

Chapter 1

JANE CONNELLY NEEDED A JOB, AND SHE NEEDED IT FAST.

Her mother was knocking on her bedroom door, calling through it, to tell her about the “great” unpaid internship she’d found for Jane at the university where she was an adjunct.

“It’s in the American Studies department. They need some help with filing. You’d get fantastic experience, Janie,” she said through Jane’s locked door. “You’ll need that for your college applications.”

“I know, Mom,” Jane lied. She *didn’t* know. She wasn’t sure she even wanted to go to college, and she had no clue what American Studies really entailed. It sounded awfully broad.

“What are you doing in there?”

“I’m changing my shirt,” she said, holding a pillow up to

her face so her voice would be muffled. That was how much she didn't want to have to face her mother at the moment.

"Well, come downstairs and talk to me when you're done changing," her mom said. Jane heard footsteps retreating down the hall and then coming back seconds later. "Are you going somewhere? Is that why you're changing?"

"No, Mom," she said. There was a good chance that the combined sighs of mother and daughter could be heard around the world.

Jane bolted over to her computer, needing to find something, anything, to do with her summer. Her two best friends were going to be counselors at band camp, the sleepaway kind. They were leaving the next day for their ten-week stint. But seeing as how Jane wasn't actually in the band, nor did she play an instrument, a job as a band camp counselor wouldn't work for her.

A quick Google search brought her to an online job board. She clicked fast and furious, hunting for any jobs that might suit her, scrolling through the ads as if her life depended on it.

As if being friendless for the summer wasn't bad enough, spending all of break at her mother's university sounded like the opposite of anything she was interested in. It sounded soul sucking and mind numbing. So maybe, in a way, her life *did* depend on it.

- ★ **Telemarketer: part time, unlimited earning potential**
- ★ **DO YOU LOVE DOGS?! Min. wage but get to play with puppies!**

- ★ **Knives, Knives, Knives: excellent commission**
- ★ **CASH FOR BILLS!**
- ★ **Sperm donors needed**

Each one was worse than the last.

Her parents would kill her if she got involved in a pyramid scheme; she knew that for a fact. Her older sister, Margo, had gotten involved in one a few years ago. She was trying to sell beach condos. In their beach-adjacent community. The worst part was that her parents never seemed to get mad at Margo for the pyramid scheme. They claimed the humiliation of losing her money was punishment enough. Jane disagreed, but no one ever asked her.

“Margo skipped a grade. Margo passed all the AP tests with the highest marks. Margo got a full-time internship at Princeton University this summer, and she doesn’t even go there. Margo’s going to be the first person on Uranus,” Jane muttered under her breath. In a moment of desperation, she clicked on the link for *Child Care*. It was a last-ditch option, but that was where she was; that was what her life had come to.

Jane scanned the listings, knowing that she needed to avoid any and all situations that involved babies. Babies were terrifying, with their soft spots and their wobbly necks. Way too much responsibility for a girl like Jane.

- ★ **Mother’s helper needed for newborn triplets.**
- ★ **Child care in our home.**

★ **Do you love babies?**

★ **Babysitter needed.**

She clicked on the last one because it was located in her town. She skimmed it once and then slowed down to scan it more closely on the second read-through.

Four days a week, 9 to 5 . . .

Eek. Nine a.m. was not her best time of day. But it was in town, so she wouldn't have to get up too early to make it there on time.

As long as it was within walking distance.

Jane's parents had given her a hand-me-down car for her seventeenth birthday, but of course Margo was using it to drive to Princeton every day. Margo's internship was far more important than Jane's technical ownership of the vehicle. Maybe if Margo had actually made some money in that pyramid scheme, she would have money to buy her own car.

What made the situation even more frustrating was that Jane could never even complain about it. Her parents would point out that Jane wasn't paying for the car herself, and therefore it was still theirs. But if Jane mentioned something along the lines of the fact that Margo had her own car in high school that she didn't have to share with anyone, she would be met with stony-faced silence. To Jane, it was the principle of the thing. It was a double standard.

She sighed and went back to reading the ad.

Three girls—a set of five-year-old twins and a seven-year-old . . .

Sounded exhausting but also doable.

Fifteen dollars an hour . . .

It might not be the easiest job on earth, but that was decent money. Even Jane’s allergic-to-math brain told her it was close to five hundred dollars a week. Five hundred dollars a week was always better than zero dollars a week. And she wouldn’t have to spend extra time with her mother.

There was no name with the advertisement, so Jane composed the e-mail “To whom it may concern.” She stated her name, phone number, and babysitting experience—which was limited to watching her cousins during family events, but she could probably get her aunt to fudge their relationship if she needed references.

She held her breath, crossed her fingers, rubbed her lucky rabbit’s foot, and hit Send.

Jane checked the clock and knew she needed to talk to her mother. If she didn’t go downstairs to talk to her mother, then she definitely needed to study for her finals. Her last two finals were the next day, and Jane needed to show her teachers the old razzle-dazzle if she wanted a grade higher than C in either of those classes.

She weighed her options, then decided on a third: none of the above.

Instead, she went back to reading the *Doctor Who/Little Women* fan fiction she'd started the previous evening.

The blossoming love between the Eleventh Doctor and Jo March was some of the most fascinating reading she'd ever done. Particularly because she could never deal with Jo marrying the German guy. How could she do that with Laurie right next door?

Jane was about to get to the *good stuff* when her cell phone rang. She considered ignoring it in favor of the good stuff, but it was an unknown number and her curiosity was piqued.

"Hello?"

"Jane!" an unfamiliar voice said in a very familiar way.

"Hi?"

"It's Connie Garcia-Buchanan." Once she heard the name, Jane realized that she should have immediately recognized the voice, with its slight Spanish accent and permanent smile.

"Hello," she said, still confused that Connie was calling on Jane's cell phone. "Do you want to talk to my mom?"

"No, sweetheart! I got your message about the babysitting job. I was very surprised to hear from you, but so happy."

"Oh," Jane said, still not quite catching on.

"The girls just adore you, and I think you would be great with them this summer."

"Oh! Oh my God," Jane said, slapping her forehead in shock.

“I didn’t realize. I just thought . . . Well, I didn’t think. I didn’t put it together. It’s an anonymous ad. . . .” She stumbled and stammered, trying to grasp what was happening.

