, an exploration of how a blindfold changes the relationship to taste and smell. That was all fine and good. But she needed to innovate. She needed something that would trump them all.

This was game time. Crunch time. Go time. All of the times. This was it.

Just as Dot was getting lost in a daydream in which she won the national science fair and was receiving a medal of honour at the White House, the door to the science lab creaked open.

Principal Davies set one foot inside the room.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet a new student here at Playa del Mar.” She stepped aside to allow said student to enter. “This is Pigeon de Palma.”

Dot looked up to see a very pretty girl. She had super-long, wavy brown hair, almost like a darker version of Dot’s hair. She wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with a faded golden lightning bolt, black skinny jeans, and the coolest ankle boots Dot had ever seen. They were black leather, with teeny tiny gold studs snaking all around them, in complicated designs. Around the ankles, they had three thin straps, each ending with a delicate gold buckle. Dot had seen shoes like that in magazines but never in person.

“Hi, everyone,” Pigeon said, offering the classroom a little wave. Her voice was sort of low and gravely, but very cute. “I’m so excited to be here.”

“Welcome, Pigeon!” said Mr Frang.

Dot wasn’t sure what to make of this Pigeon person. It was very rare for Playa del Mar to welcome new students after the start of the school year. It was even weirder for them to look . . . cool.

“Pigeon just moved here from New York City,” added Principal Davies, which was pretty much the only thing she could have said to push Dot over the edge. It was Dot’s dream to live in NYC someday – heck, at this point it was her dream even just to visit – and Pigeon had spent her formative years there? This was so unfair. No wonder she seemed so sophisticated. No wonder her boots were so cool. “I’m sure you’ll all do your best to make her feel welcome,” the principal concluded, leaving Pigeon to fend for herself.

Pigeon circled the lab tables, looking for a place to sit. Dot turned her attention back to the distillation of wood. There would be plenty of time to analyze the new girl, but for now, there was work to do.

“Do you mind if I join you?” said a gravely voice.

Dot looked up. Pigeon was speaking to her.

“Um, I don’t really do group assignments,” Dot said. She wasn’t trying to be rude; it was true. Unless the experiment absolutely called for lab partners, Dot always preferred to work alone.

“It’s all right, we already did this experiment at my old school,” Pigeon said, casually tossing her long, wavy hair. A spicy fragrance wafted through the air. Dot immediately recognized it as a designer perfume her own hippie mother wouldn’t let her buy.

“Well, the experiment is basically completed, so there’d be nothing left for you to do anyway,” Dot said.

“I can just observe,” Pigeon said as she pulled up a chair.

Dot inhaled, trying not to let her newfound audience faze her.

“At my old school, distillation of wood was actually a *sixth*-grade experiment,” Pigeon said. Her condescending tone was not lost on Dot. “I wonder if I’ll be repeating a lot of the old curriculum here. Especially because science has always been kind of my thing.”

“Science has always been *my* thing,” said Dot. “Which is why, outside of the school’s curriculum, I’ve been conducting research on my own for years now.”

Pigeon impatiently tapped her fingernails on the lab table, breaking Dot’s concentration. Dot noticed they were painted a sort of green metallic oil-slick colour that Dot had never seen before. Even Pigeon’s nail polish was fancy.

“So, where in New York did you live?” Dot asked.

“We lived on the Upper West Side,” Pigeon said, “but my school was on the Upper East.”

“Wow. That must have been amazing,” said Dot, while her head kept singing *unfair, unfair, unfair*.

“This town seems . . .” Pigeon trailed off, as though searching for the right word. “Cute.”

The way she said the word “cute” made it clear it wasn’t a compliment.

Dot wanted to leave this town more than anyone, but she didn’t appreciate this stranger rolling up and trash-talking it on her very first day. Who did this person think she was?

Dot’s hands flew across the equipment, attempting to complete the assignment as quickly as possible so she could be free of this situation.

“I’m going to start handing back the quizzes from yesterday,” said Mr Frang. “Please don’t let them distract you from your experiments. If you have any questions, of course I’m available after class.”

Dot didn’t even bother to look when the paper landed on her table. She never got anything less than an A, especially in science.

“Hm. B-plus,” said Pigeon, staring at the quiz.

