

Nina Shiner

Wants to be  
a Web Designer



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# Nina Shiner

Wants to be  
a Web Designer



by Kathy Childs





This book is dedicated to my parents who said  
it might be a good idea to take some computer classes.  
They were right!

And to my daughter Rachel – my writing cheerleader.







The most beautiful thing we can experience  
is the mysterious. It is the source of all true  
art and science.

-Albert Einstein







One



## Nina, The Girl Who Roasts Marshmallows

If families were yoga poses, my parents and I would be a triangle because there are three sides to us. My dad always laughs and says I'm the shortest side of the triangle because I'm the runt of the litter.

After dinner one night, he lifted me up and spun me like a helicopter, stretching me out to help me grow taller. I thought if he let go, I'd fly to the treetops. We went faster and faster, until he set me down in the grass, and we fell over, dizzy with laughter.

"I bet you're an inch taller," Mom said, putting her arm around me.

Dad tossed me a bag of marshmallows. "People saying you are short for your age won't go on forever. Someday, you will just be called short." He chuckled.

The sun was setting, and we plopped down in our triangle of lawn chairs arranged around the firepit. I could

almost taste the soft, white morsels and tore a corner of the cellophane bag open. Immediately the sweet scent of fresh marshmallows filled the air. I grabbed my roasting stick, still covered in white goo, and picked off the burnt remnants.

Mom repositioned her telescope to look up at the sky. She leaned forward in her chair, gazing up through the lens. “There was quite a dust storm on Mars today,” she said. “The images sent back from the lunar rover reminded me of a windy day at the shore when sand blows up in our eyes.”

She never thought it was odd to know the minute-by-minute weather conditions on Mars when she didn’t have a clue about the local forecast for our own local beaches.

“Nothing like sand being kicked in your face from millions of miles away,” Dad said in his teasing voice. I thought it was amazing how he could come up with funny things to say even when scratching out math equations in the dim light of the fire.

With the two of them distracted by their nightly obsessions, I was left alone to quietly ponder if I should slow roast a marshmallow or go for the crispy torch by putting it directly into the flames. This was just the way I liked a summer night to be. I could not have felt cozier if I were inside one of my gooey marshmallows.

“Nina,” my father said in his serious voice, “we’ve thought up a new enrichment experience for you.”

*Enrichment.* That one word caused my roasting stick to twist and drop into the fire. My marshmallows boiled, turned black, and then melted into the flames.

To say their ideas for enrichments were out of the ordinary would be a lie. I’d been sent away to so many life enhancing experiences I’d lost count. Last year I swung by my ankles at trapeze camp to help cure my fear of heights—which only heightened.

I did, however, win an award for developing a triple-knotted safety harness. That may not be something every trapeze artist aspires to, but I made it home without a body cast.

Since then, whenever my parents suggest an enriching experience, my stomach shakes, rattles, and rolls as if I'd just backflipped through the air. And wasn't I just back from a month-long yoga retreat to discover my inner warrior?

So if someone had told me that my parents' latest idea for my adolescent enrichment was a STEM boarding school, I would have told them they were from the same planet my mom was eyeballing. And worse yet. This was a school that pumped out kids who grew up to be like my parents. Even adults cringe at the thought of becoming their parents.

Until that moment, I thought they were OK with the fact that I preferred yoga and aromatherapy to app development and space. Doing a Warrior flow series in a room scented with eucalyptus quieted my mind. It calmed and comforted me and put my head in order. My yoga practice stretched my every muscle to its limit, soothed my soul, and led me to understand my true life calling—to create a yoga website for kids.

I stared down at the school brochure, which was filled with glossy pictures of students being served hot chocolate by a robot, a cyber garden that grew supersized fruits, and tree houses filled with hammocks. A knot formed in my stomach. I swallowed to push it down.

But I guess I should have expected something like this. Having a dad who is interested in the latest and greatest technologies is one thing but having a dad who is obsessed with technology is another. For an old techie guy who wears glasses and wrinkled tee shirts he'd done OK in Silicon Valley, but his success in creating techno gadgets didn't mean that kind of stuff was for me.

“Dad, why would you send me to a boarding school for techies?” I waved the brochure around my head for effect. “Aren’t you the one who said your biggest regret was spending your childhood believing geometry and calculus were your best friends? You’ve said a thousand times that you don’t want to see me repeat your mistake of hanging out in a dark library and getting sucked in with the wrong gang of bookworms.”

I was proud of myself for remembering one of his quotes at such an opportune moment. I leaned back in my chair, twisted a marshmallow onto a new stick and figured this conversation was over.

“Nina, you’re almost thirteen,” he said while pushing his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. “The world is about to find you and perhaps shape you into a person you never intended to be.”

I’d been through this conversation a thousand times—the *Be the Sculptor of Your Own Life* lecture was about to begin.

“Think of yourself as an untouched block of marble,” he said. “Who will be the sculptor? You or the outside world?”

Did he really picture me as some kind of Michelangelo with a pick and hammer, sculpting myself into a work of art? Careful not to answer too quickly, I counted to ten and responded appropriately, “Me.”

I looked at my mom. She was the designated family tie-breaker. She never thought up these enriching activities, but she had been known to nix a few that would have sent me to the dark side of the moon. Mom always liked to use space analogies when making a point, and I knew she had the ability to save me.

I stared into her face with my best pouty expression and tried not to crack a smile, which was difficult when she had telescope eye—a circular red indentation around her eye that

she got from leaning into the lens. In an attempt to plead my case into her one good eye, I cocked my head sideways and spoke in her planetary language.

“You’ve told me a million times that even a planet has parent stars that protect it with heat and light.” I paused and let my eyelids droop for full effect. “Are you saying I’m going to be sent away from the protection of my parent stars?”

The edges of her mouth curled down immediately, but she recovered faster than I anticipated. She took the brochure out of my hands, flipped through a few pages, and opened to a section titled “Creativity Lab,” which showed pictures of kids creating animations of exotic flowers eating toads, birds flying upside down, and rockets blasting up toward the moon.

“You know your father explains things in his own way,” she said with a sideways glance in his direction. “Let me explain. Ever since you came back from your yoga enrichment, you’ve been wondering how to build a yoga website. Nina, this school will teach you how to bring your true North Star to life.” The curve of her mouth turned upward in a toothy Hollywood smile. “You can learn to animate Rosie.”

I hadn’t been thinking about this school having anything to do with Rosie. Mom was right. For weeks I’d been filling my sketchbook with dozens of drawings of Rosie in every yoga pose ever known, but I didn’t know how to get her off a piece of paper and into a computer animation.

Could my parent stars actually know me better than I thought? I looked down at the fire and twisted my hair, which I did when I was nervous or angry or when I was facing any feeling I didn’t want to deal with. What I felt about being sent away was at the top of my least liked situations.

“Creating your destiny isn’t going to happen by sitting around the backyard roasting marshmallows,” Dad added in

his matter-of-fact way. “You have to go out into the world to experience the magic of the universe. Adventure awaits you!”

What was I supposed to say? Yes, I would rather roast marshmallows than seek adventure? Sometimes staying silent is the only thing to do.

I pulled my roasting stick from the fire and slowly loaded it up with another marshmallow. Then I carefully held it a few inches from the fire until it was a golden brown. I blew on it and popped it in my mouth. Chewing warm marshmallows is not just a great stalling technique but also one of the greatest pleasures ever known.

Maybe I could go along with this plan just long enough to get Rosie out of my sketchbook and into a website. I’d been away at enrichment camps and back again so many times. Why would this be any different? The school was only thirty minutes away. An easy Uber if it got too techie-twilight-zone-weird.

I reached under my chair and pulled out a flashlight and my sketchbook with my drawings of Rosie. She was my best friend. Well, fake friend, really. I flipped through the pages of her in every pose possible. Maybe it was time to make her real.

I relaxed back in my chair between my mom and my dad. Dad scooted his chair closer so he could put his arm around me. We stayed there like that for a long time, quietly poking at the fire and watching the stars twinkle in the night sky.

Two



## Unicorning Your Life

The night before leaving for my new school, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling filled with glittery glow-in-the-dark stars and a spinning planet mobile. Mom told me she repeated the names of all the stars that orbit the earth to help her go to sleep. Me? I liked to recite yoga poses. It was fun because there are hundreds of postures—all with weird names like “Frog,” “Flying Eagle,” “Chair,” and “Lizard.” I’ve even made up a few that someday Rosie will teach everyone on her website.

At the crack of dawn, I learned why the weather forecasters reported that the morning fog around the San Francisco Bay was thick as pea soup. Highway 101 north was lined with billboards that appeared to float in a cloud of sad mist. Sad because Megan, my only *real* friend, was texting me a stream of tearful emojis. Only a few miles from home, the ache of loneliness began to throb in the pit of my stomach. Megan was my next-door neighbor and best friend since forever. She was never sent away, so she didn’t understand all my coming and going.

Promise I'll be back soon. 💔

I placed a broken-heart emoji in the text and pressed Send.

Minutes later, my parents' minivan rolled up next to the curb of the dorm. I nervously wiped a line of sweat forming on my upper lip and peeled the pink polish off three freshly painted fingernails. Usually I was pretty good at matching my mood with fingernail color, but pink was a major miscalculation. A fearful yellow would have been a far better match.

It took only a few minutes to move my suitcases and boxes from the car to the lobby, but it was enough time for the fog to transform my perfectly styled hair into frizz and my shirt into a sweaty mess. I sighed. First I was saying a goodbye to my best friend, Megan, then I had to say goodbye to dry clothes and straight hair.

The lobby attendant asked my name and handed me a key fob labeled NS/JR-Rm 233. Two sets of initials. NS, of course, for me, Nina Shiner. All I could figure was that JR stood for junior—as in high school. I was only a seventh grader but decided this mistake might be a fabulous error in my favor. It was a well-known fact that high school privileges were far better than any middle schooler ever got.

The elevator door opened to the second floor. A few steps down the hall and one click of the key fob changed my room's glass door from black to transparent. Another click swished it open. A breeze blew from the room, filling the hallway with the scent of saltwater. Without saying a word, my dad walked to the center of the room and dropped my boxes on the floor. Like some kind of dazed zombie, he stared toward the window and raised the blinds.

"Get a load of that," he snickered. "Pretty swanky to have a



dorm room with a view of the bay. As I recall, my dorm room looked out at a brick wall.”

The view was amazing. I was about to agree but stopped when out of the corner of my eye I saw an extra-long-legged girl sitting on one of the twin beds. I did a double take. Not because some stranger was in my room—but because a herd of pink unicorns was galloping across the face of her phone.

“How...how?” I sputtered.

“Oh,” she giggled, “it’s a hologram cube. See?” She got up and showed me a clear pyramid atop the center of her phone. “You cut some plastic from an old DVD case and super-glue it together to make a hologram cube. Want to hold it?”

I did. But I didn’t. Holograms were cool in a haunted mansion but freakish when a herd of pink creatures was about to run up my nostrils. I snorted and backed up. Her mouth curved down, and her eyes lost their sparkle. Great. Within two seconds, I’d already hurt her feelings.

“If you don’t like unicorns, I can change it up. I have some great hummingbirds, or maybe a cartwheeling emoji?” she asked hopefully. “What would you like? Since we’ll be roommates, I can create whatever little cuties you’d like to hang around with us.”

“Roommates?” My eyes widened. I stepped back and glared at my parents, who had said nothing about a roommate. I squeezed the key fob in my fist. The two sets of initials suddenly made sense.

“Ah, unicorns are fine,” I said, like it was totally normal to have unicorns prance across my palm within seconds of meeting a stranger I’d be sharing every minute with.

“Unicorns are said to be shy animals, hiding in clouds and rainbows, but you sure wouldn’t know it these days,” she said with a childish giggle. “Everyone is unicorning their life. You

see them all over the place. Socks, gym shorts, headbands... you know what I mean?"

"Well, yeah, I guess I haven't given it much thought, really," I said as three lavender unicorns reared up on their hind legs, clasped hooves, flew off the face of her phone, and whinnied in unison "To Infinity and Beyond."

"That's my phone alarm," she said. "I wanted to show it to you so it wouldn't scare you in the morning."

"Hmm. I've always wanted to be tussled awake by a swarm of flying unicorns," I said.

"Awesome. I want us to be *perfect* roommates," she said with another giggle.

The sound of tape being ripped off a box echoed through the room. Mom yanked out my bedspread and a couple of pillows and began unfolding sheets. She leaned over my bed and tucked a corner of the sheet under the mattress.

"Mom, I can make my own bed," I said, while the unicorn girl watched.

My dad stepped to her side, put his arm on her shoulder, and leaned his head onto hers.

"Just let me help you," Mom begged. "It will only take a minute and..."

I cut her off. "No, please, no. I can do it. You guys don't have to worry about it." I sideways glanced at the unicorn girl and quickly back to them as a signal they needed to go.

"I'm going to miss you so much," she said, giving me a tight hug. "You're only thirteen years old, and I'm already saying goodbye to the brightest star in my sky."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine," I said and peeled myself away.

"One last thing," she whispered, "be sure to allow some room in your heart to feel the magic of the universe. It won't disappoint you."

I shook my head for her to stop her magic of the universe cosmic chitchat. She was on the edge of going on and on about how everything in this world is not rational and I should always leave room in my heart for the poetic and surprising. I'd gotten used to her hippie soul speak, but it usually caused weird sideways glances, and this was not the time.

"OK, OK. We love you to the moon and back," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Yeah, me too," I murmured and looked at the floor so I wouldn't have to see her sad face.

Dad gave me one of those awkward shoulder to shoulder hugs. The door swished open, and they were gone. I watched them walk down the hallway toward the elevator and thought I should have felt gushy or sad, but mostly I wanted to find my hair gel to smooth down the inch of frizz that encircled my head.

"Your parents seem nice. Are you an only child?" the unicorn girl asked.

"Yeah, guess you could tell?"

She nodded her head. "You know I was too absorbed in my holograms to remember your name," she said. "Sorry. What did you say it was?"