“I understand. I thought for sure you had put it together, what with the girls and their ages. And the job being here in town.”

Jane laughed because she was uncomfortable, and that was what she did when she was uncomfortable. She also felt incredibly stupid. But that wasn’t new for her.

“It would be nice to have someone so close by,” Connie continued while Jane sat on her bed and chewed her nails down to the quick.

“Yes, that makes sense,” she said.

“I’m getting my master’s degree in social work—I don’t know if your mom mentioned that to you. I decided to take three classes this summer, trying to get ahead of the game. Two of them are offered online, but I didn’t realize what a beast it would be trying to entertain the girls while I did homework and studied for exams. Not fun.”

“Not fun,” Jane said, slightly dazed.

“When are you done with finals?”

“Tomorrow,” Jane said. She tried to keep a smile in her voice even as the reality of the situation sank in.

“Can you come over around four o’clock? For an interview?”

“Um, yes. I guess so.” Jane tried to ignore the thought gnawing at the edge of her brain.

“Good. I promised the girls they could help choose their babysitter. So while I don’t feel like I need to interview you, they’re still going to want to.”

Connie laughed, so Jane did, too, but it sounded like “ha ha ha” rather than actual laughter sounds a normal person would make. She loved Connie and the three little girls. She even thought Connie’s husband, Buck, wasn’t too bad a guy.

“And I would only need you until the beginning of August. Classes end after that, so you would still have a few weeks off before school starts.”

“That would be great,” Jane said. She tried not to think about the real problem. But the more she tried not to think about it, the less she could ignore it.

“I’m so happy you’re one of the applicants. The other ones were a little less than desirable. A few were downright creepy.”

“I guess you never can tell who might crop up from an online ad.”

“That’s for sure,” Connie said. “Well, this is great. So great. Thank you so much for applying, even if you didn’t know it was me you were applying to.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at four, then.”

“See you then.”

“Excellent. Say hi to your parents for me.”

“I will.”

Connie paused before saying good-bye.

“And, Jane, I know you and Teo don’t talk much anymore, but

this will be so good for the girls. Don't let anything from the past stop you from making choices in the present."

There was a solid chance that Jane died of embarrassment right there on the phone. What were the odds that she accidentally, anonymously applied to babysit for Teo Garcia's younger half sisters?

Margo would know the odds, the little voice in the back of her brain said. She told it to shut up, but it never did.

When Jane regained her composure and came back from the dead, she said, "Thanks, Connie. I'll keep that in mind."

"Bye, Jane."

"Bye." Jane tapped the End button on her phone and flung herself back onto her bed, rolling around, trying to figure out what she had gotten herself into.

Connie had it wrong, though. Teo wasn't the problem. Teo was a nice guy, if not slightly boring. The problem was his constant shadow and Jane's eternal foe, Ravi Singh.

What Jane could never understand was why a guy like Teo Garcia had a best friend like Ravi Singh.

Only one thing would be able to soothe her at the moment. She picked up her trusty Magic 8 Ball and considered what question to ask.

"Is it a bad idea to take this babysitting job?" Jane asked the Magic 8.

Cannot predict now.

Definitely not the answer she was looking for.

Chapter 2

SOMEONE TAPPED ON TEO'S BEDROOM DOOR SO LIGHTLY THAT he barely even heard it. This usually signaled that his sisters were playing in the hallway. They had all sorts of games that Teo didn't know the rules for and they wouldn't explain to him.

A light tap on the door was always supposed to be met with him throwing the door open and yelling "boo" or growling or doing something to make them giggle.

Today he pulled the door open and yelled, "Gotcha."

Unfortunately, he found his stepfather, Buck, on the other side.

"Sorry," Teo said, straightening up. "I thought you were going to be Keegan."

"Oh, got it. Sure. Keegan's always up to something."

Teo nodded.

Buck nodded.

They stood there for a moment.

“Um, so did you need something?” Teo asked.

“Oh. Yeah. I was wondering. Well, your mother and I were wondering, if you wouldn’t mind, maybe.”

Teo bit his lip and fought the urge to close the door in Buck’s face. He wouldn’t go so far as to say that he didn’t like Buck, because most of the time they got along okay. Things would be easier with Buck if he would just say things to Teo rather than beating around the bush so much.

“Is this about the lawn?” Teo asked.

“Yes,” Buck said, visibly relaxing.

“Mom already talked to me. I’ll mow it. She said I could do it this weekend after I was done with school.” Teo gestured toward his bed, where all his AP chemistry notes were laid out. “My last final is tomorrow.”

Buck looked into his room and let out a low whistle.

“Gotcha,” he said. “Well, that’s a good boy, then.”

Buck patted him awkwardly on the back, but he didn’t move to walk away.

Teo smiled, tight-lipped, and closed the door, just to have Buck tap on it again.

“I, uh, wanted you to know that I appreciate all your hard work, and I’ll give you twenty bucks for a good job.”

Teo paused. He was saving every last dime he could so he wouldn’t have to live with his mom and Buck again after graduating from high school. But sometimes money from

Buck felt tainted or as if he was bribing Teo. Still, money was money.

“Thanks, Buck,” Teo said.

“You’re welcome.” He continued to stand in the doorway.

“I’m going to shut the door now, okay?”

“Oh, yeah, good luck with studying,” Buck said, and then he finally, *finally*, walked away and Teo could get back to the solitude of his room.

Life would actually be easier if Buck lived up to some kind of evil-stepfather stereotype instead of being this squirming, wishy-washy people pleaser.

When Teo was younger, he thought Buck’s issues were because Teo was Puerto Rican and Buck was white. But as the years passed, it became obvious to Teo that it had more to do with their age difference.

Buck was uncomfortable having a stepson only fifteen years younger than he was, and it wasn’t Teo’s job to make him feel okay about it. So now there were these big, gaping silences and a deep crevasse of awkwardness between them. The older Teo got, the weirder things were.

He shot his friend Ravi a whiny text about Buck, but Ravi didn’t answer immediately, so Teo was going to have to find some other way to amuse himself. He stared at the notebooks on his bed and sighed. He had too much work to do for Buck to distract him this way.

Teo really had only one choice. In order to restore balance in his life, he did a quick Google search for *Jose Rodriguez*.