“What?” Dot snapped to attention. “There must be some kind of mistake.” Dot did not get Bs, ever. She hardly ever got A-minuses. Bs were for the hoi polloi. The fact that Dot even knew what “hoi polloi” meant only further cemented her status as an A student.

But sure enough, there it was: her quiz, with a big red B-plus on top of it.

How had this happened? She knew she’d been kind of exhausted this week, with babysitting eating into her homework time, but still. This was unprecedented.

Once again, Principal Davies appeared at the door.

“Pigeon, I’m sorry. As it turns out, I need you to come with me. I forgot I have another part of the orientation packet to go through together.”

“You know, I actually interned for Elon Musk last summer,” said Pigeon as she stood and pushed her chair in. “You know, the guy who started SpaceX? And Tesla? And who is, like, an investor and businessperson –”

“I know who Elon Musk is,” Dot interrupted, annoyed.

“If you ever need somebody to tutor you, I’m sure we could work something out.”

Dot was flabbergasted. Pigeon smiled. “It’s been awfully nice chatting with you. I’m sure I’ll see you around.” And with that, she turned and walked away.

“Yeah, likewise,” murmured Dot.

Dot kept her eyes on her beaker, fighting the urge to watch Pigeon as she walked away.

Dot knew one thing for sure: she did not like this Pigeon person. It wasn’t just her ridiculous first name, although that probably didn’t help. It was – Dot couldn’t believe what she was thinking, was she turning into her mother? – her aura.

Pigeon had very bad energy.

You’re being ridiculous, Dot thought. You don’t even know her. It’s her first day at a new school and she’s just trying to be impressive to make friends.

Still, this felt like that moment in a movie, where the main character meets her nemesis. Dot wanted to remain open and kind. She wanted to know her story. But she was, Dot hated to admit, experiencing a feeling she had never felt before. She was intrigued. She was jealous. She was conflicted. For perhaps the first time ever, she was seriously intimidated.



CHAPTER

MA

Malia watched as Connor Kelly sauntered across the cafeteria, blue plastic lunch tray in hand. He gave her a slight nod and then sat down with the other boys on the soccer team. Malia sighed. He was so close and yet so far away.

Malia remembered a time, not too long ago, when she and Connor barely exchanged words. Back then, she sometimes wondered if he even knew her name. Now he said at least three sentences to her each week. That, Malia thought, was progress.

Still, so much about Connor remained a mystery. He was like some exotic endangered species Malia could only observe from a safe distance. Across rooms . . . on social media . . . but rarely up close and personal. But now she had places to run into Connor – like the cafeteria, or the Gregory house, or, if everything went according to plan, the Veronica concert.

She had spent all of her waking moments (and also some of her sleeping ones) dreaming for the past three days about the concert and how it might go. The darkness, the neon lights, the fog, the music, the dancing. Malia shivered. The thought of dancing in Connor Kelly’s proximity was almost too much to handle.

But of course, before that could happen, she had to buy the tickets. Malia had lined up jobs like crazy, posting on social media to drum up some new clients. Plus, Bree’s mom agreed to let

her babysit her brother, Bailey, three days a week, and Mrs Gregory had booked Malia for three upcoming jobs, which meant money and a potential Connor sighting in one.

Shoko and Mo arrived at the table, placing their trays down with a clatter. Shoko and Mo were pretty much inseparable, and they always sat at the same lunch table as Malia and Bree. Malia snapped out of her daydream.

“What are you wearing to the concert?” asked Mo urgently. The entire school had caught Veronica fever. The concert was all anybody could talk about.

“I don’t know,” said Malia, though she had, of course, been obsessing about this very topic for days. Maybe if they had any money left over from buying the ticket, she could get a new outfit. “What are you guys wearing?”

“Ugh, who knows? It’s such an event. We’re going shopping this weekend!” said Shoko, waving her hands around as if she found this stressful. Her parents gave her a seemingly unlimited allowance to spend on things like concert wear. Malia wondered, as she often had, what that must be like.

“Hiiiiii,” said Bree, suddenly appearing with her lunch. She put her tray down and pulled up a seat next to Malia.

Bree removed her studded jean jacket and hung it on the back of her chair. Malia noticed that she had tiny little scratches all over her arms.

“Oh my god, what happened to you?” said Malia, with genuine concern.