"Nina. Nina Shiner." Always thankful to be named after my grandmother, rather than the constellation Orion, which was my mom's first choice. "It's German," I added.

"I'm Jericka Reynolds. My parents say we're a Heinz 57 mix."

"Like the ketchup?" I asked.

"Means we have an uncertain ancestry," she said and crinkled her nose. "Heinz 57 is what a litter of puppies is called when you have no clue what their mix is. My mom is super into dogs."

I managed to find the box marked bathroom in big bold letters and pulled the packing tape off while Jericka told me

she was in her second year at P. design. She had started in sixth grade and was in seventh grade like me. When her parents divorced, they decided it was best for her to have roots at one school rather than go back and forth from one city to another.

“Pick your classes carefully,” she said. “Signing up for Server Surfing sounds fun, but it means shuffling around the data center cleaning up after Edgy Reggie.”

“Edgy Reggie?” I asked.

She cocked her head sideways and arched one eyebrow. “When you meet him, you’ll figure out *real* quick what I mean.”

She told me more weird stuff about the teachers while I grabbed some clothes out of a box and started hanging up shirts in the closet—whites first, followed by warm pinkish tones, then cool greens, and finally the blues. A perfect color wheel of clothes appeared. Art teachers loved me.

Just when I’d found my happy place arranging my pants by thread count, an ugly truth about a roommate popped into my head. Jericka would soon know my most embarrassing habits—like how many times I reapply deodorant, what I looked like with my retainer, and if I if I talked in my sleep and told my most secret secrets.

Three



## A Whole New Ball Game

“You’re not going to be warm enough in that spandex,” Jericka said, looking me up and down. “The air conditioning at the school is freezing. Here put this on,” she added, tossing me a red sweatshirt with green smiling unicorns running down each sleeve. “Just looking at you in that skimpy muscle shirt, makes me shiver-shake all over.”

“It’s called a yoga tankini top,” I corrected her.

“Whatever. Anyway, we have our orientation to get to.”

I tugged on the sweatshirt, which looked like a robe on me, and followed her down the hall and onto the elevator. “You’re about to see the most scenic parking lot in America,” she said.

Landscaped islands of palm trees towered above. Rows of purple and yellow flowers grew from median strips. Jericka said hello to a few people passing by but didn’t bother to introduce me. Was she embarrassed to admit that this person who looked like a fifth grader dressed in her big sister’s hand-me-downs was her roommate?

“You know, this place is different from regular schools. It’s going to take a while for a girl like you to fit in here.”

“Uh, OK,” I say.

“Basically, you’ve got the normal kids sent here by their parents because they don’t know what else to do with us, like me. Then you’ve got the techie crowd, who are only happy in the company of their electronic devices and think socializing means video gaming.”

A few minutes later, she looked into a classroom. “Here we are,” she announced. Then she turned to me and said, “By the way, I’m figuring this is the first time you’ve been away from home?”

“Uh, no, I’ve been away from home *plenty*.”

“Yeah, well, just hang with me, and I’ll help you figure this place out.”

I’d probably been away more than all these kids put together and done just fine. Well, mostly fine. She then turned and walked through the door.

Two small steps into the room, a hollering of “Rouge ball blue! Rouge ball blue,” echoed off the walls.

Jericka immediately ducked down to avoid a plastic ball flying over her head—then smacking me right between the eyes. The ball bounced onto the floor and rolled back to a bunch of giggling boys nestled in a circle of beanbag chairs.

“Gotta be quick when Conner and his friends are around,” Jericka said. “They’re from the group with parents who don’t know what to do with them.”

Seconds later, five or six butt-dragging guys crawled out of their beanbags and threw their bodies on the ball in a sweaty boy heap of sharp elbows, gasps, and grunts. After a few full body rolls around the floor, one arm extended out of the pile with a yell of “Always blue, always blue.” The ball then whizzed

through the air to the other side of the circle and was snatched up by a kid waiting on the sidelines.

I rubbed the welt forming on my forehead. Could this be an omen sent from the universe, telling me I'd just stepped into a whole new type of ball game?

“Over here,” Jericka yelled to me and pointed down to the yellow beanbag next to her. I awkwardly crouched backward and plopped down with a snap, crackle, pop I hadn't heard since my last bowl of Rice Krispies.

*WHOOSH!*

A door sounded from the back of the room.

In stepped a tall willowy woman wearing a lime-green dress clinging so tightly it could have been a second skin. Round jade beads hung around her neck, and a bracelet of orange stones dangled from her wrist. It was an odd combination some people might call original, but the truth was she looked like a skinny stick of celery decorated with peas around her neck and a wad of carrots on her wrist.

Without saying a word, she gracefully drifted to the wall and pressed a small shiny white button.

*KABOOM!*

A 3D projection in huge bold lettering hovered over the middle of our beanbag circle.

**Welcome to P. design  
A Silicon Valley Technology  
Charter School  
Sponsored by Pythia, Inc.**

“Welcome to P. design’s seventh grade class,” she said in a faint whisper. “My name is Professor Joy. I am the director of this school and excited about the technologies you will learn here at P. design, a charter school sponsored by Silicon Valley’s Pythia, Inc.”

Professor Joy. A name I liked. Had a nice ring to it. She paused to gaze down at us with a kind, nurturing expression I hadn’t seen on a teacher since kindergarten.

“Your job at this school will be to actively explore technologies, not by sitting in dull classrooms listening to long-winded lectures,” she said, slowly walking around our beanbags, “but by comingling with the Pythia employees in the innovation labs and research projects.”

She silently walked back to the wall in the direction of the white button, turned to face us, slightly smiled, then—

*KAZAM!*

The lights darkened, and a warm gust of wind swept through the room.

Out of thin air, a pink sparkly hologram tornado sprang up from the middle of our beanbag circle—swirling—spinning—glittering. Sprays of reflected light bounced off the walls and ceiling, then slowed, morphed into a transparent disk, and spun about the room like a Frisbee. Within seconds a spray of pink crystals dropped down from its edges, turning the disk into a colorful crown of sparkles.

I pressed my back into the beans and grabbed onto the fabric to keep from being sucked up into the spinning vortex. One kid in our circle reached up to grab one of the sparkling crystals, and his hand went right through the pink-colored fog.

I sucked in a deep breath. Dry air hit the back of my throat. This had to be the fine line between magic and technology my dad always talked about.



Four



## The Crystal Cap

*WHOOSH!*

The door opened from the back of the room. A man stepped from the shadows. I stared into his round chubby face. I knew this man. I'd met him. He was about the size of a seventh grader. And wide as he was tall. Round faced with a soft knobby chin disappearing into the heavy folds circling his neck.

I closed my eyes and immediately had an odd craving for melted marshmallows. My mouth watered. Then it came to me. I couldn't help but smile. I'd seen his face a thousand times through the lens of my mom's backyard telescope—he was an exact replica of the man in the moon. The only difference was a pair of thick round glasses sitting atop his huge pug nose.

Professor Joy lifted her hand toward him. "I'd like to introduce Dr. Schmidt, who will lead us into a new era of thought computing."

"Behold. His high-pitched voice squeaked much like a miniature poodle's ball. He cleared his throat and swallowed. "Behold, the crystal cap—the basis of what will be known as

Project Golden Arm,” he said just as squeakishly but in more of a Labrador retriever toy variety.

He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, lifted his T-shirt to rub his belly, and continued squeaking. “Our goal is to harness the same mystical crystal technology embedded in cell phones but take it to the next level—thought computing! Some might call it mind reading, but it will simply allow us to wirelessly capture thoughts and organize them in a way for a person to control an artificial arm.”

My eyes narrowed. *Thought computing? Oh, great.* Less than ten minutes into orientation and I’m already lost in twilight-zone man-in-the-moon technobabble. Thank goodness my Uber app was up to date. Seemed I would be plotting my escape sooner than I had thought.

He took out a handkerchief, wiped a film of sweat off his bald head then put it in his pocket and clasped his hands behind his back. Gazing down at his navel, he began to slowly shuffle around our beanbag circle.

Jericka glanced over, smirking, then puffed her cheeks out like balloons and circled her fingers around her temples. I hid a giggle better than the kid next to me who put his hand over his mouth only to spurt laughter through his fingers.

After a few laps around our bags, the man in the moon shuffled up to the whiteboard and drew a skull. “I often compare the issue of reading brain waves to bad cell-phone transmission—the brain’s signals are sent correctly but get all jumbled up in transmission.”

He then drew a few blue squiggly lines in the skull and labeled them brain waves. When the lines crossed through the skull, he changed the color of the brain waves to green.

“Notice I’ve changed the color of the brain waves as they exit the skull. The bone casing gets in the way, which causes

the brain waves to break down. When that happens, the prosthetic arm can't receive clean signals. It's just like one of those cell-phone conversations when all you hear is every fifth word." The big dimples that formed in his cheeks were almost as large as his smile. "This, my friends, is where the magic of the quartz crystal cap enters the picture."

Magic? That's wizard speak. I tried to imagine him wearing a long purple robe covered in stars and carrying a gold staff. Which proved impossible. Wizards were tall and lean with soft, long hair. Never Pillsbury Doughboyish, wearing high-water mom jeans.

"As some of you may know," he said in a slow hushed voice, "quartz crystals have been used in Swiss watches to accurately keep time for centuries. These little gems are also used in electronics for frequency control. We believe embedding the crystals into the cap will help the brain waves stay in a precise pattern."

He tilted his head up toward the spinning projection. He widened his eyes. He stood there in awe—much like my dad did when lost in a mathematical equation. Lifting his plump little hand, he pointed up toward the spinning crown and said, "There have been many attempts to read brain waves, but it is *right* here, *right* now, for the *first* time ever, that we merge the magical components of crystals and put them into a mind-reading cap. We call this 'Project Golden Arm!'"

Professor Joy stepped up next to him and clapped her hands. Her face lit up with a broad smile. "And now is the time to announce the brain-computer interface competition! Schools across the entire state will bring their projects to compete. We are so lucky. This class will enter the contest with Project Golden Arm!"

Dr. Schmidt lowered his brows which made his face crinkle up like a boxer dog. "People lose their limbs in accidents

or through illness every day. The crystal cap will bring them thought-controlled prosthetics and launch Pythia into a new era of mind-controlled artificial limbs. An endeavor all of you should feel honored to be a part of.”

A scruffy-looking kid with a dog curled up in his lap peered up from under his baseball cap and raised his hand. Dr. Schmidt nodded in approval to proceed.

“Well, sir, this is cool and all, but I build robots. I have no skills for any of this Vulcan mind-meld stuff.”

I wanted to yell out *Spot on!* I had nothing to offer this project either. I leaned back in my bag. Scratched my eyebrow. And tried my best to hide my stare at this disheveled guy wearing a shirt that looked like it had been balled up in a corner for a month. By the looks of him, he was part of the techie crowd and never touched an ironing board. Sure, the world would be a better place if looks didn’t matter, but that wasn’t the way the world worked—unless you were on a dig to the center of the earth in search of dinosaur bones. But still, I had to give him some credit as the only person in the room who had the guts to speak up.

“Brad, is it?” Dr. Schmidt said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me address your concern and share my vision.” He opened his palms toward the ceiling, raised his voice, and got all preachy, like he was standing in a church pulpit instead of a middle school beanbag circle.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn about capturing human brain waves. College may seem a long way off right now, but if all goes according to my plan, every student in this room will be able to add impressive entries to your college applications and maybe even receive scholarships.”

Brad took a deep breath, exhaled, and leaned forward. “I still don’t get it. Sure, I’ve built a robotic barista, but a robotic

arm that is controlled with brain waves? Kind of science fricking fictionistic, if you ask me.”

Dr. Schmidt nodded and walked over to Brad. “Young man, we’ve already given thought about your financial struggles, as well as your future scholarship needs. It’s our belief your robotics expertise is completely applicable to the skills necessary to create an interface for the prosthetic arm.”

He then pointed his finger down at him. “You, son, will lead the student competition and receive a scholarship to the college of your choosing, just to make the effort more interesting to you, so to speak.”

Brad’s eyes widened. He swallowed and said, “Glad to be of service sir.”

Dr. Schmidt smiled, then turned to face the kid tossing his blue ball up in the air with one hand and catching it in his other hand.

“And Conner, first-place science-fair award winner for several years in a row, you will handle the systems interface effort. And Missy here,” he said, extending his hand toward a blonde girl, “you will lead the human factors arena based on your interest in sight-controlled devices for the disabled.”

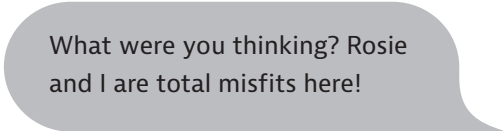
My face dropped just as hers lit up as if she had just been named head cheerleader. Dr. Schmidt walked around the circle pointing out something incredibly brilliant about each of the blue-ball-throwing boys, Jericka’s work with holograms, and even Professor Joy’s exceptional background in animation. With every unnaturally high IQ-ish thing that was mentioned, I twizzled my hair into a tight rat’s nest and picked off my last remaining pink fingernail.

Finally he pointed to me and tried to hide a smirk as he said, “Ah, and Nina. She’s here to learn how to bring her diagrams to life in a yoga website.”

Heat crawled up my neck. My heart started pounding. Pricks of sweat broke out on my forehead.

He made my website sound ridiculous and childish. This was my calling. My true North Star. No doubt about it. The day I figure out how to lift my drawings of Rosie out of my sketchbook and into an animation, I'd be out of this voodoo Vulcan mind-meld place.

I pulled out my phone to text my dad.



What were you thinking? Rosie and I are total misfits here!

I didn't think I could sink any lower into that bag of beans until the snap, crackle, crunch sounded when my butt hit the floor. No doubt about it. This school was going to turn me into the biggest loser ever.

Five



## Roho Chica Bonita

*Life as I knew it* was over. I laid my head back and gazed up at the glittery gold constellations painted on the ceiling. My mother was probably looking up at the sky at that very moment. Dad would be at her side working out his equations. Our three-sided family triangle was now just a boring two-sided ninety-degree angle. Did my parents even miss me? Or were they so wrapped up in their scientific worlds that they didn't even notice when they tossed my favorite roasting stick into the fire?