It was his favorite fantasy, meeting his father and his father's family. Anytime things got weird with Buck, Teo would start his search all over again. He had never met Jose, but that didn't keep his imagination from running wild.

The problem was, Teo didn't know much about his father besides his name and that he was Puerto Rican. Teo tried searching a couple of different combinations of his parents' names together and got tons of hits because their names were common, but nothing useful or concrete. He wasn't sure what he would do if he ever found his father. Mostly Teo wanted to know where his father was. Knowing that he was out there somewhere would be enough.

The doorbell rang downstairs, and Teo heard the murmur of voices filtering up through the air-conditioning vents. *This must be another one of the potential babysitters*, Teo thought. There had been a whole train of them in and out of the house all week.

He listened for a few more minutes to the muffled voices coming up from the living room. The more his sisters giggled, the more curious he became.

He checked his phone again—still nothing. Where the hell was Ravi? He almost always answered his texts within minutes.

Carefully, Teo cleared his search history and x-ed out the tabs. His nightmares often featured a scene where Keegan asked something along the lines of *Who is Jose Rodriguez?* during dinner. *Teo was looking for him on the Internet*, she would continue.

Then his mom, Buck, and all three sisters would stare at Teo until their eyes popped out onto the dinner table and rolled around. Nightmare Teo could speak only Spanish, and not even Nightmare Mom understood him. Not being understood was a theme in a lot of his recent nightmares.

Checking his phone one last time, Teo tiptoed out of his bedroom and sat at the top of the stairs to eavesdrop as his sisters interviewed the Potential Babysitter with a constant barrage of inane questions.

“Do you like brownies?” Piper asked.

“What kind of brownies?” Rory asked before the Potential Babysitter could even reply.

“Will you make brownies with us?” Keegan asked.

Their rapid-fire dessert questioning didn’t surprise Teo. They were passionate about baked goods.

“We could make brownies,” the Potential Babysitter said.

“Yay!” all three girls cheered.

“See?” Rory said. “I told you she’d be nice.”

“So what will you let us do?” Keegan asked.

Teo knew that question was like the kiss of death. As the oldest of the three girls, Keegan tended to be the ringleader. She was the kind of kid who, if you turned your back to her long enough, would rally the rest of the kids and start a mutiny. He knew this for a fact, as she had already done it once when she was in kindergarten and twice in first grade. Teo’s mom spent a lot of time in parent-teacher conferences about Keegan.

Teo checked his phone again.

“What do you mean?” the Potential Babysitter asked.

“Like, can we go to the pool, and the sprayground, and mini golfing?” Keegan clarified.

“I guess?” the Potential Babysitter answered.

“The mini golf at the boardwalk?” Piper asked. “Not the dumb one on the highway.”

“Yeah, that one’s for babies,” Rory added.

Teo had no idea how they came up with those kinds of rules, but they were forever evolving. Last time he checked, they loved the mini golf course on the highway because it was fairy-tale-themed.

“We’ll have to ask your mom about that,” the Potential Babysitter said. Teo knew his mom would like that the girl was deferring to her in these matters.

All three girls started talking at once. This would be a make-or-break moment for this poor girl.

“Mom never lets us go to the boardwalk.”

“Maybe you could tell her to take us.”

“Or maybe Teo could take us.”

Teo slid down a few steps and peeked through the slats of the handrail. He couldn’t see the face of the girl they were interviewing, but he really wanted to interject that he would *not* be taking anyone to the boardwalk.

“I want to play the crane machine.”

“I want to play Skee-Ball.”

“I want to mini golf.”

“I want to go on the log flume!”

The storm of wants and requests kept raging. Teo felt legitimately sorry for the Potential Babysitter at this point. He was surprised that his mother hadn't stepped in to help. She must have wanted to see how the older girl would handle all three kids when they got whipped into a simultaneous frenzy.

“Do you guys like Slip 'N Slides?” the Potential Babysitter asked over the din.

The three girls all grew quiet. “What's that?” Rory asked.

“It's kind of like a log flume for your body.” Teo thought that was an excellent description of a Slip 'N Slide.

“Really?” Keegan asked.

Teo leaned over again to watch the proceedings.

The Potential Babysitter nodded.

“Do you have one of those?” Piper asked.

“Yup. In my garage.”

“What else?”

“Um. Well. Okay.” She rubbed her palms on her shorts. “We could set up the sprinkler and one of those little wading pools and make a fountain. We could turn the lawn sprinklers on, and it would be like having our very own sprayground.”

Teo smiled. He used to do stuff like that all the time at the Connelys'.

And that was when he realized his sisters were interviewing Jane Connelly. The girls were all going wild about the setup

that Jane had described, and Teo tried to back up the stairs, instead knocking his elbow hard and hissing in pain.

“Teo?” Keegan asked, walking over to the steps.

“Crap,” he said under his breath.

He played it cool and walked down the stairs the rest of the way like a normal person.

“Hey, guys,” he said. He turned to Jane and nodded at her casually.

“Hey,” Jane said.

“You remember Jane, right, honey?” his mom asked. She was sitting at the dining room table, observing the interview.

He opened his mouth to say something snarky like *How could I forget Jane?* Then he thought better of it. Instead, he shot his mom a look as he passed that he hoped she would interpret as *You could have warned me.*

Thankfully, his phone vibrated at that moment. Finally. Wait until Ravi heard what was going on.

Ravi

Eh, don't worry about Buck.

You should invite me over for dinner.

“Um, gotta take this,” he said to the room at large, not focusing on anyone, as he wandered into the kitchen and leaned against the counter.

He tapped out a message to Ravi, telling him to come over for dinner, and continued to listen to his sisters interview Jane. He felt trapped and regretted that he hadn't stayed in his room.

The girls peppered her with questions.

"We can go to the library and on picnics. We can take walks and ride bikes," Jane said.

The thing about Jane Connelly wasn't so much that Teo didn't like her. He was neutral about her. She was always nice enough to him. He had spent a lot of time with her while his mom was taking night-school classes.

But Ravi hated her. He claimed she was his archnemesis. Teo didn't see it, but he also wasn't interested in fighting with his best friend about a girl who didn't really matter.