“Oh, just Veronica.” Bree sighed. “There was an incident this morning, involving glitter eyeliner and a very violent feline outburst. That cat’s claws are no joke.”

“Wow. I’m . . . sorry to hear that,” Malia said.

“It’s okay,” said Bree with a shrug. “I mean, it’s actually not okay. But I’m fine.”

Dot approached the lunch table and put her tray down next to Malia’s.

“Can I sit with you guys?” she asked.

This was an irregular occurrence. For as long as Malia could remember, Dot had always sat at a different lunch table, with the honours students who thought they were a little bit smarter than everyone else. Malia had learned not to take it personally, as lunchtime politics were complicated.

“What? You’re deigning to sit with the non-honours students?” Malia teased. “At LUNCH? What is going on here?”

Dot rolled her eyes. “This annoying new girl is sitting at my table, and I just . . . can’t.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” Malia said, “Because we were just talking about gearing up for the Veronica concert and I have booked all the jobs in the land.”

Dot took a deep breath.

“Okay. To be clear, I still need time to focus on homework right now. Not to mention the science fair.” She paused before adding, “And for the last time, I do not like Veronica.”

“To each her own,” said Malia. “But I, for one, will babysit every second I can until we are all sitting front row at that concert.”

And she meant every word.

Malia arrived home floating on a cloud. She had taken to listening to Veronica on her way to and from anywhere, as she found it inspired her to make her dreams a reality.

“I saw your face on my phone. You just won’t leave me alone,” sang Veronica. Of course, this made Malia think of Connor. *“Social me-me-me-me-media. But everything’s about you.”*

Malia felt so joyful that she almost didn’t mind when she bumped into her sister, Chelsea, the seventeen-year-old human equivalent of an evil snake, making her way through the front hallway.

“Why, if it isn’t the smaller version of me!” said Chelsea. This was her idea of the ultimate compliment. It was also a stark contrast from the usual insults Chelsea flung Malia’s way.

Immediately, Malia was suspicious.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“The real question is: what do YOU want? What do you want, little sister, from your life?”

Yes, Chelsea was up to something. But really, Chelsea was *always* up to something. Previously, she had formed a rival babysitting business and attempted to put Malia and her friends out of business. Who knew what sort of terrible scheme she was devising now.

“Right now, all I want is to go to my room,” Malia said, then added, “where you aren’t allowed.”

Malia’s eyes landed on the large framed family portrait that hung near the front door. The entire family – Mom, Dad, Chelsea, and Malia stood dressed in white and beaming for the camera. It looked so happy, and so misleading. Malia could barely remember another time when she had been in Chelsea’s presence and made that same expression.

“Oh, Malia. When I was your age, I was so ambitious. I was already mapping out my future. I think it’s about time you started to do the same.”

Malia tried to go around her, but Chelsea blocked her path.

“MOM!” Malia yelled, which was the easiest way she could think of to make this situation stop.

“Yes?” called their mother. Moments later she appeared, with a celery stalk in her hand.

“Chelsea is harassing me about my future again,” said Malia.

“That is an unfair assessment. I was just trying to offer Malia a chance to follow in my unusually accomplished footsteps.”

“I can make my own footsteps!” Malia protested.

“By joining our team at Abernathy Inc.” Chelsea paused, waiting for a reaction.

“Wait, what?” asked Malia. This was news to her.

“Ramona and I are looking for a new junior intern,” Chelsea continued, “and I think Malia would be a perfect fit.”

Chelsea had recently accepted an internship with Ramona Abernathy, a retired tech mogul and the wealthiest woman in all of Playa del Mar. Even though she was technically retired, Ramona was still a very busy woman. As Chelsea explained it, she worked as a consultant on all sorts of projects and sat on the board of many organizations. Malia didn’t quite understand what that meant, but she gathered that it was important. And working for Ramona was impressive, by any measure.

“Oh my goodness! What an honour,” said their mom.

Still, Malia was skeptical. This was Chelsea, after all. Her big sister was known for achievement in every area except kindness. Doing Malia favours was not a bullet point on her very long résumé. In fact, she wasn’t even particularly inclined to include Malia in social activities, routinely excluding her from social gatherings *in their own house* and “forgetting” to wait for Malia to join the carpool home from school.

But now Chelsea was being nice? For no apparent reason? Something was amiss.