If I were home, I'd sit down next to them and look for yoga poses in the stars. Where astronomers saw Aquarius, my inner yogi saw the mighty Heron pose. And the intertwined fish making up the Pisces constellation easily morphed into the Half Camel posture.

An instant later Professor Joy stepped back into the classroom and pressed the white button—and one *POOF* later the crystal cap vanished and was replaced with a projection of two ginormous mirrored buildings. The image was easily twenty

stories tall and stood up against the blue water of the San Francisco Bay. It was so realistic I felt as if I'd been transported to an alternate universe.

**KAZAM!**

I flinched, blinked, and stared up at a time-lapsed projection of the sun coming up over the bay, cresting above our heads, then setting in the western sky. Palm trees swayed at the base of the buildings, and colorful birds played in a fountain. I settled back in my bag, and for the first time since I'd entered the room, I felt, well...peaceful.

“These are the Pythia Towers. But more importantly for us, look over to the far side of the parking lot and you will see the P. design dorm. Your new home sweet home.” She slowly walked around our circle glancing down at each one of us with a smile. “I believe over time you will create a sort of family with the students who live there. You will share classes, study halls, and activities with your dorm mates, and probably for the first time in your life, you'll share a room with someone who just may end up being a forever best friend.”

My new home sweet home. I liked the sound of it. As for forever best friend, well...

**KABOOM!**

The sound pulled me back to the beanbag circle. I held my breath in anticipation of another 3D projection to begin, but instead it was just Professor Joy who stood before us. Words like *JAVA...widgets...gaming accelerators...*and finally *Clouds* spewed from her mouth. I sank deeper in my beans, feeling all soaked and soggy with technology gibberish. The only thing missing was a dark thundercloud projection above my head that rained bits and bytes.

The *click-clack* of dog nails across the floor broke into Professor Joy's speech. I looked up just as a little lump of fur



streaked past me and dove headfirst into an empty beanbag. His deep brown eyes looked into mine. My heart melted. Brad followed—the loose leather sandal strap slapped against the floor in an awkward rhythm of the disheveled. Mom would smile at a person like Brad, shake her head, and say he was the kind of person who marched to the beat of a different drummer.

“Ahh, nothing like disturbing our discussion, Brad,” Professor Joy said. “Class, I’ll use this moment to introduce Brad McNealy, a fellow P. design student who is my assistant in the robotics lab and is part of several special projects.”

“Sorry,” he said with a shy smile, “nature called.” He then cocked his head down toward his little dog curled up next to him. “What did you say, Chuckie? You feel deserving of an introduction too?”

“But of course,” Professor Joy nodded, “let me also introduce you to Brad’s constant companion, Prince Charles, a welcome member of the team. He also helps to soften some of Brad’s, well, let’s say, rough edges.”

She went over and gave Prince Charles a pat on the head. “I am, of course, kidding. Underneath that rough exterior, Brad is tenderhearted,” she said fondly. “OK, let’s move on,” Professor Joy pressed the magic white button.

### *KABOOM—PIZZAZZ*

Hundreds of balloons fell from the ceiling in a projection so realistic I reached out to grab a red balloon and watched my hand go straight through the transparent latex. Some popped in midair; others bounced onto the floor and onto my lap. Guitar music vibrated through the room. A full rock band projection filled up our entire beanbag circle. Several men, all dressed in black T-shirts and jeans, started singing, “Welcome to this new age—to this new age.”

“Your timing to join Pythia’s charter school couldn’t be more perfect,” Professor Joy shouted over the music. “The company is celebrating our fifteenth year in business tomorrow afternoon with a live performance by The Dragons!”

There was a collective gasp of excitement, and several side conversations erupted. For years I’d watched over-the-top Silicon Valley parties reported by the local news. Dad said money was falling out of the pockets of technology companies, so they were always looking for show-offy ways to blow a few million.

The music suddenly went silent, and the band evaporated into thin air as quickly as it had come. Professor Joy looked at the clock on the wall and pressed the button again while saying, “OK. We still have much to accomplish.”

She pulled a wood tray from a cabinet, carried it over to our circle, and tilted it so we could see a dozen or so metal bracelets. “These are your individually programmed identification iWallets to be worn on your wrist. All are preloaded with your daily schedules and your classmates’ contact information. They will also give you access to the school areas you are allowed to enter. Press the instructions if you’ve never used one before.” She handed them out to each of us and smiled. “I must warn you, the built-in buzz that signals an incoming message or reminder takes a little getting used to.”

I turned the red metal bracelet over a few times looking for anything the least bit pretty about it. Jericka leaned over and whispered, “I now know what a dog feels like when wearing a nasty choke-chain collar. They might as well have given us an electronic leash to spy on our every move.”

I shrugged my shoulders. What did I really care? I was only sticking around here long enough to get Rosie into an animated website.

“Now let us move on to review Pythia’s security policies,” Professor Joy said and pushed the white button on the wall. Simple bold lettering hovered over the center of our circle.

## **Security: Simple as A B C - Always Be Careful**

Spy stories—Password sharing—Website decoys—Phishing. Just when I thought she could say no more about the dangers of the Internet, she added, “Before we take a break, I want all of you to create a password, one difficult to hack, but meaningful enough it can easily be remembered. I need a volunteer to come to the whiteboard and write out the hypothetical password. Then we’ll decide as a class if it is an easy password to hack.”

I shifted my gaze to my left palm. My tried-and-true rule was to always avoid direct eye contact with a teacher when I heard the word *volunteer*.

“Anyone want to test out their password on us?” she asked.

I glanced away. A surfer-dudish-looking guy who had been leaning up against the doorframe slowly sauntered up to the whiteboard, picked his marker carefully, and wrote in bold red letters:

**ROJO(CHICABONITA@AMARILLOBEANBAG ;-)**

I looked down at my red sweatshirt and yellow beanbag and back up to the surfer boy at the board. He turned toward me, winked, and smiled.

Six



## A Blue Omen

“I got it!” Conner screamed. His arm shot up, waving wildly in the air. “Code for Nina. Cute girl in red sitting in a yellow beanbag!”

The boy at the board turned his baseball cap backward and shrugged. “Didn’t know anyone in this room could decode Spanish so fast.”

“And did you know Nina in Spanish means “little girl”? Any of you notice how incredibly short she is?” Conner added.

Suddenly the inside of my sweatshirt felt like steel wool. Heat crawled up my neck and coated my face. A couple of girls cupped their hands over their mouths to hide their giggles.

“Nice.” Professor Joy’s voice dripped with sarcasm. Her lips narrowed into a thin line across her jaw. “While that may be a difficult password to hack, in the future, please consider a password that does not embarrass another student.” She sipped her water. “Let’s take a break. Please be back in two hours for a tour of the server room and driverless go-kart track. Oh, and be sure to stop and order a drink at Pythia’s Robot Café located in the

main atrium. You will have the pleasure of meeting the special new barista.”

Like I cared about some new barista. All I could think about was how to get out of a beanbag without splitting the back of my pants wide open. I took a big breath in, lifted my butt up into Crab pose, waddled my way out, and immediately tugged at an underwear wedgy. Beanbag chairs were so incredibly rude.

Jericka was leaning up against the doorframe waiting for me with a big smirk. “Let’s go meet that barista and find some air to cool down your face.”

I put my hands up around my cheeks. “You can tell?”

She snorted. “Am I blind?”

Jericka took the lead and turned down a dimly lit corridor, which twisted around into another darker hallway, which looked exactly like the last dark hallway. “I hope you know where we are,” I said looking up at the hallway street sign that read, “Disk Drive.”

“Just follow me,” she said. “We’ll be in the atrium in no time.”

We turned onto Memory Lane. When we pushed through a set of glass doors, we were immediately covered in a misty blue fog from head to toe.

“Ick,” I said, rubbing the moisture off my arms. “It’s like we entered a giant snow globe but filled with blue air. How is that possible?”

“The atrium is a sort of greenhouse,” Jericka said. She pointed up to the glass ceiling and then off into the distance. “The air is humid due to the jungle of trees in here, and the blue is from the blinking blue sign at the Robot Café.”

“Cool. A totally glassed-in room. And so incredibly blue,” I say.

“Yeah, so quit your staring at the air, and let’s get mov-

ing.” She nudged my arm. “There’s probably a line forming at the café.”

I’m not usually one to be superstitious, but within minutes of a blue ball smacking me between the eyes, I’m covered in a blue mist? It was no secret among yogis that the universe often communicates its messages with color. Blue symbolizes truth. At that moment my favorite *Star Wars* saying popped into my head: “*Searching for the truth is easy. Accepting the truth is hard.*” I stopped in my tracks.

“Was I led here for a reason?” I whispered under my breath. “To search for truth?”

“No, I led you here to get a drink,” Jericka said, pulling me by the arm. “Now pick up the pace.”

“Wait, er, wait,” I said, pressing my heels into the ground. “Go on without me. I just need a minute to center myself.”

She cocked her head and sighed. “Is that yogi language for needing to chill?”

“Yeah, guess you could say that,” I replied.

“You are definitely going to take some getting used to.” She rolled her eyes. “OK. I’ll save you a seat at the café.”

I sighed in relief. Finally, with Jericka out of sight, I could concentrate on this blue-omen situation in peace. I veered off the main sidewalk on a cobblestone path that led into a thick canopy of green. A sign read, “Enchanted Forest,” with a carved arrow pointing toward a circle of trees so tall they almost touched the glass ceiling. After a few twists and turns, the path ended at the base of an oak tree. A wooden ladder leaned against its trunk with delicate braids of blue violets looping around each rung.

Blue again. This blue omen track I was on was serious.

The ladder led up to a wooden platform balanced among several large branches. It was only ten feet or so up, but I’d

never gotten past my fear of heights. To me, it may as well have been a climb up to the top of Mount Everest. The words of a counselor at my trapeze camp came to me: *The best way to cure fear of heights is to make friends with it*, which made as much sense as kicking a beehive to cure an allergy to bee strings. *Besides*, I would say to the counselors, *I don't have a fear of heights. It's my body flailing in midair and hitting the ground with a thud that bothers me.*

But there was no turning back. With my eyes tightly closed, I grabbed one rung of the ladder after another until the rungs ended at a round hole just large enough to pull myself through. I poked my head in and opened my eyes. In the corner of the wooden platform, a huge rope hammock was tied to the tree. How I loved a hammock! And this was just one of many. As far as my eyes could see were zigzagging rope bridges connecting a maze of quaint tree houses—each with a cozy hammock.

My whole body tingled. I wasn't expected back at the classroom anytime soon. So, what the heck. I wouldn't be missed if I spent a little snooze time in a hammock. I pulled at the rope, crawled in, and gently swung back and forth. It was just what I needed to lull away the feeling of being a total loser at this school.

My eyes had barely closed when an angry voice rose up from below.

"You take us for fools, do ya?" a man yelled. "You think you're just playing a game? But it's a game we win. In the end, you slimy hackers never get past us."

"*Hic, hic, hiccuupt, hic,*" tweeted like a sick canary. "I get it. I get it. It's true; I was just playing. I'm sorry," a kid replied meekly.

"Yeah, right. I bet you're sorry," the gruff man yelled back. "Sorry you got caught."

I peeked over the edge of the hammock and looked down through the branches—just leaves, bark, and more leaves. Never accused of minding my own business, I slithered out of the hammock, tiptoed to the edge of the platform, and stepped onto the limb of the tree.

Wait. Dry air hit the back of my throat, and my arms swung wildly. This was crazzzzy. I kicked out one leg in the air to keep my balance and grabbed onto a branch hanging above my head. I could die if I fell. My heart started beating out of my chest.

One more misstep like that one, and I would end up like Tedrick, the spying sociopath who fell out of a tree in one of the *1000 Ways to Die* episodes—the show I binge watched more than any other. It was gruesome and gross. But I swear, seeing the weird ways people die kept me out of danger’s way.

In the falling out of a tree episode, an oak allergy caused itchy red welts to break out all over the Peeping Tom Tedrick, causing him to itch himself into a panicked frenzy. With arms flailing and feet tap-dancing, he lost his footing on a branch, slammed into the ground, and was found dead with a red rash crawling across his face. “Verti-go, going, gone,” the narrator explained.

With the thought of Tedrick’s demise spinning in my mind, I had to create a braver version of myself. I got down on my knees, dug my fingernails into the limb, and crawled down the narrowing branch until I was directly above the two of them. I pressed my stomach against the bark, twisted my head around the branch, and peered down. All I could see were the tops of their heads and a man’s index finger poking into a kid’s chest.

“What kind of idiots do you take us for? We have your IP address, and now we *own* you,” the man said.



“*Hic, hic, hicccuupt, hic,*” the kid tweeted in response.

“Pathetic!” the gruff man said, then thumped the kid in the chest again. “You sound like a dying animal.”

*Buzz, buzz, buzz*— my bracelet hissed like an attack of hornets. Immediately the talking stopped, and a ferret faced man was looking directly up at me. I silenced the buzzing with my hand, but the damage was done, a message from Jericka streamed across the face of my bracelet. The man’s index finger pointed up at me through the branches. “You in the red. What are you doing up there? Come down here,” he screeched.

I pulled my face close into branch and slithered backward toward the platform.

“Come down, I said,” he hollered again. “You were eavesdropping on a private conversation. Come down here!”

When the soles of my shoes slammed onto the platform, I quietly crept toward the hammock, crawled in, and rolled onto my side. All was silent except for the squeak of the planks and the pounding of feet on a platform below. No doubt about it. That ferret faced man was coming for me.

I rolled out of the hammock and hunted for an escape route. I couldn’t get away by slithering down on the branch. Too dangerous. My only choice was the ladder. But if I was climbing down, while the ferret faced man climbed up, I’d be like an animal caught in a snare.

Trapped. There had to be another way to escape. *Think, Nina, think!* All that was between the ferret faced man and me was this platform and a hammock. *Think harder, Nina!* Every brain cell and life experience I’d ever had lit up in my head. Then a simple solution came to me.