It would suck to have Jane around all the time. Ravi would be so pissed off. He practically lived at Teo's house in the summer because his parents refused to put on the air-conditioning unless it was over a hundred degrees outside, and Ravi couldn't handle that.

Maybe Teo's mom wouldn't hire Jane. There was still hope.

But hope died moments later when he heard his mom offer the job to Jane, who accepted it on the spot.

Of course.

Teo took a deep breath, preparing to tell Ravi the news. His fight-or-flight response kicked in, which was really more like an all-flight, all-the-time response. Conflict was not his forte. He would rather go back to studying chemistry than tell Ravi this

news. Maybe they would never be at his house at the same time, and Ravi would never have to know the truth.

But the thought of Ravi coming upon Jane in the kitchen one morning after a sleepover, and the yelling that would ensue, was enough to force Teo to suck it up and tell him.

Teo

Jane Connelly is going to babysit my sisters this summer.

Ravi's answer was immediate.

Ravi

THAT IS THE WORST NEWS I HAVE EVER HEARD. I AM GOING TO HAVE TO HAVE A LONG TALK WITH CONNIE ABOUT THIS DECISION. HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN?

You know how my family is. There was no way I was going to be asked my opinion.

BUT SERIOUSLY. JANE CONNELLY OF ALL PEOPLE!?

You need to chill out with the caps lock.

The next five words came in separate texts.

Ravi

I

WILL

NOT

CHILL

OUT!

Teo let out a long breath. This wasn't going to end well.

Chapter 3

MARGO HAD ONE THOUGHT ON HER MIND ALL DAY, ALL WEEK, even all month if she was being honest with herself. There was one thing that was keeping her up at night, making her feel guilty, and taking up a lot of brainpower. She kept telling herself that ripping off the Band-Aid would feel so much better than dealing with the pit in her stomach and her clammy palms every time she thought of this one particular thing: finally coming out to her parents.

They were nice people. They wouldn't disown her for being bisexual. At least that was what she told herself over and over again on her way home from work every day.

She thought about different ways to come out. Maybe write them a heartfelt note or perhaps hire a skywriter.

She grinned, thinking about that one as some butthead

nearly sideswiped her car. Jane wouldn't be pleased if Margo hurt her precious 1998 Buick LeSabre. It seemed like every driver on the road was out to get her, always honking at her and giving her the finger. Like she was *trying* to get into a car accident.

Margo was happy every day she made it home alive, and today was no different. She pulled up in front of the house and sighed with relief.

As she walked through the front door, she accidentally let it slam behind her, alerting the lady of the manor to her presence.

"Margo, is that you?" her mom called from the kitchen.

"No, Mom. It's a burglar."

"A burglar wouldn't call me Mom."

"I know, Mom. It's a joke."

"Oh," her mom said, sticking her head around the corner. "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. Let your sister know. I don't want her to be shocked when she's forced to come downstairs for dinner."

Margo would have laughed, but she felt for Janie. Sometimes it seemed as if her mom and her sister couldn't agree on anything, not even something as simple as dinnertime.

Margo trudged up the stairs and dropped her stuff off in her bedroom before peeking through the slight opening of Jane's bedroom door.

"Hey," Margo said, opening the door a little further.

"Hello," Jane said, her voice dull.

"Mom wanted you to know that dinner will be ready soon."

“Cool.”

Margo glanced around the room. “Why do you have a poster of a blue phone booth?”

“It’s not a phone booth. It’s a police box,” Jane said.

“What’s up?” Margo asked, leaning on Jane’s desk. There was an odd feeling in the room. Jane was curled up on her bed, staring into the corner of her room.

“It’s kind of a long story,” Jane muttered.

“We have at least a few minutes before Mom forces us to eat dinner.”

Jane smiled at that. Their mother loved staying on schedule.

“She’s going to kill me,” Jane finally said.

“I’m probably going to need further information to decide whether you’re exaggerating.”

“Mom got me an unpaid internship at the university, and I went out and got myself a babysitting job instead.”

Margo *tsked*. “Yeah, Mom’s gonna be pissed.”

“Thanks for your support,” Jane said, flipping over facedown on her bed.

Margo took a seat on the bed and patted her sister’s back awkwardly. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“So why’d you do it?”

Jane rolled over and sat up. “Probably because the idea of driving to and from work with Mom every day basically sounded like hell.”

Margo nodded. "She really does like to get on your butt about things."

"Can't you ever say 'ass'?"

"She really does like to get on your *ass*," Margo repeated.

"Thank you. It sounds better that way. Like you're actually on my side."

"I am on your side."

Jane frowned. "I don't think anyone is really on my side."

"So where's the job?" Margo asked, rather than arguing with Jane's statement. She knew it would only end with Jane going off on a tangent about how the rest of the family were geniuses and Jane was a poor little imbecile. She'd heard it all before.

Jane shook her head. "That's kind of the worst part. At the Buchanans'."

"Shouldn't that be good news?"

"I don't know. When I asked the Magic 8 about it, it seemed hesitant."

"How can the Magic 8 seem hesitant?"

Jane handed the toy over to Margo. "It kept telling me to ask again later."

Margo closed her eyes and held the ball, concentrating on the question or else she knew Jane wouldn't accept the ball's answer. "Will Mom flip out on Jane?"

Margo looked at the answer and read it out loud. "*Ask again later.*"

"Maybe it's broken," Jane said.

Their mother called them for dinner then, interrupting Margo's answer.

"What were you two doing upstairs?" their mom asked when they came into the kitchen to fill their plates.

"Girl talk," Margo said with a grin toward Jane as they took a seat at the table.

"Where's Dad?" Jane asked.

"In the basement. He's worse than you two." She stood up from the table and called through the basement door for her husband to come eat before the pork got cold.

Once everyone was seated, Jane took a deep breath. "I got a job," she said.

"Yes, Jane," her mom said. "At the university."

"Um, no, a different one. Connie—you know Connie around the corner—needed a babysitter for the girls this summer. She's taking a ton of classes and, well, I got the job. I'd really like to help Connie out."

"That's nice of you," her dad said, smiling genuinely, obviously oblivious to his wife's unhappy glare.

"I got Jane an internship at the university this summer, Steven. It's going to look great on her college applications."