“I think this sounds like a wonderful opportunity!” said their mom, clapping her hands together as though she was at a Broadway show.

“Does it pay?” Malia asked.

“It pays to put it on your résumé,” Chelsea said, rolling her eyes.

“That kind of experience is priceless,” said their mother. Malia’s mom worked as a career counsellor, and this kind of thing was right up her alley.

“The internship is every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after school, plus Saturdays,” said Chelsea.

“Whoa. Four days? But what about babysitting?” Malia asked. “And schoolwork? I’m already super busy.” *And the Veronica concert is happening in a few weeks*, she silently added.

Chelsea snorted. “Like you’ve ever been serious about school. And look at me. I’m able to balance my internship with school, plus way more activities than you’ve ever done.”

“Malia, I’m glad you’re thinking about time management,” said their mom.

“Yes, and I have a lot on my plate,” said Malia. This was a phrase her mom used a lot, so Malia hoped it might work to her advantage.

“But time management is a great skill for you to work on,” her mom concluded. “And this can be practice. Having an internship will teach you how to prioritize!”

“Unless you’re afraid you can’t do it,” Chelsea added.

Malia sensed this was a fight she would never win. Plus, she hated it when Chelsea acted superior. If Chelsea could balance everything, then surely Malia could, too.

“Okay, so how does it work? Do I have to apply?” she asked.

“Just come with me to the office on Thursday,” Chelsea said. “I’ve already talked you up. You’re my sister, and Ramona will love you.”

“Could I, like, try it out first?” Malia asked. She was terrified of committing to something that would eat up four days of her week, without the promise of money or Connor or her friends or anything of the other things that brought joy.

“Malia, this is an opportunity hundreds of girls would kill for,” Chelsea said. “It’s a yes or a no.”

Malia had never liked that phrase, about the things other girls would kill for. Anything involving killing was sure to be bad, including the sound of this internship. Still, she felt trapped. If she said no, she would look like a wimp in front of Chelsea. If she said yes, she just cut her available babysitting time in half, not to mention her funds. She had a concert to go to and Connor’s heart to win.

“I don’t know . . .” Malia waffled.

“The answer is yes,” said her mom.

“Yes?” said Malia tentatively.

Her mom beamed. Chelsea smirked. Malia sighed.

Since she clearly had no choice in this matter, she figured she might as well roll with it. With the art of babysitting firmly under her control, maybe it was time to expand her business sense by taking on a real-person job. Who knows what she’d learn, or what she’d be inspired to do? Maybe Ramona had the secrets to unlimited earning potential. She was about to find out.



CHAPTER BREE

But the bonnet is so cute!” yelled Bree. “I don’t understand what your problem is!” She held a glittery blue bonnet in the air, prompting the cat to dig his claws ever deeper into Bree’s second-favourite sparkly pillow.

In the three short days Bree had owned him (the vet had informed them that Veronica was, in fact, a boy cat), Veronica had all but destroyed Bree’s lifelong dream of feline parenthood. He had also, quite literally, destroyed her duvet, her fluffy white rug, her curtains, and everything that once sat on top of her desk.

Despite what Bartholomew had said, this particular sphynx cat had no interest in being hugged. He wasn’t even a little bit cuddly. He didn’t want to socialize with Chocolate Pudding, or with Bree, or really with anyone. He did, however, have a lot of energy.

“I love you!” Bree yelled, close to tears. “Why won’t you let me love you?”

The cat stared at her menacingly, his giant yellow eyes glowing with what anyone who wasn’t Bree would likely identify as pure evil.

Bree pounced on top of him, causing the cat to scratch at her arm. “You’re supposed to want to be held!” she said. “Hugs are good for you!” Somehow, she managed to hold him for just long enough to squeeze the bonnet on to his head and secure it with the little elastic. Veronica made a sound not unlike a baby screaming.

Just then, there was a knock at her bedroom door.

“Bree, lovey?” her mom called from outside the locked door.

“Yes?” Bree called, trying to sound casual.

"I'm picking up Emma and Olivia up from dance lessons, so it's time for you to hang out with Bailey until we get back. He needs help with his school project."

"Okay!" Bree called as Veronica ran in manic circles around her.