Hammock + escape off platform =  
trapeze rope to swing to the ground

Of course! Hadn't I just graduated at the bottom of my class from trapeze school?

My hands shook, but if I wanted to live, I had no choice but to use everything I'd learned. I yanked down the hammock, then triple-knotted some of its rope around a branch.

The ferret faced man's heavy breathing rose up through the platform's wooden planks. The ladder squeaked.

I stood at the edge of the platform. Wrapping my fingers around the ropes of the hammock, I whispered, "Rosie, if I live through this, I promise you will have life too."

As if taking a ride on Aladdin's magic carpet, I closed my eyes and jumped.

Seven



## The Purple Pimple

The lightness of flight was short, the stab of pain in my butt cheeks sharp—proving I was still alive. With no time to waste, I ran toward the blinking blue lights of the Robot Café.

I'd only met Jericka hours earlier, but the sight of her felt like seeing a long-lost friend. I was so caught up in the moment of being alive, I grabbed her from behind and gave her a big bear hug.

“Whoa,” she said, “and hello to you too. It’s about time you got here.” She turned and looked down at my stomach. “What is that all over you? Tree bark?”

“Shh,” I said, scanning the crowd to see if the ferret faced man had trailed me. “I’ll tell you later.” I ripped off the red sweatshirt and threw it down under the bar. “Now act normal,” I whispered.

“Normal? Do you think it’s normal to strip down and throw my sweatshirt on the floor? There is no *normal* around you, Nina,” she said and pulled a leaf out of my hair. She held it inches from my nose. “See what I mean?”

I shushed her again and hid my face by staring down at the drink menu mounted on the bar. Techy-named concoctions that only a computer geek squad could come up with filled the screen.

“I’m kind of torn between the Google That Latte and a Midnight Munchie Special,” I said faking an inner calm, “but think I will go for the Girl Scout Cookie Mocha, topped with melting BITS and BYTES of chocolate butterscotch.”

We stepped forward toward the counter and read the instructions posted behind the counter on how to place an order. Suddenly, Jericka gripped the back of my arm. She yanked me backward and shrieked, “It’s an honest to god real robot...the barista is a robot...I hate, hate...robots!”

Her grip on my arm tightened. I lost my balance, tripped over my feet, and fell backward into the guy behind us. “Hey, there,” he said, “what do you take me for? Some kind of pushover?”

I turned to apologize. But argh! It was Conner. Just my luck.

“Uh, uh, sorry,” I said.

Jericka, still pulling on my arm, started mumbling something incomprehensible about a movie where robots took over the world. She pointed her index finger at the bar where a three-foot-tall shiny white robot stood. It wore a retro blonde wig; ripped-at-the-knees, faded bell-bottom jeans; and a pair of red sneakers. As robots went, she was pretty stylish. However, my image of her outfit totally fell apart when I spotted a bungee cord looped around her waist as a belt and a T-shirt with “Girls Who Code” written across her chest. Made of metal or not, this girl needed someone to take her out for some shopping.

“Jericka, it’s not like...er,” but stopped when I caught sight of the robot’s face. It had eerie blue eyeballs, and a round purple camera lens stuck out of her chin like an infected pimple.

“Whoa. I think that’s a video camera in the cleft of her chin.”

“She’s probably taking zoomed-in pictures of us right now,” Jericka whispered with her hand over her face.

“And close-ups are so disgusting. Every oversized pore looks like a crater on the moon and the tiniest of blemish an erupting volcano,” I said while lowering my head. “But wait. We can’t leave. I really *need* that Girl Scout Cookie Mocha.”

“Well, the sign on the wall says to speak directly into her face. Which of course means”—Jericka stopped midsentence to squeeze my arm— “she can take videos of us and send the footage off to a bunch of drooling losers. I’ve seen how it all works on those nasty police shows.”

“Well, I’m just going to have her talk to the hand,” I said, then pressed the palm of my hand out in front of my face and yelled my order.

Immediately the blonde robot creature hinged at her waist in a stiff imitation of a bow and nodded her head. Two seconds later, a tattered plastic Giants pennant unwound from her side and pointed us toward the end of the bar where a sign read, “Pickup counter.” She actually seemed kind of likable if I ignored her eerie blue-eyed stare.

“What kind of robot likes the Giants?” I whispered while walking toward the other end of the bar.

“I don’t know, but I’ll tell you one thing, I’ll take a cute warm-blooded barista who winks when I give him a tip any day over that blonde-haired freak of nature.”

“Shh. Watch what you say in front of her,” I whispered. “What if she hears you? She might spit rusty robot slime in our drinks.”

“Oh, come on. As if robots have saliva, Nina.”

Did she not know that was an *only kidding* voice? And she said *I* was going to take some getting used to.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.* I glanced down at my bracelet to silence the unfriendly noise, but this time the buzzing had announced my drink was ready. I reached for my cup. I was about to wrap my fingers around it, when a hand swooped in front of mine and grabbed it. “What the....?” I said and turned to see Josh’s face inches from my nose.

“Hope I didn’t embarrass you with my password,” he said, combing his hands through his hair. “It was just that you were sitting there all colorful in all that red sweatshirt and yellow beanbag.”

I took a step back. Obviously, he had no idea about personal space. He then sifted his fingers through his hair again and shook his head apologetically in the worst imitation of shame ever. I knew from a Teen Time article on body language that when someone sifted their fingers through their hair, they were either nervous or bashful. I studied his face. Definitely not an ounce of bashful, so the hair-sifting habit had to have been nerves.

“We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Josh Chello,” he said and extended his hand. “And you are Nina, a.k.a. RojoChicaBonita.” The robot barista rolled down the counter and stood in front of Josh to take his order. “Oh, nothing for me, thank you,” he said. “Don’t know how you people drink this stuff. Too sweet. I’d rather chew on pencil lead. By the way, what flavor did you get Rojo?” he said with my drink in his hand and talking a mile a minute. “I see you as a sophisticated hazelnut or vanilla girl. Although, you could also be prone to the more exotic pumpkin spice or eggnog in the season.”

What was I going to say? *Oh no, I’m more of a Girl Scout Cookie Mocha with the taste of a third grader?* Based on the words he used and the bit of blond peach fuzz over his lip, he was older. Sophisticated. With the drink selection I made, I

might as well have been wearing a girl scout sash and working on a how to look childish badge.

“Well...er,” I stammered and looked at Jericka.

“We have to go, Nina. I need to take a shower after all that moving into the dorm today,” Jericka said as she stepped between us, saving me from stumbling over my words.

Whether she noticed I was grasping for what to say or had an intuition for sensing mortification, I knew at that very moment that our friendship was cemented forever. There are some unwritten rules of how to rescue a good friend and saving me from having to answer embarrassing questions was one of them. I took my mocha from Josh and followed Jericka out the door and toward our dorm. Maybe I wasn't as doomed as I'd thought when it came to having a roommate.

After pushing through the doors to the parking lot, I stopped at the curb to scan the area for the ferret faced man. “Jericka,” I said in a hushed voice, “I need to tell you something kind of weird. When you left for the Robot Café, I climbed up a tree and saw a man.”

“You were climbing trees? Yeah, I'd agree that's weird.”

“No, well, yes, I climbed a tree, but that's not the weird part.” I stammered.

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, so you think climbing trees isn't weird?”

“Just wait a second,” I said, sounding more shrill than I meant to. “While I was in the tree, I overheard a mean ferret faced man threatening a kid.”

Jericka narrowed her eyes. “Threatening a kid with what?”

“Something about hacking. And owning him since they had his IP address.”

“Owning him? That's what they say in those mafia movies my dad watches.” She turned her eyes up toward the sky, deep

in thought. “When the mafia says they own someone, it usually means they’ve got some information on them that is really bad and will use it against them if they don’t cooperate.”

“You know,” I said, softer, “that ferret faced man saw me. He caught me eavesdropping and was really mad.” My voice weakened and cracked. “He came after me.”

“Did you get a good look at the kid?”

“No, but I’d recognize his...*hic, hic, hicccuuplt, hic...hic-*cups anywhere,” I said.

“So there’s a hiccupping hacker among us.” She locked her arm in mine and pulled me close. “But you’re right. You overheard something that could put you in danger. We need to find that hiccupping hacker and get to the bottom of this before the ferret faced man finds you.”



Eight



## The Difficult Truth

Spinning circles in the three-foot rectangle separating our beds was the only nervous pacing I could do in a limited space. How Jericka could be singing in the shower at the top of her lungs with the knowledge that my life was in total danger was beyond me. For all I knew, my picture would be showing up on a TV episode about a girl who mysteriously disappears in the middle of the night only hours after arriving at her new school.

With no way to know if the ferret face got a good look at me, I kicked off my black stretch pants and tossed the tankini top in the corner of the room. The full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door reflected my near naked body. There was no denying the fact I had not blossomed into adolescence. Megan's teasing whistled through my head. When in the dressing room at the mall, she would giggle and say, "*Nina, you're so flat that pirates can't wait to get their hands on your sunken chest.*" She'd then smile. "*But nothing a foam bra can't take care of!*"

I missed her. But not her jokes.

Short and flat-chested. Was I going to look ten years old forever? I held up a pair of royal-blue yoga tights with groovy slits down the side and a tie-dyed T-shirt. Anyone looking for a girl in black pants and a red sweatshirt would be totally thrown off. I pulled up my hair and tied it into a tight, high-on-the-head Barbie-doll ponytail. Typically I liked my hair loose and a bit messy. For now, that had to change—but there would be no stooping to a chest full of foam rubber.

While Jericka dried her hair, I ripped the tape off a half dozen moving boxes to surprise her with the cool stuff I brought from home. I pulled out my posters—Dancer pose, Camel, and the ten instructions to help keep a yogi on the right path. A few thumbtacks later, a mini yoga studio was born.

The door of the bathroom swung open, and Jericka appeared from the mist in a towel. She eyeballed my posters. Her face changed immediately. Not exactly a stink eye, but I knew if history ever repeated itself, which it usually does, a sarcastic comment about people who practice yoga was coming. One all-time favorite I had heard a million times was, *I bet yoga changed your life, but I think that's a bit of a stretch.*

But instead of offering another round of yoga jokes, what came out after she opened her mouth and cocked her head sideways was, “So you must really like yoga.” She shook herself around like a belly dancer. “Very twisty. I’ll show you mine,” she said while unrolling a huge poster, which she held up against her chest.

Pink and purple unicorns flew with their wings fully extended through puffy white clouds. Several were sliding down the arch of a colorful rainbow and landing with toothy horse grins onto a pot of gold. I wanted to gag. It was some-

thing a kindergarten teacher would staple to a classroom bulletin board to make her five-year-olds feel at home.

“Guess you could say I go for more of the fantasy theme,” she said, stating the obvious. “Know all those projections they used on us during orientation? Imagine a herd of unicorn projections leaping over rainbows in the middle of our room. That’s what I’m going to create. Just imagine a world where unicorn holograms can live among us!”

I’ve heard enthusiasm was contagious. Hers was not. I picked up a water bottle from my nightstand and guzzled it to give me time to figure out what I was going to say. I looked up to my yoga poster for advice on how to respond. My eyes landed on “TRUTH: carefully choose your words so they do the least harm and most good.”

“I...uh...have never known anyone who wants to learn how to do holograms.” It was the best stab at truth I could come up with on such short notice.

“Kind of new to me too,” she said and started to curl her eyelashes in the full-length mirror. “But with all the smarty-pants people around here creating brand-new worlds of techy stuff, I figure what better alternative universe is there than a world filled with holograms of my favorite things?”

I didn’t know how this new roomie, getting-to-know-each-other conversation was supposed to go so I opened up my sketchbook as a way to return to my safe place with Rosie. I couldn’t wait to lift her out of her dull pencil drawings and into an animation on the computer screen. I could imagine her in a floral lime-green yoga outfit—the color of rebirth.

But instead of crouching down and sketching out Rosie in a new pose, I asked the question that was sizzling in my brain. “Did you notice that I was the only one...well, that...er...in the class who doesn’t have any real technical skills?”

There was a long silence. Awkwardly long. I bit the inside of my cheek, wishing I hadn't asked. Jericka was nice and probably didn't want to say, *How could anyone not notice?*

"It's a delicate process," she replied. "Clamping down too hard can be disastrous." She looked up from the mirror with the eyelash curler pressed up against her cheek. "I've known girls who have pushed down so hard they ended up with eyelashes that looked like fishhooks. Um. Did you just say something?"

"Oh, never mind," I said, relieved in a way that she had not heard me. Or at least was polite enough to pretend she didn't hear me.

"Do those eyelash curlers actually work?" I said trying to sound like the girly-girl roommate that she probably wanted to have.

"Well, mascara alone just isn't enough to create a lasting curl, but adding this clamp to turn them up a bit seems to keep the eyelash from going limp."

"Hmm, limp eyelashes. Who would have known?" I said and checked the time. "Guess we should get back for the rest of orientation."

I stepped into my tie-dyed flip-flops, and Jericka strapped on her three-inch heeled sandals. When we stood side by side, I was a full foot shorter, in height as well as all this technology stuff.

Nine



## Edgy Reggie

*Sneaking into the classroom* a couple minutes late caused us to bump smack into a crowd of kids huddled around the door. We had barely squeezed ourselves into the room before Professor Joy raised two fingers over her head. “We’ll now be heading down to the basement server room. Unfortunately, it’s gotten dark out, so we’ll need to save the driverless go-kart-track tour for another time. Let’s all line up single file, since the stairs down to the server room are fairly narrow.”

I’d heard teachers say, *line up in single file*, at least a million times, and I reacted the same every time. I looked over at Jericka, totally willing to accept any position in line that came to her, took her by the arm, and with my sharp elbows fully extended, bumped us directly to the back of the line.

“I’ve been to enough of these schools to know it’s important to get a clear view of which brownnoser will become teacher’s pet and who will be the girl whose hair flings with the perfectly timed *accidental* rub up against a cute guy’s

shoulder,” I said to her under my breath, while standing on my tiptoes to get a full view.

“You’re a pro. You’ll be writing an advice column someday on this kind of stuff,” she replied.