"The pay is really good," Jane continued. "I don't have much savings, and the job Mom found is unpaid."

"You know, Linda, maybe Jane finding a job on her own is a good thing," he said pointedly.

"Maybe she needs to be more concerned about her future and less concerned about making money," her mother said.

“Or maybe she needs to do what she enjoys.” Her father’s eyebrows went into his hairline—that was how hard he was trying to make this point.

Jane sank back into her chair, looking relieved. Her mother leveled her gaze at her.

“Do you really want this? It’s going to be hard, much harder than filing. Being a babysitter isn’t as easy as it looks. Especially for kids as energetic as those Buchanan girls.”

Jane sat up straight. “I want to. I swear. I went over there yesterday, and they interviewed me. It seemed like a lot of fun.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun. Even if it is hard work, it seemed like it could also be a lot of fun. And the girls seemed so excited.”

“All right.”

“All right, I can do it?”

“Yes,” her mom said. “It’s good that Connie will have some reliable help this summer. From what she tells me, Teo is in a funk. Being rude and always out with that boy.”

“What boy?”

“That Ravi. The one who used to always tease you so much in middle school.”

“Thanks for the reminder, Mom.”

“Maybe he liked you,” her dad said.

Before Margo had a chance to tear into him about how sexist and awful it was that boys could tease girls under the auspices of “liking them,” her father stood and started clearing the table, and her mother followed. Margo’s rant would

have to wait for another day. Along with any chance for her to come out.

Even if her parents had stayed at the table, there was no way she could have come out to them after that display. It would have been foolish to even try to talk to them when they both had Jane on the brain.

Or at least that was what Margo told herself so she would stop feeling like such a coward.

She would come out when the time was right, on her own terms.

“I need to get back downstairs,” their dad said. “I’m working on a huge submarine model, and I’m at the trickiest part.”

Margo rolled her eyes but helped with clearing the table.

Only Jane sat there through the cleanup, looking stunned.

Margo took the seat across from her once everything had been put away and the dishwasher was humming.

“It sucks that Mom acted like that,” Margo said when their mother had slipped out the back door to take the trash to the garbage cans.

“Thanks,” Jane said. “But it actually went way better than I’d expected. She didn’t even mention me quitting. I thought for sure that would be her fix for everything.”

“What would you have done?”

Jane looked thoughtful. “I would have really pushed the whole ‘helping a neighbor’ angle. She would have eaten that up. I think luck was on my side, though, since mom had talked to Connie recently.”

“True,” Margo said.

“I wonder what’s up with Teo. I thought he was always some kind of perfect son.”

“Yeah, perfect Teo, always doing what his mom needs him to do, never complaining.”

“He practically ruined our childhoods by being so perfect. And now he’s off with Ravi Singh, making trouble every night.”

“Wait, has Teo really gone all bad-boy?” Margo asked.

“No. I don’t think so, at least. It’s probably more along the lines of Mom totally misconstruing something Connie said and turning the fact that he’s not home much or whatever into a much bigger deal than it is.”

Margo squinted. “Yeah, I just really can’t imagine what kind of trouble those two would even get into.”

“I bet they mug old ladies.”

“And knock over mailboxes with baseball bats.”

“Take candy from babies,” Jane said.

“Hot-wire cars,” Margo added.

“Drink wine coolers and stay out past ten.”

“Yeah, they’re totally badass.”

Jane pumped her fist in the air. “Yes! I love it when you curse.”

Margo giggled at her sister’s enthusiasm for swearing.

Margo almost told Jane her secret right there in the dining room. It had been a long time since she’d felt this close to her sister. Sometime in her teens Margo had lost touch with Jane, and then when she left for college, she never seemed to have the

time. But maybe this summer would be a good chance for them to become friends again.

It couldn't hurt to have one.

Unfortunately, their mother came back in from the yard, and their dad starting yelling from the basement, and the moment was lost. But Margo promised herself that she would find another one and not let it pass her by.

Chapter 4

ON HER FIRST DAY OF WORK, JANE SLIPPED OUT THE FRONT door with a yelled good-bye toward the back of the house.

“But what about breakfast?” her mom called from the kitchen.

“I’m not hungry.” Jane slammed the door good and hard to punctuate that sentence.

She ate a granola bar that she found at the bottom of her backpack and washed it down with water from the bathroom sink. It might not be the most balanced breakfast, but it got her out of the house nice and fast.

She marched down the street and around the corner, proud that she was actually going to be twenty minutes early. If only school were this close to her house, she might be early for that sometimes, too.

Connie had told Jane to let herself in the back door when she

arrived, because it was sometimes hard to hear the doorbell from inside the house, and Connie wanted Jane to get comfortable streaming in and out anyway. Connie had had a key made for her and everything.

So Jane let herself in through the back door and was met by a shirtless Teo in the kitchen.

If she were a different kind of girl, she would have let out a wolf whistle.

For the record, she'd seen him without his shirt plenty of times in the past. He was the kind of guy who would mow the lawn without a shirt on or would whip it off while playing soccer with his friends. He was a lifeguard, for God's sake, Jane told herself. She'd seen his naked torso on numerous occasions.

But somehow, while he was sleep-mussed and standing in his own kitchen wearing only a pair of basketball shorts, it was a completely different story.

She tried to calculate the last time she'd seen him without his shirt on and realized it was probably last summer. Jane would guess he'd done a lot of abs work during those long winter months, because she could basically count his six-pack.

"You're early!" Teo said, putting down his glass of orange juice and covering himself with a paper towel.

Jane turned away to hide her laughter and the blush that was traveling up her entire body, only to walk directly into a kitchen chair.

"Sorry," Jane squeaked, apologizing to Teo and the chair she knocked over.

“No, it’s cool. Just a little surprising,” Teo said, looking at the paper towel as though he wasn’t entirely sure how it had gotten in his hand. He put it down, then went into the laundry room and grabbed a sleeveless T-shirt, pulling it over his head as he reemerged.

“Thanks. I obviously can’t handle the sight of boy nipples,” Jane said, blushing even more deeply and slapping her hand over her mouth. *I shouldn’t even be allowed to speak*, she thought.

Teo’s eyes went wide, and he blushed as deeply as Jane had.

She squeezed her eyes closed and balled her hands into fists.

“What are you doing?”