Bree's job was to babysit Bailey, especially now that the concert was approaching and she needed the extra money. But so far, it felt virtually impossible. How was Bree ever supposed to see human Veronica if she couldn't get cat Veronica under control?

"And it's taco night, so can you also take the stuff out of the fridge? I'll heat everything up as soon as I'm back."

"Uh-huh!" Bree said, her voice coloured with fake sunshine.

"Okay! Everything is good with the cat?" Her mom sounded suspicious. How did she always know everything?

"Yep! Everything is great," Bree said as Veronica went into full-on attack mode with one of Bree's remaining pillows, sending stuffing flying through the air.

"Okay, then! I'm heading out. Come downstairs, okay?"

"Coming!" Bree said in a singsong voice, as she scrambled to pick up the bits of discarded stuffing and bury them securely in a trash bag.

Veronica meowed, pleased with himself.

Bree sighed.

"Look, I get that you had a rough kittenhood or whatever, but I love you now. You're safe here. You don't have to keep acting out. You have food and litter and toys and an entire wardrobe with outfits for every occasion and even accessories."

The cat meowed defiantly.

"I need you to, like, calm down."

Veronica blinked one time.

"Can you stay in here and not destroy everything? I have to go downstairs for a little bit to spend time with Bailey. I'm not abandoning you. I'll come back upstairs soon, okay?"

The cat sauntered in front of the door, daring her to open it.

"No, I need you to stay in here."

Bree felt very exasperated. She wondered what Taylor Swift would do in this situation. She carried her cats around in the airport and stuff, and they seemed so nice.

Bree had no choice but to resort to bribery. She opened a package of fish-flavoured cat treats and threw one across the room. Veronica bounded after it, his bonnet sparkling all the way. Bree slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

Downstairs, she opened the fridge to find the ingredients she needed for taco night. Tortillas and all sorts of toppings – including her favourite: fish covered with her mom's signature marinade – sat in foil-covered dishes. Bree took each dish out of the fridge and lined them up on the counter. Bree loved taco night. She felt thankful that it would be a happy ending to what was turning out to be a very stressful day.

Once everything was set up, Bree headed to the family room, where Bailey sat on the couch, watching cartoons, eating popcorn, and having no idea how good his life was. He didn't have a psycho cat. He didn't have to hold down a job or even help out around the house. He just got to be nine years old, which seemed like a pretty good deal.

"What are you watching?" Bree asked.

"*Danger Duck Detective Agency*," Bailey said, never taking his eyes from the screen.

"Should you really be watching this right now? Mom said you needed help with your project."

"Yeah, but I'm almost done," Bailey countered. "It's a papier-mâché model of the Eiffel Tower. Mom already helped me make the base level and I just have to put another layer of paper on top."

"Okay, well, then maybe we should finish it together now, quickly, so we don't have to worry about it," Bree suggested. "You'll feel good once it's done." She purposefully left out the part where

she wanted to get it over with as fast as possible so she could run back to check on her . . . challenging cat.

“Okay. It’s in Marc’s study,” Bailey said with a shrug.

They headed into Bree’s stepdad’s office, where the lopsided, half-finished Eiffel Tower was on top of the desk, surrounded by decidedly less artistic things, like stacks of Marc’s legal papers. Bree spread out the supplies, and they got to work. They were just getting into a good rhythm of layering on the paper strips, when Bailey suddenly looked surprised.

“What’s that noise?” Bailey asked.

“I don’t hear anything,” Bree said.

“It sounds like a goose. Being strangled.”

At that moment, something truly horrible-smelling made its way into Bree’s nostrils.

“What is *that*?” said Bree, gagging. It was the worst thing Bree had ever smelled. It was even worse than nappies.

“Ewww! That is sick!” Bailey added, covering his nose and mouth with his hands.

They followed the smell out of the study, through the foyer and into the formal living room – the fanciest room in the house, where Bree and her siblings were usually not allowed to go. The scent grew stronger and stronger.

And then, she saw it.

Veronica – sparkly bonnet still on his head – was inside the grand piano. There he stood, perched on the strings of the enormous instrument, where he proceeded to puke directly into it.

“GAK! GAK! GAK!”

“Whoa,” said Bailey. “Mom is going to kill you.”

“VERONICAAAAA!” screamed Bree, sprinting to the piano and trying to grab the cat. But Veronica was too fast. He leaped out of the way and scurried out of the room, flying through the house until he was nowhere to be found.