No big shocker when Missy weaseled her way on one side of Professor Joy. Show-offy girls like her were so easy to read. Two seconds later, I let out a gasp. Out of nowhere Josh stepped between Missy and Professor Joy. I sucked in my breath, never expecting a guy like him to take up a chief brownnoser position. But instead of trying to suck up to Professor Joy, he turned his head toward the back of the line and slowly scanned every face until finally his eyes landed directly on me. He smiled, waved his hand overhead, and started to wrestle his way back through the line.

He stopped directly in front of me, put on his Cheshire cat smile, and said, “Forget something, Rojo?”

My mind turned to mush, and my face got hot. Had I forgotten something? As if I needed to pee, I nervously shifted my weight from one foot to another. After all the years of eavesdropping on kids chatting it up, I’d learned zip about how to throw out some emergency lines of sass.

He raised his eyebrows and dangled my red sweatshirt in front of my face.

“Oh, gosh,” I said. “Thanks. I guess I left it, um, ah, somewhere? I’m kind of spacey today.”

“No problem. I found it crumpled up at the Robot Café, and it gave me an excuse to come work my way back here,” he mumbled. “I’m kind of an end-of-the-line guy myself.”

I quickly rolled the sweatshirt in a ball, stuffed it in my pack, and followed the line down a dark stairwell. We descended several flights to the basement, finally hit the

ground floor, and smooshed ourselves together in front of a large metal door labeled, THE GREEN ACRES SERVER ROOM. Not exactly a dungeon door locked up with metal chains, but it was secured like one. Electronic whizbang lockboxes, blinking red devices, and bolts the size of my hand hung on it like Christmas decorations.

“Everyone,” Professor Joy said to get our attention. “Take a quick peek above your heads and get acquainted with Pythia’s squadron of security cameras. Don’t ever make the mistake of believing you are anonymous here or anywhere else. You can quote me on that. Whether you are eating lunch in the cafeteria, crossing the street, or shopping at the mall, you are *always* being watched. Cameras are everywhere.”

I looked up at the ceiling. Like a family of evil bats eying us from the rafters, security cameras peered down at us from every nook and cranny. I imagined a team of security guards in blue suits watching us in some far-off secret room full of flat-screen monitors. Their eyes would narrow as they examined us closely taking note of our clothes, shoes, and hairstyles and checking to see if we had the shifty, nervous eyes of a thief.

Jericka nudged my ribs and stuck her face in mine. She peeled back her eyelids like a boogeyman’s wild crazy stare and giggled. I laughed, too, but couldn’t help being creeped out that we are always watched from every possible angle.

“Now, follow my directions to enter,” Professor Joy said and turned toward the door. “Place your student bracelet on the panel next to the door. When it clicks, push the door open and it will close behind you. Only one person at a time.” She held her bracelet over the panel and pushed through the entrance, then looked over her shoulder. “Hope you aren’t afraid of the dark.”

When it was finally my turn at the door, I put my ID bracelet up against the monitor and pushed it open. Immediately a blast of freezing cold air hit me. It wasn't cold enough for me to see my breath, but then again, I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face. I crossed my arms around my chest and jumped when the door slammed shut behind me.

My eyes stared to adjust to the dark—suddenly, I was surrounded by a huge swarm of space-age fireflies blinking chaotically. First red, then green, and then white flashes. Bugs. I hated flying bugs, especially the ones that zipped around in the dark. I rubbed my arms to keep them from landing on me, but as my eyes continued to adjust to the darkness, I saw that the fireflies weren't flying but were resting on big black boxes. And they weren't bugs at all. They were actually the status lights on a gazillion computers.

I rubbed my eyes. I had never seen anything like the warehouse-size room I'd just entered. Hundreds of servers and storage-locker-size glass enclosures filled the floor-to-ceiling metal racks that surrounded me. Inside the glass enclosures, robotic arms zipped around at lightning speed, swapping out magnetic tapes and disks. I felt like I'd stepped onto a movie set that belonged in the *Wizard of Oz*. The only thing missing was the face of Oz himself displayed on a huge flat screen with smoke coming out his ears.

Suddenly I felt very out of place. A bit scared. I self-hugged and found Jericka standing a few feet away with Josh. I went over and huddled with them. Then out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a man step out from behind a server rack and slink up quietly behind Professor Joy, directly in her shadow.

I swallowed hard. Ferret face? I stepped backward. I wanted to run. He stood so close to Professor Joy she could probably feel his hot breath on the back of her neck.



“Reggie?” she said. “Come on out here. These kids won’t bite.”

The man stepped out of the darkness. He nervously swung a water bottle back and forth, back and forth. He stood so close to Professor Joy she could smell his breath. Blood rushed back into my veins. Not ferret face, but a creeper just the same.

“Let me introduce Reggie,” Professor Joy announced. “He is the data center director better known as the computer guru who keeps this place running.”

There was a prickly weirdness in the way his whole body swayed like a rubbery Gumby doll keeping rhythm with the swing of his water bottle. His gray misshapen hoodie was unzipped and underneath he wore an oversized T-shirt that read, “Nerd (noun): Four letter word with a six-figure income.”

Josh leaned in close to me and whispered, “That shirt is a perfect example of what geeks wear to make themselves appear important to the outside world.”

I giggled, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Edgy Reggie’s face. Something seemed off. His evil grin reminded me how a spider would smile when a bug was about to fly into its web. But no. It was the way his eyes darted back and forth. Dark and cold. Like the hungry sharks that stared me down at the city aquarium.

“So, hello,” he raised his hand and waved. “I’m Reggie. Welcome to the Green Acres Server Room. The name of this server room reflects two things, the acres of computers that fill this space and, needless to say, the millions upon millions of greenbacks Pythia rakes in from our customers.”

He stopped to laugh as if he’d just made a funny joke, but when he noticed that no one laughed along, his smile quickly faded. He took another swig of water and wiped his hand across this mouth. “This tour has an educational component

to it, so bear with me for a sec while we get through the historical part first.”

He cleared his throat, then awkwardly rocked back and forth on his heels as if he were in an invisible rocking chair. “In my simplistic view of human history, there are four significant eras. The Hunter-Gatherer Age, the Agricultural Age, and the Industrial Revolution. Just a few decades ago, we marked the beginning of the Digital Age, consisting of computers and communication technologies. Just pause and imagine life before cell phones and the internet.”

Did he really need to ask? People didn’t have lives before cell phones and the internet.

He then raised his index finger in the air. “Let me just say one more thing, technology has been the single greatest driver of economic growth since the industrial revolution began!”

Spit sputtered from his mouth. His eyes shifted back and forth. I crossed my arms, readying for another blast of spittle, but he merely sighed and pointed his water bottle toward a marble statue.

“Let’s head over to our statue of the Pythia.” We walked several yards and stopped directly at the foot of a woman made of marble, about eight feet tall and carrying mounds of gold in her hands. “Let me introduce you to one of the Delphic oracles that belonged to the fortune-teller clan named the Pythia. Yup, you got it. The same weird-arse name as this corporation.”

I looked up at her Mona Lisa smile and down the long flowing gown that touched the top of her small bare feet. It was like one of the ancient Greek statues you’d see in the dusty art museum that my grandmother occasionally dragged me to.

“Note she is holding mounds of gold-rush treasures. As you all know from studying the history of California, this was a huge gold-rush state. I personally consider the computer era

the second California gold rush, and all of you are now part of this new and exciting digital era.” He turned toward Professor Joy and pointed toward the marble statue. “Now back to our lovey lady of Pythia.” He stared up at the tall slender woman made of white stone and said, “Have you told them yet about the Pythia spirits that like to haunt the students?”

Hauntings? A chill ran down my spine.

Ten



## Shark Eyes

“Don’t be alarmed,” Professor Joy interrupted. “The legend of the Pythia can create...well...sometimes a mysterious ruckus. But we’ll cover that in homeroom tomorrow.”

“Ha! I’d call it more of a haunting ruckus!” Edgy Reggie said with a high-pitched giggle. “Bet none of you ever heard those two words in the same sentence.” Edgy Reggie continued to chuckle to himself as he took a pair of nail clippers from his pocket, twisted them open, and started to cut his nails. “Yep. Seen them myself in this very room. They are usually a harmless breed of spirits, but they certainly can stir folks up from time to time.”

“Ahem,” Professor Joy cleared her throat to cut him off. “As I said, Reggie, more on the legend of the Pythia tomorrow.”

“OK, OK. I get it. I’ll shut up about ’em,” Edgy Reggie said while pressing the clippers down on his thumb. A quick snap, and his fingernail flew out, bounced off the statue, and fell to the floor next to his foot. What kind of person does that?

“Anyone here still go to malls?” he asked. “Well, don’t get used to it. Malls are a dying concept.” He paused to clip his

index finger. “You should understand, Pythia servers here in this data center support a huge chunk of the world’s online shopping habit, whether through our website design services or through hosting the consumer clouds.”

He snorted and laughed, then added, “Imagine Pythia as a sort of King Kong crushing malls the way King Kong trampled New York City skyscrapers.” He giggled, put his nail clippers in his pocket and pointed to his left. “Let’s go over—whoa, watch out everyone!” he shouted as a kid on a skateboard whizzed around the corner of the tape library and ran right over the top of Edgy Reggie’s foot. The boarder took flight. Josh gripped my arm. He jerked me back and out of the way of the boarder, who rolled a couple of times before finally landing face down on the cement floor.

No one moved a muscle. Including the boarder. He was so still I wasn’t sure he was even breathing. Edgy Reggie rushed over, crouched down by the boarder’s side. He said something softly next to his ear. Receiving no response, Edgy Reggie put his two fingers on the kid’s neck to check for a pulse.

I took a breath in. My chin started to quiver. Two words rattled around in my head—*board stiff*. The sketchy skateboarder in the *1000 Ways to Die* episode was as vivid in my mind as the day I watched it. Trash-talking kid launches himself off a jump—lands face first onto a sidewalk of wet cement. He loses consciousness, suffocates in the wet cement, and the narrator finishes with a corny pun — **BOARD STIFF**. I pinched the palm of my hand, hoping it would help to rid the morbid thoughts that seemed to be an addictive hobby. I couldn’t help it. The ugly stuff just kind of bubbled up.

“Is he OK? Should I call 911?” Josh yelled and took his phone out of his pocket.

The boarder rolled over, pressed his hands into the floor, and slowly sat up, his face as white as a sheet. He shook his head in a wide-eyed daze. Two seconds later, he was grabbing for his baseball cap and struggling to get to his feet.

Professor Joy took his arm. “Just hold on a minute; you just took a big fall. Why don’t you just sit for now.”

But instead of a real answer, he turned his cap around and slid it backward over his head. He scanned the floor and said, “Anyone see my board?”

Josh walked to the rack, dislodged the board from under a metal shelf, and handed it to him. The boarder slipped it under his arm, pulled the brim of the cap farther down the back of his head, and limped off in the direction he had come.

“Well,” Edgy Reggie said as he got up off the floor, “that certainly proves my point about baseball caps.” Wiping his hands off on his jeans, he said, “People who wear ‘em backward have an IQ lower than dirt. The service personnel ride on skateboards and small bikes to maneuver around the acres of these systems. I’ll be reconsidering that policy after that brainless stunt.”

He took another swig of water, swished it around his mouth, and wiped his chin off with his hand. “Let’s move on to security.” His face darkened to match his shark eyes. He lowered his brows, and a deep crease formed. “I will only say this once, so pay attention. There is one rule never to be broken. Read my lips as I say the word *no*, as in no hacking of the systems. Ever. Not for fun. Not to prove you can do it. Not to use the systems for your own purposes.”

He enunciated each word so painfully slow I felt like I could take hold of it and pull the words out of his mouth like a long string of sour taffy.

“When I catch the hackers who think they can outsmart me, I personally take the honor of working round the clock to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law.” He stopped and the veins in his neck popped. “Hacking equals juvenile detention, folks. Don’t test me.” Edgy Reggie took another swig of water and started nervously blinking as if he was doing some kind of Morse code with his eyelids.

I lowered my head and whispered, “He sounds like a prison warden. And what is it about hackers and this place? First threatening that kid under the tree. Now warnings in the server room?”

“Didn’t I tell ya?” Jericka cupped her hand around her mouth. “Edgy Reggie is creepy paranoid. He thinks every kid here wants to hack into his servers. I personally have better things to do with my time.”

“Ugh,” I gasped, “he must be friends with ferret face.”

“You might be on to something, Nina,” she whispered.

“Oka-a-y, Reggie,” Professor Joy stepped in. “On that note, I think we are indeed finished with the tour. We will exit the same way we came in. Once at the door, swipe your bracelet, and then you are free to go back to the dorm and grab a quick snack at the hydroponic garden. Last I checked, there was a nice supply of ruby-red strawberries. Good night and see you in the morning at the Castle Roundtable for homeroom.”

Professor Joy led our group one way, and Edgy Reggie turned the other. I looked over my shoulder and watched him walk slowly down the row of servers—back to his dark cave where psycho data center managers belonged.

All of a sudden, my heel lifted out of my shoe. I reached for the wall to steady myself. My hand fell to the floor and my back leg kicked up behind me. Not only was it a miracle that

I hadn't fallen, but I'd actually launched myself into a perfect Half Moon pose. I could almost hear my favorite yoga instructor clap and say, "*Beautifully executed, Nina!*"

"Oh, geez, I'm sorry," Josh said, taking hold of my arm. "But that was the smoothest recovery ever. I mean epic. What was that?"

I leaned down sideways to put my shoe back on. "Thanks. I think I'll just say some good karma showed up and pushed me into a Half Moon pose to avoid a fall."

Josh leaned down and put his head close to mine. "Some good what? And into what moon?"

I shook my head. "Oh, never mind. It would be impossible to explain."

"Hey, have you seen The Dragons in concert?"

"No," I said while stomping my foot back into my shoe. "I haven't."

"Really? Well, that needs to change. Are you up for going tomorrow to Pythia's anniversary party?" he asked.

"Um, yeah. I'll probably go," I said.