She carefully opened one eye so she wouldn’t totally lose her concentration. “I’m trying to sink through the kitchen floor.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Any advice?”

“I’ve never actually sunk through a floor before,” Teo said, but now he was smiling, and Jane could at least relax a little.

Jane cleared her throat. “So, um . . .”

“Teo,” an annoyingly familiar voice said from the basement stairs, “I thought you were bringing down Pop-Tarts.”

Jane thanked all the gods she could think of that someone was about to rescue her from this embarrassing moment.

Unfortunately, that someone was none other than Ravi Singh.

He took one look at Jane, and then, making a production of ignoring her, he turned to Teo. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Good morning to you, too, Ravi,” Jane said.

“Oh, Jane, how lovely to see you,” Ravi said with the kind of fake grin usually reserved for creepy clowns in horror movies.

Teo just stood there with his mouth open. He had backed himself into the doorway. Jane figured he wanted to be able to beat a hasty retreat if she and Ravi went nuclear on each other.

“You want a Pop-Tart?” Ravi asked Teo, holding the box he had found in the pantry and offering one to him but not to Jane.

Truth be told, Jane did want a Pop-Tart, but she certainly wasn’t going to ask Ravi for one as if she were some kind of peasant asking for a boon.

“I need to get out of here,” Ravi told the room. “I have SAT prep this morning. I need to get my score up if I’m serious about applying to anywhere Ivy League.”

Jane rolled her eyes and tried not to regurgitate her granola bar.

“How did *you* do on the SATs?” Ravi pointedly asked Jane, stuffing half a Pop-Tart into his mouth.

Lucky for Jane, he wasn’t the first person she’d had to dodge on this matter. “I did perfectly fine for where I want to go.”

“And where do you want to go?” Ravi asked, gesturing with the other half of his Pop-Tart. “I think you’d be good with one of those HVAC repair programs, or maybe a gas station attendant.”

“Gee, I don’t know, *Mom*. Maybe wherever you aren’t?”

Teo snorted and Jane looked over at him, shocked. Ravi usually tossed insults at Jane, and Jane took them while Teo stood idly by, ignoring their back-and-forth.

As Jane was about to go on, feeling bolstered by Teo’s seeming

appreciation of her level of wit, all three of his sisters came spilling into the kitchen.

“Jane, Jane, Jane!” they all said at the same, each of them trying to tell her something different.

Buck walked in then, too, and patted Teo on the back.

“You’re looking good this morning,” Buck said to Teo, squeezing his biceps on one arm. “Did you start using heavier weights, like I suggested?”

Jane would have died on the spot, but Teo seemed to take his stepfather’s words in stride, even if he curled in on himself a bit, crossing his arms and stepping away from Buck.

Jane would have liked to stay and listen to the rest of the exchange because, damn, she should be getting exercise tips from Teo, and maybe Buck, too, if he was the genius behind Teo’s new body. Unfortunately, the girls were all desperate to take her to the basement and show her various toys.

“Mom said we had to wait for the boys to wake up,” Keegan explained, taking Jane’s hand and walking down the carpeted stairs. “We wanted to wake them up, but she wouldn’t let us.”

The large basement had two separate areas, one with a TV and a sectional couch, where the floor was piled high with blankets and pillows from the sleepover. Beyond that, an area in the back was sectioned off with shelving that held all the girls’ toys, including a kitchen set that Jane would have gone wild for as a kid.

The girls got deep into playing almost immediately, and Jane

joined in. She tried to focus their play on the kitchen area, because, really, it was beautiful, but they seemed to want to play a game that, from what Jane could gather, was essentially *My Little Pony DMV*. There was a pony behind a couple of blocks in a pile, and the other ponies would step up and ask questions about insurance coverage.

They didn't even really want Jane to play, because every time she picked up one of the figures, they would tell her that now Applejack (or whoever) had to go to the end of the line because Jane had made her lose her spot.

Connie came down to say good-bye to the girls.

She *tsked* at the mess that the boys had left in the basement and told Jane not to clean it up for them. "They're big boys. They can handle it."

It hadn't even crossed Jane's mind to clean it up.

Connie asked Jane to come back upstairs so they could go through the regular schedule.

Today would be easy because the girls only had swim class at eleven. "I tried to keep it light to start with so you could get used to the routine and get to know the girls a little bit better," Connie said.

"Thanks," Jane said, trying to peek around to see if muscleman Teo was still lurking.

"Do you feel okay about driving the minivan?"

"Yes."

"And make sure the girls are all strapped into their seats

before you drive. Sometimes they like to pretend they buckled themselves in, and then they climb into the front seat and scare the bejesus out of me.”

“That sounds terrifying.”

Connie nodded and smiled. “If you need anything, text or e-mail me. Even when I’m in class, I can usually get back to people that way. But the girls are really self-sufficient. Try to be at least within earshot of them, but you don’t need to be on top of them all the time.”

Jane nodded. She could handle that.

“Feel free to bring along a book or a magazine or summer homework or anything,” Connie said. “I know you’re giving up a lot of time to be here, so I don’t want you to feel like you have to watch them every second.”

Jane smiled because that was very good news. She had totally planned to watch them every second.

“And if you’re hungry, take whatever you want from the fridge or the cabinets. Let me know if there’s anything you like that we don’t have. Especially lunch-wise, since you’ll need to feed yourself and the girls every day.”

Connie must have caught Jane’s scared look. “It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate. Sandwiches, fruit. Rory doesn’t eat bread. She’s not allergic or anything—she just doesn’t eat it—so I make her cheese roll-ups or crackers with peanut butter.”

Connie finished packing her bag and let out a deep sigh. “All right. I’ll see you around five!” she said.

Jane went back down to the basement and kept an eye on the

time, but it seemed to be moving in the wrong direction when the girls decided they wanted to play hide-and-seek. They would hide and Jane would have to find them. And according to the girls, all games of hide-and-seek had to be started from the living room.

Jane threw open the basement door at the top of the stairs and felt it crash into someone.

“Ah!” Teo’s voice came from behind the door.

The girls slipped around Jane and out of the basement while Teo stood there rubbing his exposed toes in his flip-flops.

“I’m so sorry!” Jane said. “I thought you’d already left for work.”