Bree exited the living room in a stupor, following Veronica’s path of destruction. In the short amount of time she had been with Bailey, Veronica had attacked a dining-room chair and consumed all of the ingredients that were laid out for the family’s fish taco night. Now the thrown-up fish tacos were marinating inside the piano.

“How did he even get out of my room?” Bree wondered aloud.

“Meow!” Bree turned around, hoping to see Veronica. Instead, she saw Chocolate Pudding, the family’s furry orange cat. Chocolate Pudding used to annoy her, the way she was always licking her hind legs and minding her own business. Now Chocolate Pudding seemed so sane. Why, oh, why hadn’t Bree realized how good things were before?

Bree missed her old life from three days ago. She missed doing crafts and seeing her friends and eating snacks and listening to the soundtrack from *Cats the Musical* on endless repeat in the comfort of her own bedroom. That is, her old bedroom – before a disturbed cat had taken over and turned it from a sanctuary to a stress factory. Bree loved animals; she even loved *this* animal. But that didn’t change the fact that this whole cat adoption was the hardest thing she had ever done.

After doing her best to clean out the piano (which took more paper towels and more self-control than Bree had wielded before), she searched the house from top to bottom. Veronica was nowhere to be found. With a resigned sigh, she reasoned she might as well return to her other responsibility and go check on Bailey.

She entered Marc’s office to see the tower had grown impressively in size.

“That looks great!” she exclaimed. At least something was going right.

Unfortunately, as she took a closer look, Bree saw the tower had something very, very wrong with it. There were a bunch of handwritten notes and little typed words all over it. *Damages . . . compensation . . . loss . . .*

Bree gasped as she fully accepted the sinking realization: The topmost layer of the papier-mâché tower was constructed from Marc's legal papers.

"Bailey! What kind of paper did you use for that?"

"I just took some of the pages from one of those big piles," he said, motioning to one of Marc's shelves.

"But that looks like one of Marc's briefs! It has lawyer words all over it."

"Don't worry, I'm going to paint over it," Bailey said. "No one will see them."

"That's not the point. The point is what if he needed that? Marc is going to be super mad!"

"Oh. Do you think that paper was, like, important?" Bailey asked.

Bree covered her face with her hands.

"Can't he just print a new one?"

"No, it had his notes all over it!"

"Oops?" said Bailey.

Bailey seemed remarkably unfazed by this exchange. Of course, Bree thought, because he could just go back to eating popcorn and being nine and not having to take responsibility for stuff. This was all Bree's fault, because she was supposed to be watching him. This entire day was a disaster. Before Veronica, babysitting had been the one thing she had under control. Now she suddenly felt like she was failing at everything.

Never one to hide from her problems, Bree sat in the front hallway, waiting for her mom to get home. As soon as she got back, Bree would tell her what happened. Her mom was going to be super mad. But Bree also needed her to tell her what to do.

"Why, hello there, Mom!" Bree said the moment the key turned in the lock.

Emma and Olivia ran past her, flaunting the joyful freedom of being children.

"What's wrong?" asked her mom, making a suspicious face.

"Who says that anything's wrong?"

"You. You're acting very odd right now. Why are you sitting on the floor like that? What happened?"

Bree started to cry. "Veronica-ate-the-tacos-and-puked-in-the-piano-and-Bailey-used-Marc's-brief-to-make-the-Eiffel-Tower-and-I'm-sorry!"

"Bree." Her mom looked tired. "Remember what we talked about. Bree, I know you love Veronica, but I need you to get this cat under control! Our agreement was that the cat couldn't interfere with your ability to help out around the house. Your job is to watch Bailey at least three days a week, and you promised this wouldn't interfere. This is exactly the kind of situation . . ."

Bree wailed with grief.

"It's okay, it's okay," her mom said. "I mean, it's not okay, but no one is hurt and that's what's important."

"I'm sorry," Bree said. "Please don't make me give up the cat."

She thought of the terrible things he was probably doing to her bedroom at that very moment.

"All right, but consider this a warning," her mom told her. "We need to get this under control, otherwise the cat can't stay."

Bree hoped that she and Veronica could come to an understanding. She wasn't sure exactly how, but for now, she was willing to be hopeful.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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