"Well, a group of us are going together. And bring your friend along." He just stood there, smiling and waiting for me to answer.

"OK, sounds great," I said hesitantly.

"Awwwwesome," he said with a long drawl.

Professor Joy led us to the metal door, and one by one we exited. By the time I pushed through, everyone had already grabbed their phone and was head down, texting. I pulled mine out of my backpack. There was a text from my dad that I certainly wasn't going to read while standing there with Josh.

"Why don't you give me your number so we can make a plan for meeting up?" Josh said, stepping up alongside of me. He held his phone in his palm with his contacts list open. As I



gave him my number he typed in an entry titled “RojoChica.” It had kind of an exotic feeling to it and was way more interesting than “Nina Shiner” any day.

“OK, then, later,” he said and bolted up the stairs two at a time.

“Cowabunga, dude! Surf must be up,” Jericka joked. “He certainly doesn’t seem like the type who is rushing back to his room to compile some code.” She cocked her head and watched him disappear up the stairwell. “Betting he’s a gamer who can’t stand being away from his blood-and-guts video wars.”

“Maybe,” I say, thinking back to his password stunt at orientation. “He likes to play games, that’s for sure.”

I opened up the text from Dad.

You are not a misfit at the school.  
Professor Joy was the lead animator  
for several Disney movies. She can  
help you develop your yoga website.  
Embrace this, Nina!

A warm feeling came over me. I guess he really did understand what Rosie and I wanted.

Eleven



## Huckleberry Hollow

*My dreams were filled with* sharks swimming with computers strapped to their backs and ferret faced lightning bugs flying around with skateboards as wings. I woke up when one of the bugs zapped me right in the eye—which turned out to be the morning sun shining through a small open slit in the drapes. I rolled to my side and slid my arm under my pillow, hugging it tightly.

An alarm sounded in the next room, waking a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. No big deal. Just first-day-of-school jitters. I could handle it. But when a hair dryer down the hall kicked on, butterfly wings rose up in my gut, swatting at my insides in a frenzied panic.

I rolled onto my back, grabbed for the headboard, and focused my eyes on a yogi Drishti point on the ceiling to calm my flutter within. Long inhales, extra-long exhales, and a silent mantra—*Breathe in the future, exhale the past*. It was my go-to mantra when I feared facing the day. If I repeated it enough, sometimes I'd actually forget what was bothering me.

The sun rose higher. A yellow glow filled the room. A shower door slammed across the hall. Water ran through the pipes above me. I let go of the headboard, yanked the sheet over my head, wishing I could lie there all day, never budging out of the safety of my sheet cocoon.

But the sounds of the morning made denial of the day impossible. Especially when a weird slurring of words started up from across the room. I pulled the sheet off my face. The murmur got louder. I propped myself up on my elbow and stared over at Jericka.

With one arm hanging off the mattress and an icky dribble of spit running down her cheek, she mumbled softly, “Lab notebook...memory stick...extra phone charger...printer ink, printer ink, printer ink.”

Oh great. Just what I needed. A sleep-talking roommate dreamily shopping through an office supply store. Maybe if she were saying something juicy, I’d stick around to hear her out, but instead of lying there listening to another round of printer ink, I needed to answer the call of nature. I kicked off my covers and plotted my route to the bathroom.

The floor was even messier than the jittery thoughts in my head. An obstacle course of stray shoes, mounds of clothing, and empty cardboard boxes covered what was probably a decent carpet. I tiptoed past some super-cute jeans I’d definitely like to borrow from Jericka someday, but for the moment, I scooped up my own lump of clothes and maneuvered around a pair of lace-up boots, a pile of sweatpants, and a couple of throw pillows, before finally making it through the bathroom door.

I scanned my face in the mirror, tied my hair back, pulled on yesterday’s yoga pants, and stepped into my flip-flops. By the time I opened the bathroom door, Jericka had moved on

to sleep shopping through the makeup aisles. Her list of eye shadows and blush tones reminded me of how little I knew about the girly side of life. She was starting to make her way down the aisle of hair straightening products when the urge came over me to crawl back into bed, lie there in yogi Corpse pose, and pretend the first day of school was not happening. But listening to her slowly go through her list was going to get on my nerves real fast.

I looked down at all the empty boxes sprawled across the floor, kicked a few around into a pile, and decided to kill some time by going off in search of a dumpster. Armed with a half dozen cardboard boxes, I pushed the down button on the elevator. The doors opened, and I immediately froze in place. What if the ferret faced man knew who I was and found my dorm room? He could be waiting for me. I put the boxes up in front of my face and stumbled through the elevator doors.

When not a soul was in sight, I rushed through the lobby doors and walked around the side of the building where there was sure to be a dumpster. Turning around the corner of the dorm, a cool breeze hit me in the face and a chill ran through me.

Fall had arrived—the time of year my mom and I would shop together for tulip bulbs to plant in our yard. But this year, mom was doing autumn planting without me. Goose bumps rose up on my arms like an allergic reaction to being sent away. I imagined I was probably already forgotten. I set the boxes down and rubbed the bumps that were standing up in random formation.

The sun wasn't high enough in the sky to burn off the foggy haze, but I could see that up ahead in the misty distance, the path forked. In one direction, it continued along the bay. The other path curved around to a distant corner of the parking lot where a green dumpster stood against a back-

drop of tall palm trees.

I picked up the boxes and took off in a quick jog. Two feet from the dumpster, I jumped up and hook-shot them over the top in a spectacular layup any basketball player would brag about. The metal side rattled, and boxes landed with a thud.

“Impressive shot,” a male voice said.

My heart leaped out of my chest. I whipped my head around. But no one was there except a little dog sniffing around in the grass.

“We don’t get many visitors in these parts.” The voice came from behind the dumpster.

I snapped my head around. And there, in the shadows of the palm trees, was a guy slowly walking toward me. I froze solid like a deer in the headlights. So stupid of me. Out here by myself in a distant parking lot at the crack of dawn. I readied myself to run for it. But there was something familiar about him. Dark eyes and the same disheveled clothing I’d seen the day before. And that cute little dog.

I gulped in a breath. “Oh, geez...uh, Brad...right?”

“The one and only,” he answered.

“I didn’t recognize you at first... It’s Nina, from yesterday at orientation.”

His lifted his chin. “Oh, right.” One eyebrow arched. “If you’re looking to show off your layup shot, the P. design girls’ basketball team is always in need of talent.”

I cringed. He’d seen the whole thing. Luckily, Prince Charles ran toward me, saving me from having to come up with a lame reply. The little dog danced on his hind legs in excitement, and his warm brown eyes peered up into mine, melting away every ounce of my morning jitters. I reached down to pet his head just as he jumped up onto my legs and licked my hands.

“Hey, little guy,” I said, scratching him behind the ears. He was the cutest mismatched concoction of fur I’d ever seen, with ears that stood on end and a head two sizes too big for his short-legged body.

“Chuckie Boy, now, now...you get down,” Brad said in the same sing-songy baby voice that little old ladies would use with their little white poodles. “Oh, well. Chuckie Boy says he likes you.”

“I like him too,” I said as he lay down, extended his front legs out, and lifted his rear end to the sky to stretch out in a perfect puppy pose. “But I thought Professor Joy said his name was Prince Charles.”

“Well,” Brad said, crossing his arms. “Professor Joy prefers to call him by his formal name. You haven’t heard her Greek mythology lecture yet, but she is one of those European history buffs and doesn’t approve of my mocking the British royalty.” He paused, scratched his chin, and in a ridiculously heavy English accent, began again. “It’s a well-known fact that British royalty have always kept a rather large herd of Welsh corgis at their country estates. He hardly resembles one of *their* specially bred Welsh corgis, but just the same, he is of the breed, so my uncle named him Prince Charles. But he says he prefers to be called ‘Chuckie Boy.’”

He paused, looked down at Prince Charles, and put a poor imitation of sadness on this face. “And it’s an unfortunate truth, but Chuckie Boy has about as much chance of becoming a well-liked and popular King of England as does the scorned King Charles III.”

His head rolled backward, and he laughed. He looked at me as if I should be laughing along, then stopped abruptly. “Guessing you don’t read the tabloids and the British royalty gossip went right over your head?”

“Like a fly ball hitting the back fences.” I said straight-faced.

“Oh, oh, I like that. You’re a funny one.” He leaned up against the edge of the dumpster and smiled widely.

For some unknown reason, heat climbed up my neck and onto my face for the second day in a row. Whatever was up with this blushing stuff, it was irritating—or could it be some unidentified *1000 Ways to Die* nervous disorder set off by boys at this school? Not recalling an episode of death by blushing, I ignored my symptoms and basked in the smile he was beaming my way.

“Do you always walk your dog out here in a parking lot next to a dumpster?” I asked.

He cocked his head to one side and glanced over his shoulder. “Well, yes. Because I kind of live here.” He stepped aside and lifted his hand toward a thick grove of palm trees on the other side of the dumpster. “Behold.”

Tucked behind a rickety picket fence with peeling white paint stood an old camper propped up on cinder blocks. Streaks of orange rust ran down the tin siding, which was thick with divots, as if it had been used for target practice. A screen door, minus the screen, hung sideways on one hinge. The only things that came close to resembling any form of civilization were the checkered blue curtains streaming out of an open window and a satellite dish strapped to the roof with silver duct tape.

I looked at him, at the camper, and back to him. My mouth dropped open. Was he kidding?

“Yeee-up,” he said with pride. “That’s what Chuckie Boy and I call ‘Huckleberry Hollow’. Our home sweet home. Lived here for almost a year now.” He lifted his chin and smiled. “I still have a P. design dorm room assigned to me, but Chuckie

Boy said it was too cramped for his lifestyle.” He looked down, scuffing his foot in the dirt. “*And* my roommate and I may have not seen eye to eye on a few things. Actually more than a few things. So we parted ways. He stayed in the room, and we ended up here.”

He leaned against the camper and picked at the mud on its wheel. “I couldn’t tell my parents I’d gotten another F in friendship after they worked so hard to get me a scholarship to a school where they hoped I *might* finally fit in. So after my roommate meltdown, I pulled my uncle’s old hunting trailer off the side of his house and set up camp.” He nodded his head up and down as if I might join him in some form of approval. “And so here we are.”

My lip curled uncontrollably as I stared at a couple dead fish still on a fishing line. Luckily Chuckie Boy jumped back up on my shins to help hide my judgy expression. He cocked his head to one side, directing my hand to his other ear, and licked my kneecaps up, down, and sideways. Right then and there that little dog owned my heart.

“Yeah, I know my fishing pole strapped to the back of my bike seems a bit on the earthly side of life, but don’t write me off as some kind of parking lot hillbilly. I’ve become a master at feeding myself which I bet none of those pretty boys living in the dorm can do. There’s a whole bay full of halibut and rockfish out there.”

“I wasn’t,” I shook my head and tried to uncurl my lip.

“Don’t worry, I’ve seen the look before, but really, it’s not a bad gig. I have a generator for electricity and a microwave, but I really have no need to cook since the Pythia chefs serve up their delicacies in the cafeteria. I spiff up every morning with a hot shower in the company sports club. I even get my clothes



washed by the on-site laundry staff. And my haircuts are, of course, done at the Pythia styling salon.”

I looked him up and down. By the looks of him, the laundry staff didn't need to use much detergent on the threadbare clothes. And his long curly mane of hair had not seen a pair of scissors since I celebrated summer solstice with 108 sun salutations.

I took a step back and looked over his shoulder to take it all in. A hammock was strung between a couple of palm trees, and a string of colorful Christmas lights were woven around the slats of wood in the picket fence. A grill and a couple of wooden picnic tables were carefully arranged to fit just right on a frayed indoor-outdoor rug, and a few lawn chairs circled a firepit. Bohemian, but cozy, unique, and even kind of interesting. But...really...life in a parking lot?

“Does Pythia know you live out here by...er...their dumpster?” I asked trying to keep my judgy tone in check and the curl of my lip from rising.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “You don't have to look at me like I'm some kind of freak loser. I thought you might be different, but I guess you're just like the rest of the snobs that go to this school.”

Twelve



## Unicorn Yoga

Insulting these kids within minutes of meeting seemed to be my new talent in life. I bit the inside of my cheek, then opened my mouth to apologize.

“But,” Brad said, “to answer your question if Pythia knows I live here, I give them reason to cut me slack. You see, I’m basically available to them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If a midnight system meltdown raises its ugly head, they call me in to help. If hackers break through the security firewall? I’m by Reggie’s side in minutes, figuring out the patch to plug the hole. And of course,” he said, finally taking a breath, “it’s a well-known fact that I create the most magical artificial intelligence code ever imagined. When Pythia is in need of breakthrough technology, I create the path.” He paused to kick some dirt with his foot. “They call me their own personal coding savant. That means I’m kind of a genius.”

Unabashed coder ego. I tried to hide my smirk. His ego was like a helium balloon that flew high over the rainbow of unchecked confidence. I’d seen the same *I’m the smartest guy*

*in the room* trait in the kids who joined the Palo Alto Middle School Programmer's Club. But his nerd talk was not meant to intimidate. Normally a person like Brad would make me question my self-worth—he was just him being himself. Which made him curiously different.

Finally his chatter started to wane, and he stood there in silence looking at me like I was going to tell him something about myself. I crossed my arms. What did I have to say that matched his high IQ world?

I reached down for one last pet of Chuckie Boy's head and said, "Well, guess it's time for me to get back."

"Wait," he stepped closer and looked me directly in the eye. He opened his mouth, but no words came. He swallowed, then said, "You'll have to swing by for a Huckleberry Hollow party. I'm told I make a mean grilled hot dog."

"Thanks, I will," I lied. I'd rather die than be seen with some disheveled guy who probably grilled hot dogs over a flame on a wooden stick. I had enough problems getting in with the right crowd without hanging out in a parking lot campsite. "OK, so I'll be on my way. Bye Brad. Oh, and bye, Chuckie Boy."

I turned to walk away, and that should have been the end of it, but Brad whipped a dog leash out of his pocket, snapped it on Chuckie Boy and ran up to my side. "So, I guess I'll see you later this morning in Specials Class." And then he added with a weird accent like he was some kind of secret agent, "Where we work on very special things."