“It’s cool. It’s not a big deal. I didn’t need those particular toes,” he said. “Crap, I never cleaned up the basement, did I?”

Jane shook her head, and Teo glanced at the time on his phone.

“It’s cool,” Jane said. “I’ll clean it up. It’s the least I can do, since I just hobbled you. The girls will help. Right, girls?”

They looked blankly at Jane.

“Don’t you want to help Teo out?” she asked them.

They looked at her, and then at Teo, and then at one another before they started dancing around and yelling, “Yes! We love to help!”

“Yeah, we’ll take care of it for you. After we play hide-and-seek.”

Teo grinned and squeezed her shoulder. “Good luck with hide-and-seek, and I totally owe you one. Thanks.”

Jane smiled as she stood in the living room with her eyes closed and counted to fifty, as the girls had instructed her. If Teo was going to be a nice guy this summer, it would definitely help balance out the pain of Ravi.

When Jane got to fifty, she yelled, “Ready or not, here I come!”

Checking upstairs first seemed like a good idea, since she hadn’t heard the door to the basement open.

Buck had done a lot of work on the house over the years, putting on an addition and reconfiguring the layout. It was like a completely different home. Jane was met with a long hallway of closed doors when she got upstairs, and she tried to listen for giggles, but there was complete, eerie silence.

Maybe the girls hadn’t gone upstairs; maybe they went outside to hide, even though Jane had told them outside was off-limits. Or maybe they had left completely and were on their way to Acapulco, for all Jane knew.

She tried to imagine breaking the news to Connie and Buck that somehow she had lost all three children while playing hide-and-seek on her first day. After the court trial, there would be a made-for-TV movie about the girls: *Hide-and-Seek Gone Horribly Wrong: The Story of the Buchanan Sisters*.

After prowling the hallway, listening for any sound of the girls behind the closed doors, she decided she needed to be more systematic in her approach. She would open each door and check under the beds and in the closets. After that she would check the basement.

The first door she opened was obviously the twins’ room. Two

beds to check under and just a tiny closet. Next was Connie and Buck's room. She scanned it fast because it felt totally wrong to be in there. Unfortunately, they had a rather large walk-in closet that required extra effort.

After that there was the bathroom, where she looked behind the shower curtain and then in the linen closet. Unless the girls had climbed onto a shelf and perfectly replaced all the folded towels and sheets in front of them, she could definitely cross off the linen closet with one quick look.

The next room was Teo's. She really didn't want to be in Teo's room, but she had to check for the girls, because now she was getting a little nervous.

She bumped her hip on his computer desk, and the screen came alive. She didn't mean to look at the search bar, but her eye was drawn to it.

How to find your biological father, it said.

Jane gasped and put her hand over her mouth. This was not information that she should be privy to. Immediately she x-ed out the window, and a second one was open behind it. *Consuela Garcia and Jose Rodriguez*, the search said in that window. She closed that one, too, and backed out of the room, shutting the door and fleeing back downstairs, trying not to think about what she'd just seen.

The girls were all sitting at the kitchen table, eating grapes.

"You didn't come find us," Keegan said.

"I was looking for you everywhere upstairs," Jane explained, taking a grape for herself and sitting across from the girls.

“We were in the basement.”

“I thought for sure you would have hidden under a bed or in a closet.”

Rory looked terrified. “That’s where the monsters live.”

Jane laughed. “Good to know,” she said. “How did you get downstairs without the door making any noise as you opened and closed it?”

“You have to do it really slow,” Keegan said.

“Also good to know,” Jane said as she focused on the kids, determined to forget that she had ever been in Teo’s room.

Chapter 5

BARELY TEN MINUTES INTO HIS SHIFT, TEO HAD A SINKING feeling in his gut like he forgot to turn off the stove. But it was worse than potentially setting the house on fire, because he was pretty sure that what he'd forgotten to do was clear his search history. He paced around the pool, trying to remember exactly how the morning had played out.

He'd been so humiliated by Buck's mention of his workout regime that the second Ravi left for SAT prep, Teo ran upstairs to his room to do more dad searching, this time starting with something broader. Obviously, other people had searched for their biological fathers, and maybe Teo was trying too hard to reinvent the wheel.

It wasn't long before he'd looked at the clock and found that he was going to be late for work if he didn't get his crap together.

He'd left as quickly as humanly possible, and he really couldn't remember if he'd closed out his search or not.

He was so desperate for his mom or the girls not to see it that he almost considered calling Jane and asking her to close up the tabs for him. But then Jane would ask questions—questions Teo didn't want to answer. He was starting to sweat just thinking about it. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to rationalize the situation.

No one really went in his room all day. It could happen, though. But his computer would probably go to sleep after a while, and unless someone purposely woke it up, he would be fine. He didn't think Keegan really had it in her to be that nosy, and the twins couldn't read that well yet.

The good news was that Jane and his sisters would arrive at the pool in mere minutes for swim class. Surely he would know right off the bat whether Jane had found out his secret. Or, worse, whether Keegan had fulfilled his nightmarish prophecy of reading his search results. Wouldn't he?

When Jane came through the pool gate, she waved at him and didn't seem particularly fussed, or like she had learned his secret that morning. At least he hadn't been looking at porn, he told himself. But he found little comfort in that thought.

The pit in his stomach grew.

Teo watched Jane walk over to the covered seating after having made sure the girls joined the right groups. Rory was still in a state of distress because she was in a lower group than Piper

and Keegan were, but she needed to learn that swimming wasn't something to fool around with.

Jane sat down next to a girl Teo knew from school but wasn't really friends with. *Claudia Lee, that's her name*, he thought. Teo tried to read Jane's lips as she was talking to Claudia. Not that he expected her to gossip with Claudia Lee about his personal dad-searching business, even if she *had* snooped on his computer, but still, he didn't really know Jane all that well.

He couldn't figure out how Jane knew Claudia. Jane ran in a crowd of dorky, less smart girls. She was like a band geek who wasn't in the band. Unless maybe she *was* in the band. Teo honestly wasn't sure. He couldn't even remember the last time he had talked to Jane at school, or even really noticed her there. Maybe when they'd ended up sitting next to each other at the drunk-driving assembly the year before.

He really didn't want Ravi's crazy anti-Jane propaganda to get to him. While he and Ravi were playing video games last night, Ravi wouldn't shut up about how terrible Jane was.

"I swear to God, she is the stupidest girl I've ever met," Ravi had said out of nowhere.

"Who now?" Teo had asked, mostly to annoy Ravi. He'd known exactly who Ravi had been talking about, but he sort of got tired of listening to the same old, same old from him. Sometimes he liked to mix it up and ask all the wrong questions.

"Jane Connelly. She's dumb."

"How do you figure?" Teo asked.

“Uh, really, Ravi,” Ravi said in a voice that Teo assumed was supposed to be Jane’s. “I don’t get it. How do the ducks know where to cross?”

“She never asked that.”

“Sure she did.”

“It was probably meant to be a joke, but you have no sense of humor whatsoever.”

“I swear she asked it in driver’s ed last year.”

“So is this really how we’re celebrating the end of school?” Teo asked. “Sitting in my basement, bitching about Jane Connelly?”

They had changed subjects after that, thank God, because Teo couldn’t handle much more of Ravi’s Jane-bashing.

The thing was, there wasn’t anything wrong with Jane. And he actually had a newfound respect for her after this morning. Not only had she totally ignored how ridiculously embarrassing Buck was, but she’d also offered to clean up the mess in the basement. In his book, that made her a decent person.

Maybe he should just talk to Jane, see if she acted like she knew his secret.

The problem was that Claudia Lee was a friend of this other girl Megan. Teo had gone out with her a few times last year. They were in a lot of the same classes and were both on the forensics team. She was on the girls’ soccer team and he was on the boys’. It made sense for them to go out. But things had fizzled between them, and Megan had been bitter, and now having to approach Claudia could definitely be awkward. He got enough of that at home these days.

But unless he wanted to spend the rest of the day panicking, he didn't have much choice.

"Hey," he said, approaching Jane and Claudia when swim class was over.

"Hey," Jane said, squinting up at him.

"Yo," Claudia said.

"How are you guys?" Teo asked, looking at each of them in turn.

"Peachy," Claudia said.

"Good. Nothing has really changed in my life in the past couple of hours," Jane said.

Teo looked at her intently in an attempt to decipher if she seemed sort of shifty or like she was trying to hide something.

"I was telling Jane that my dad and stepmother are basically blackmailing me to bring Dinah and Job to swim class all summer."

"Oh yeah?" Teo asked, half listening, half examining Jane's body language.

"Yeah, I want to go to this superexpensive art school in Chicago, so they said that if I could save them money by being Dinah and Job's nanny this summer, they would put all that toward school."

"Sounds like a good deal," Teo said. At this point, Jane was staring back at him with a confused expression. She couldn't know. But what if she knew? The little voice in the back of Teo's head wouldn't let it go.

Claudia was barely containing her laughter. “You guys should just kiss already.”

“Um,” he said, looking from Claudia to Jane. “What?”

“What? Oh my God,” Jane said, covering her face.

Teo’s eyes went wide. “Us?” he asked.

“Yeah, you’ve been staring at each other this whole time.”

“Uh, no.” Teo backed away a step.

“Uh, yes,” Claudia said.

Jane stared at the pavement, and Teo felt terrible.

“Hey, Jane,” Teo said, hoping to break the tension. She looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Any chance you know how to sink through concrete?”

She started laughing.

Just then the girls came skipping over with several of their friends, including a little girl who Teo realized was probably Claudia’s stepsister.

“Look at what Dinah made!” Keegan said, showing Jane and Teo a folded-up piece of paper.

“Claudia taught me,” Dinah said proudly.

“Oh, that’s a cootie catcher,” Jane said.

“Yes! A cootie catcher,” Rory said. “It catches all the cooties and locks ’em up and throws away the key.”

Jane nodded seriously at this description. “It’s for telling fortunes,” she explained.

“Yeah, it’s the funnest. We like telling fortunes,” Piper said.

“You know,” Teo interjected, leaning into the little crowd, “Jane used to be awesome at this stuff. She was really into Magic

8 Balls and tarot cards. And she used to make the best cootie catchers.”

Jane blushed a little, Teo thought, but it could have been the sun getting to her.

“Really?” Keegan asked. “Can you make one for each of us?”

“Of course,” Jane said.

“Jane knows all sorts of stuff like that. About superstitions and cool myths.”

“I do?” Jane asked.

“Yeah, you were always telling me to hold my breath when we drove past graveyards and not to step on any cracks in the sidewalk.”

“Really? I don’t remember.”

Teo shrugged. “You made an impression. I have never opened an umbrella in the house, nor will I ever.”

Jane laughed again.

Piper pulled on the hem of Teo’s shirt, so he knelt down to talk to her.

“How do you know Jane?” she asked.

“When we were kids, her mom used to babysit me sometimes while our mom went to work.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“You were friends?”

“Sure,” Teo said.

“Are you still friends?” Keegan asked. She had a talent for making things awkward, much like her father.

“Um, yes,” Teo said, smiling over at Jane, hoping she would play along. In kid world, their passing acquaintance would probably be called friendship, even if they never talked to each other, spent zero time together, and mostly avoided each other at school. Although Teo knew that it was partially his fault for always being around Ravi.

“Of course,” Jane said.

“Do you ever have playdates?” Piper asked.

Claudia snorted. Teo had kind of forgotten she was still sitting there.

“Not anymore,” Jane said. “Moms don’t really set up playdates for kids in high school.”

Piper nodded seriously.

Claudia and her stepsiblings left a minute later, and Jane started getting the girls ready to go home.

“Hey,” Teo said, putting his hand on Jane’s arm. “I wanted to thank you again for offering to clean up the basement for me. That was cool of you.”

“Yeah, no problem. We haven’t done it yet, because we needed to get ready for swim class. But I figure I’ll trick the girls into doing most of it by telling them it’s a race.”

“You have quite the devious mind, Jane Connelly.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

After work, Teo was happy to find that the basement was in perfect shape. Not only that, but he had been wrong: He *had* closed out his tabs from earlier that morning. He hadn’t wiped

his history, but at least the dad search hadn't been sitting there for the whole world to see.

It was also nice to know he had an ally in Jane. Now he just had to try to get Ravi to stop antagonizing her, and they'd be in pretty good shape.