"Uh, you will?"

"Indeedy. The name Nina Shiner is at the top of my roster. A name like that isn't easily forgotten."

I sucked in my breath. But I *was* forgotten. And *maybe* unwanted. Even Megan wondered why my parents kept sending me away. Most kids don't get sent away until they

are eighteen, and this was a real boarding school rather than a temporary enrichment experience. I swallowed hard and turned away to hide the tears of homesickness welling up in my eyes.

“Gotta go,” I said and bolted away toward the water’s edge.

With Brad out of sight, I waded into the bay, crouched down in a low Squat pose and gulped air. My heart was beating double time and sweat stung my eyes. I pulled up my shirt, wiped my soggy cheeks and shivered. A cramp crawled up my calf and into my thigh. I stood up, wiggled my toes into the rubbery flip-flops, and shook my legs back to life.

A group of seagulls circled, shrieking and dive-bombing me for trespassing into their fishing zone, until they were silenced by the blast of a jet engine flying overhead. I covered my ears and looked up at a plane dropping down through the clouds just as a seagull grazed me and delivered a wet gooeypoop on the top of my head. Disgusting dirty bird! I reached up and grabbed a handful of goo off my scalp. Immediately I plunged the top of my head into the freezing water. I wondered what was worse, the crap on my head or the ridiculous way I freaked out over the simple word *forgotten*.

I slogged through the sand back to shore, my skin mottled red from the cold water and my feet numb. Ignoring the advice from my gym teacher to always take the stairs, I jumped in the elevator. The mirrored door closed, and I nearly fainted at my reflection looking back at me. How was I going to explain going to the dumpster and coming back soaking wet with clumps of seagull poop in my hair? The elevator doors opened to the sound of hair dryers set on high and music blasting. I quickly tiptoed toward my room with my head low.

Even from down the hall, I could hear the slamming of drawers coming from my room and Jericka’s made-up lyrics

about unpacking set to “Ninety Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall.” I peeked through the crack in the door. Jericka was scooping socks out of a box and tossing them wildly into a drawer. “Fifteen socks go into the drawer, throw some in, turn back for more, fifteen socks thrown into the drawer.”

Her braids swung back and forth—jingle-jangling with every toss. The beads woven in intricate patterns down each strand were ingenious geek camouflage. No one would ever suspect a girl with a head full of rock-star braids of creating iPhone holograms in her spare time.

I picked up a sandal next to the door, held it up in front of my face, and said, “I think this might be yours?”

“Oh, hi. I wondered where you were. I’ve been working up a sweat unpacking.” She blew some air down the front of her shirt. “Sweating is something I try to avoid. And speaking of sweat, why are you all wet?”

“Oh?” I said, faking surprise and handed her the shoe. “Right. It’s hotter than heck out there. Guess I should shower off.”

With only a few minutes before we had to head off to homeroom, I had to rush, so it was more like running my body through a two-minute car wash than an aromatherapy cleanse.

With my hair dripping wet, I stepped into some tie-dyed yoga pants, my coolest sweatshirt, then stuffed Rosie’s sketchbook and my laptop into my backpack. We took the stairs two at a time, pushed open the lobby doors, and were immediately covered in a moist fog blowing in from the bay. We followed the sidewalk, trusting that somewhere up ahead, tucked away in the white mist, stood the Pythia buildings and our school.

“These people look like a gang of escaped wax-museum figures,” Jericka, said pointing at the shiny heads of the people walking by us. “Their hair is so caked in hair product I can see their comb lines.”

“Anyone of them could be the ferret face disguised with hair wax,” I say. “I just want to go home where the sun shines, people don’t coat their hair in goop, and I don’t have a creeper looking for me.”

Before I could dig my heels in and run back into the safety of my own dorm-room cocoon, the momentum of the wax figures pressed up against my back and pushed us right through the lobby door. With every step, I felt as if I was shrinking a foot in height. I’d never been in the grand cathedrals of anywhere, but this place had to compare. It was the size of a football field with curving marble staircases at each corner leading up to glass encased office areas.

I spun in a circle with no idea of where to go and leaned into Jericka like a dumb rock as the river of wax figures flowed around us. Arm in arm, we stumbled a few yards to get out of the crowd and bumped smack into a floor-to-ceiling castle made of huge colorful Lego blocks. Plastic bricks the size of grand pianos were stacked all the way up to the second floor. I craned my head back to see Lego princesses with long flowing hair, fire-spewing dragons, and knights in shining armor peering out of windows at us.

“Can I help you?” a girl said from what appeared to be a reception area. But unlike a typical cold white lobby, it was an alcove filled with miniature hot-air balloons that created, well, a happy feeling.

“How, uh,” I mumbled and pointed.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied, “they are drones made to look like hot-air balloons. Pretty cool, huh? What can I do for you?”

“Um, er,” Jericka stuttered, “this is all so different. Is this the entrance to P. design?”

“The very place. We remodeled over the summer. Can I see both of your bracelets?” she asked. I released the sweaty

death grip I had on Jericka's arm and placed my wrist on the scanner, and Jericka did the same.

"Welcome to P. design, Nina and Jericka. Just step onto the drawbridge behind me, and you will easily find your way to your classrooms. Have fun on *your personal* journey!"

"Uhh, thank you for your guidance." Jericka nudged my shoulder and mimicked, "Just follow me, Nina, to *your personal journey*."

The wooden drawbridge creaked as we walked across it, and chains rattled. It wasn't two steps later that she latched on to my arm and started whimpering. "This is creepy, Nina. That receptionist said nothing about walking into a pitch-black tunnel. What if bats live in there? I hate bats."

"Baby steps, Jericka. Just take baby steps," I said, faking confidence like I was some kind of expert in dark tunnels. "Hold on...what the?" I said, as out of nowhere animated pink and purple unicorns lit up the tunnel. Several seven-foot unicorns were jumping in unison over rainbows. Some were in the midst of a beautifully executed Warrior flow—Warrior I, Warrior II, and then each unicorn swooped a little green hoof down to the floor to form a perfect Triangle pose.

Jericka released her death grip on my arm, giggled, and reached out to pet a violet unicorn. "So otherworldly. This *really* is our very own personal journey. How did they know to fill it with unicorns for me and yoga for you?"

"Stop for a second." I grabbed her arm and covered her ID bracelet. Instantly the unicorns disappeared and the whole tunnel turned into a group of people in a yoga class. "Just as I thought. Our bracelets have been chipped to display our favorite things when we walk through a programmable art area." I raised an eyebrow and smiled. "And *you* picked unicorns as a favorite thing?"

“Well...they asked what my favorite things were on the student questionnaire. Was I supposed to lie?” She bit her lip. “How do you know about programmable art?”

“My dad reads Silicon Valley gossip columns about what rich geeks do,” I said and watched a unicorn jump over a girl in a headstand. “Bill Gates put this stuff in his mega mansion in Seattle. Well not *this* kind of stuff,” I sneered. “Betting he is more into Monet than unicorns sliding down a rainbow toward a pot of gold.”

“Well, then, he just doesn’t know what he’s missing,” she quipped back.

I stopped at the ping of a text coming in on my phone. Everyone knew a text took priority over any real conversation.

RojoChica, can't wait to see you today at the concert. Wear something outrageously red.

My heart leapt up into my throat. Josh. Within seconds, another text.

Meet up at noon before for pre-concert party at Huckleberry Hollow.

Huckleberry Hollow. Funny. Brad had actually convinced other people to call his trashy little campsite Huckleberry Hollow. At least it would be familiar surroundings and certainly nothing to be intimidated by. I bit my lip and cracked a smile.

“What are you smiling about?” Jericka said, bending over to see my screen.



“A text from Josh. Think I can borrow something red to wear?” I asked.

She grabbed the phone out of my hand. “Ooh, he is getting *very* friendly.” She read the text and immediately scrunched up her face. “You need to wear blue or black or pink. Anything but red.”

“B-b-but...” I stammered.

“Come on Nina. Never do *anything* a guy *tells* you to do. Only agree if he *asks*. And *asks* nicely.” Her eyebrows drew together as she slapped the phone back in my hand. “Do you want to make him think you are mindless?”

“If I wear red, I’m mindless?”

She lowered her eyes. “Well, it just seems he should ask you to do things rather than just expect them from you. Even stupid stuff like what color to wear.”

Our bracelets both buzzed: “8:30 Homeroom–Castle Roundtable” streamed across my schedule bar as I registered hearing another buzz behind us. I turned. Who else but Missy. She gusted by us without even saying hello but did leave us in a cloud of her perfume.

I turned to Jericka. “How very trendy. French pastries or doughnuts?”

She stuck her nose in the air. “Oh, definitely doughnuts. She must have read the Teen Time article. The scent of vanilla glazed donuts is the new go-to fragrance.”

I wrinkled my nose and studied Missy from the doorway of the classroom. She tossed her long blonde hair over one shoulder and then over the other. One fling would have clued me in that she was a girl used to being the center of attention. Two hair flings meant she wasn’t just used to it; she expected it. Then, just as all teacher’s pet brownnosers always did, she

pulled out a chair and pushed it so close to Professor Joy they could have been conjoined twins.

Conner and the other members of his ball-throwing gang piled past me with an explosion of laughter. A guy with curly red hair jabbed a short pudgy boy in the arm, while the tall skinny one tripped his thin look-alike with his foot. Conner had a tight grip on his Hoberman switch ball, which I imagined was part of his identity, the way footballs were to football players. Or basketballs to basketball players. Which made me wonder, *What is it about boys and their balls?*

I watched him toss the ball in the air—catch, toss, catch, toss—and with each toss a speck on his wrist glimmered and sent a beam of light ricocheting around the room. Suddenly lines of smoke were streaming off the walls.

“Fire!”

Thirteen



## Know Thyself

"Oh no!" Conner screamed. "Don't worry. I got this." He jumped from his chair, grabbed a bottle of water, and began to douse the wall. "A simple malfunction of my laser watch," he muttered while opening a second bottle of water.

Smoke rose up onto the ceiling, and a mix of gray ash and water flowed down the wall. A geometric burn pattern emerged that looked like an outline of sharp mountain peaks.

Professor Joy stood in the doorway with her arms crossed.

Conner's face reddened. "I swear I didn't know it was on. My dad and I are working on a laser watch." He lowered his voice. "Guess it still needs some work."

"Understatement of the year," one of his buddies shouted from across the table.

Professor Joy stepped toward him and held out her hand. He dropped the watch into her flattened palm. "See me after class," she said sharply. "Well, with that very warm welcome to homeroom, let's get started."

She put the watch on a small table and watched Josh stroll past her with his phone two inches in front of his face—a classic gaming position if I'd ever seen one.

“So nice of you to join us, Josh. Now put your phone away,” Professor Joy instructed.

“Oh, gosh, sorry,” Josh said, quickly stuffing his phone in his pocket. “And I apologize for being late and disturbing class.”

At least he had manners. Some gamers think the video-game world should be treated with more respect than the real world.

“As you know,” Professor Joy began, “P. design is the technology school created by the Pythia Corporation to train students in the high technology skills demanded in this digital world. Yesterday you were introduced to the Golden Arm Project which will be explained in more detail later.” She took a big breath in and clasped her hands together over her heart chakra in an unmistakable prayer position. “Today I'm excited to present to you how the name Pythia was selected.”

She smiled broadly and touched another one of those magical white buttons on the wall. I grabbed the arms of my chair and readied myself for the ride.

*THWACK!*

Within seconds a freaky mist seeped from the cracks in the floor and around our feet. Up our legs. Around our torsos. Finally rising to engulf us completely. A light breeze streamed through the room, lifting the fog and revealing a massive set of stone steps leading up to some kind of ancient temple. I leaned my head back and followed the pillars up to the top where statues of naked women, soldiers on galloping horses, and Greek lettering were carved out all over the marble roof line.

A projection of huge black letters hovered over the structure.

# Temple of Apollo at Delphi

With her hands still firmly in prayer position, she bowed her head toward the temple and closed her eyes as if deep in meditation. Moments later she whispered, “The projection in front of you is a depiction of the Temple of Apollo as it stood in 320 BC. This is where a group of female visionaries lived out their lives, helping the most powerful leaders of the time see into the future. Today we might call this group of women ‘psychics’ or ‘fortune-tellers.’”

“Or ghosts?” Conner snickered.

“The word *ghost* conjures up all sorts of negative energy. I prefer to call them ‘spirits.’ Now to begin the story,” Professor Joy said, pointing to the temple’s roof, “note the Delphic maxim carved above the temple’s entrance, ‘Know Thyself.’”

Delphic? I sank lower into my chair. I squinted up at the ancient swirls of loop the loop letters, Know Thyself. From having to memorize ridiculous synonyms, I knew Delphic was associated with the occult. A chill ran down my spine. What kind of place was this school?

“Know thyself. Know thyself. Know thyself,” she repeated softly like a mantra from yoga class. “It’s just one of the 147 inscriptions carved into the temple’s structure, but of all the sayings, ‘Know thyself’ is by far the best known. It was later expanded upon by Socrates, who said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’”

I finally exhaled. So far, it was harmless enough, but when Professor Joy pressed the button again, I pressed my back into my chair, expecting a three-headed Delphic creature to spring

out from behind one of the columns. The temple vaporized, and in its place stood a gypsy woman with long dark hair flowing down over her shoulder. A crack in the earth was spewing some kind of mist that she appeared to be smelling.

Professor Joy stepped away from the table, leaned up against the wall, and again clasped her hands over her heart. “This is a depiction of one of the temple’s prophetic women standing over the Chasma Ghes, more commonly known as the cleft of the earth. This sacred place is located on the side of Mount Parnassus in central Greece where the mystical vapors were emitted from a deep crevasse. It is said the women of the temple would inhale these vapors, which stimulated their prophetic powers.”

Kind of weird and woo-woo eerie, but the woman in the projection had a gentle way about her. Calm and serene. Almost spiritual.

“This group of women were known as the Pythia. Our number-one business goal at Pythia, Incorporated is to be known as a leader in the industry with visions of future technology. Thus, the name Pythia was chosen.”

Whoa. A Silicon Valley company named after a clan of cave-dwelling vapor sniffers? I turned my head and bit my lip to keep from laughing just as Conner’s high-pitched giggle echoed around the room. The rest of the class couldn’t help but join in. Professor cleared her throat and stared Conner down. He whimpered a few more snickers, then went silent.

“I understand how some of you could be skeptical of the Pythia,” Professor Joy said, while pacing around our circle. “People with visionary abilities are difficult to understand, but I know for a fact that all of us possess a sixth sense, sometimes better known as a gut feeling, which I personally like to call ‘hunch-think.’”

She paused to look each one of us in the eye. “It’s my belief this group of women perfected their hunch-think while meditating in the depths of the earth. Each of us has the ability to develop their intuition or hunch-think. It will often start out as just a whisper but explode into a calling to us, which is impossible to ignore.”

Half the class rolled their eyes into the back of their heads. I dropped my eyes to the floor. This sounded like voodoo. For all I knew, making direct eye contact with a person like Professor Joy could lure me into some kind of world of hocus-pocus where my shrunken head would wind up in a glass container on her desk.

Seconds later, without any warning or wish on my part, a *1000 Ways to Die* episode filled my head. I imagined a vaping gypsy chanting her visions of the future and going into some kind of psychic spasm, which causes her to slip and fall down, down, down, into the dark crack in a cave. This was out of control. I needed to somehow figure out a way to stop that show from hijacking my thoughts.

Professor Joy cleared her throat. “If there is one thing I want to leave you with, it is to never make the mistake of underestimating hunch-think. All innovators, past and present, confess that their prized technological creations began with a hunch.” She walked to the wall and pushed the white button, and the gypsy woman vaporized.

Missy raised her hand. “Are the Pythia hauntings true?” Clipping her words with an accent I’d never heard before.

“Well, the easy answer is that those among us who believe in the spirit world may see the Pythia, but the nonbelievers simply cannot,” she whispered in a low voice.

The room stilled. Was I a believer? Would I see the Pythia?

“That is all for now, but before you go,” she said, back in her teacher voice, “I’m passing out to each of you a bracelet

for access to the Dragon's concert this afternoon. Our home-room color is red. If there is an incident with one of you at the concert, security will look to your bracelet, and I will be contacted." Her voice became stern. "I'm looking forward to this concert as much as you are, so please let there be no issues."

I turned the bracelet over in my hand and smiled. I would indeed be wearing the color Josh instructed without appearing to be brainless. The yogi mantra, "There are no coincidences in the universe" came to mind. Red. It was meant to be. Suddenly all our class bracelets buzzed as if someone had thrown a hornet's nest into the middle of the table.

"I'll never get used to those things," I said, comparing the next class displayed on my bracelet to Jericka's.

"Algebra II" rolled across hers. Mine scrolled, "The Robot Café-Specials Class." Between the two choices, I most certainly got the better deal. Algebra was like studying an ancient language filled with parentheses, x's, and y's, while the Robot Café offered the sipping of a flavored mocha.

"You definitely drew the short end of the stick," I said.

"No joke. Wish we were going to the same class," she said as we started to go our separate ways. "Maybe see you at lunch?"

"I'll look for you," I replied.

I almost said something silly like how I would miss her but bit my tongue. My parents never said they would miss me, so I assumed she wouldn't either, but she reached out her arms wide and gave me a warm hug, which was way better than an *I'll miss you* any day.



Fourteen



## Meet Marilyn Monroebot

**Just my luck.** There was no way to avoid a walk through the atrium on the way to the Robot Café. Nothing like a return to the scene of the crime to get my blood stirring. I passed by the Enchanted Forest sign and distracted myself by looking up at the droplets of moisture clinging to each of the panes of glass. What had been a mystical blue snow globe in the dim light of late afternoon was transformed into the feeling of being inside a puffy, white cloud by morning light.

One turn on the path later, my pulse skyrocketed. The oak tree was just a few steps away. I kept my head low and did a nonchalant sideways glance toward the base of the tree and up to the platform. A rope hammock had been rehung on the platform, and the one I used as a trapeze to the ground was gone.

Had to be the work of ferret face. He must have cleaned up the evidence before anyone could question what happened. I quickened my pace through what felt nothing like an enchanted forest.

Walking toward the Robot Café, I could see Brad at the bar, tossing food to Chuckie Boy seated on a bar stool. Dogs always calmed my nerves. Just the sight of that little fur ball sure calmed mine. He wasn't just a dog to Brad; furry buddy was more like it.

"Hey, Chuckie, isn't Brad sharing?" I said, reaching to scratch him behind the ear. Chuckie Boy stiffened his head, obviously not wanting to be disturbed while begging.

Brad jumped, startled by my presence, then gave me the once over and said, "You look very nice, Nina."

Those five simple words brought a red rash of blush up my neck and onto my cheeks. I turned my face away and reached back to pet Chuckie Boy's head. "Thanks," I said in a tone that I hoped would make him think I was told that all the time.

"So how did you like meeting the cave-dwelling vapor-sniffing women of Pythia?" He said, waving his hand around in a flimsy circle at his temple. "I've heard it all before and couldn't work up the strength to sit through it again. I'll never get used to the ding-dong names these Silicon Valley companies come up with. Pythia. Plain wacky." He stuffed a french fry in this mouth and chewed. "And take Apple for instance. Apparently, Steve Jobs was on a fruitarian diet and had just come back from an apple farm when he picked Apple as its name."

"Someday you'll name your company"—I bit my lip and looked at the ceiling, hoping to look clever—"Huckleberry Hollow Computing. Has a catchy rhythm to it. A stream of smoke rising up out of the top of a camper will be your logo."

"Oh, you are a funny girl. Didn't I already tell you I like that? Hate to be repetitive." He said quickly, as if his thoughts flowed almost faster than his mouth could keep up with.

A group of kids from yesterday's orientation showed up and placed their orders with the robot. She spared no one

from her beady-eyed stare. The more I looked at her, the more those piercing blue eyes had a familiar creepiness to them. Yes, of course! No wonder she creeped me out. She looked just like the murderous Annabelle doll from the horror flicks. There were no long braids hanging over her shoulders, no bloody knife swinging from her hand, but the blue-eyed fixed stare was definitely the same.

There was no denying that robot had talent. The ten complicated orders she memorized would have caused human baristas to blow a gasket. With no help from anyone, she wheeled herself around from one end of the bar to the other, filling all sorts of Italian soda and mocha concoctions. Then to beat all, she did an unmistakably perfect Dancer pose—one arm spun forward for a spigot of chocolate chips, her back arched, one leg kicked back, then her other arm went straight up to fill a cup with espresso. I pointed at her, and my mouth dropped open; I was totally speechless.

“Yep. She’s a beauty. I created Marilyn,” Brad said in a tender tone.

“Her name is Marilyn?” I asked.

“Ah, my apology. You two have not been properly introduced?” He said with a snobbish accent. “Here, watch this.” Brad tapped the counter with two fingers. Within a second, she rolled herself up next to me. “Smart girl, eh? She’s learned to come, sit, and wait for our order. She actually catches on pretty fast.”

“OK,” I said, “but why Marilyn?”

“Oh, please. Don’t you see the resemblance? Marilyn Monroebot? The movie star from the 1950s? Gorgeous, blonde, blue-eyed? She’s going to have a sultry voice someday. Just haven’t gotten to that yet.” He paused with a goofy smile. “But there is one thing I added to upgrade her intelligence. This

Marilyn is way too smart to get mixed up with dirty politicians.” Brad said and over-laughed. “Still don’t get my jokes, do you?”

“Oh, well, I guess I do see the resemblance,” I lied. “How did you teach her to do all the barista stuff?”

“It’s really just old-fashioned programming but applied to a piece of machinery. The fancy name for it is machine learning. But to answer your question, once I connected her camera up with the software that controls her movement, I was able to program the repetitive task of creating the drinks.”

My eyes glazed over.

“But more on that later” he added immediately. He must have noticed I was paying more attention to Chuckie Boy’s ear than to him. “Training Marilyn was kind of like training Chuckie Boy, but way easier. And she doesn’t expect a treat every time she does what she is supposed to. Hear that, Chuckie?”

“You’re lucky to have a dog like him,” I said and got a bit sad for the little mutt we once had.

“He’s a good companion for a guy no one else seems to want to live with,” he said softly. “It would be so much easier if people were more like computers. When something goes wrong with code, you get a clear error message, but when something goes wrong between people, all you get is a bunch of confused feelings.”

I didn’t know what to say. It never dawned on me he had anything going on inside him other than a coder’s high.

“You might want to order a drink,” he said, looking down at his notebook. “We’ll be getting started in a sec.”

I glanced at the menu, and even though the Girl Scout Cookie Mocha was tempting, I went for something more exotic. I looked at the camera in her chin rather than her eyes and clearly stated, “Island Paradise Coconut mocha.”

Immediately she scurried off on her roller wheels and started to whirl herself around in a pirouette. My mouth watered when she sprayed on the whipped cream and poured a scoop of chocolate chips on top. But when she pulled out a set of dirty old pliers to place a little decorative umbrella in my cup, I scrunched up my face and looked at Brad.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” he said with a shrug. “The pliers need to be cleaned up, but they were the only ones I could find in my toolbox.”

Brad threw Chuckie Boy a bite of sandwich, picked up a napkin, and wiped the drool off his hairy muzzle. His paper plate flew from his hand like a Frisbee into the trash, then he announced, “OK gang, grab a seat, and let’s get comfortable. I’m going to bring Marilyn over for a more intimate introduction.”

I headed over to the tables, which were more like chest-level bars, just wide enough to fit a laptop, but getting comfortable on a metal mesh chair that looked like a barbed wire fence was going to be a challenge. I leaned over a table and put my cup into an indentation for my drink, then went to pull the chair out when suddenly a hand with a perfectly manicured set of sparkly fingernails flashed in front of my face like a fast-moving meteor shower. In the blink of an eye, long skinny fingers wrapped around my cup and snatched it away. In its place stood a tall pink thermos with the name *Missy* spelled across it.

“What the?” I snarled.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Missy said. “I was sitting here.”

But I did mind! It was the rudest example of seat stealing I’d ever experienced. I didn’t really care where I sat, but neither should she. I blew indignant hot air out of my mouth in a loud huff. Then I went to another table, sat down, and aimed my most potent stink eye in her direction. Those sparkly nails had to cost at least a couple hundred a month. Obviously, her

daddy handed the credit card over with every pouty-face emoji she sent him about needing a manicure.

Brad turned away from the bar with Marilyn Monrobot cradled in his arms like a cherished infant. It looked like he actually loved that blonde-haired mutant. Which caused my brain cells to cartwheel back to my childhood and land on the story of Pinocchio. No doubt about it, Brad stared down at his little robot creation the same way Geppetto the wood carver looked at his puppet Pinocchio—who turned out to be a long-nosed liar and ran off to become a bad boy donkey.

Brad stepped up to the table and gently set Marilyn down on the robot stand. Since I believed there were no such things as coincidences, I was sure Missy had seen Brad put the stand there and snagged my seat so she could sit right in front of him.

“OK,” Brad began. “It’s a well-known fact that a team of engineers who put their heads together to create a product is better than a single lone-ranger engineer. Managers like to call it collaboration. I call it a group where one person does all the work and the others take credit, but no one asked me. Anyway, I’m told the time has come to invite a team to explore how to get Marilyn to the next skill level. And guess what?” He turned his palms up toward us. “You are that team.”

I stirred my mocha slowly. Great. Another team project where I had nothing to offer. I might as well tattoo a capital *L* for loser on my forehead.

“Today we will get to know our little friend Marilyn by stripping off the façade she hides behind, but before we do the unveiling, Dr. Schmidt asked me to say a few words about the mystical crystal cap we were lectured about yesterday.”

He reached in his pocket and took out a circular quartz crystal and held it up between his fingers. It was smooth. About

an inch in diameter. Pinkish, but with a foggy transparency.

Brad gazed at the crystal. “I know this doesn’t look like much, but the secret to its value is in the sauce, so to speak.” He paused to see if anyone laughed, which we didn’t. “What I mean by the secret is in the sauce is that without the special communication network, memory chips, and software, it’s just another run-of-the-mill quartz crystal. But once it’s all put together, the crystal cap’s value is enormous. And it quite possibly holds the key to allowing people that have lost movement in their limbs to get up out of their chairs and dance again.”

“All yesterday’s news,” Conner said, leaning over the table and staring down the crystal like he was going to burn a hole in it with his eyes, “Let’s talk where the rubber meets the road. Who would buy this crystal cap?”

“Any health-care company that serves people with prosthetic arms or legs could cash in on an invention like this,” Brad answered. “I mean this cap, if all goes as planned, will allow people to move their artificial arms or legs with their brain waves.” Brad tapped his finger on his head and acted like he was pulling on an invisible string. “Which will prove our thoughts can be read with the right technology.”

“So you are saying this crystal cap thingy is like a mind reader?” Conner asked.

“Once perfected,” Brad said.

“Well, how much would it go for? Come on, spit it out. I mean real cash value,” Conner said, narrowing his eyes on the crystal.

“I can’t spit out anything I don’t know or care to know. At this point, what’s important is making it work.” Brad stopped abruptly, narrowing his eyes right back at Conner.

I was no body-language expert, and I never understood the banter that often goes on between boys. But deep inside me, a hunch-think bubbled up—something about Conner was off.

Fifteen



## Full Frontal Freaky

“OK, let’s get back to some robot reality,” Brad said with an edge. “Marilyn is a very early prototype of what Pythia plans to sell to major coffee chains to replace human baristas.” Brad took a screwdriver from his back pocket and carefully unscrewed Marilyn’s metal face. “Of course, that is years off, but we have a pretty decent start on her.”

Without her face plate and blonde wig, Marilyn was a hairball of wires and circuit boards. The camera in her chin stuck out like a thumb that had been smacked by a hammer—purplish-red, swollen, and irritated.

“Know the saying, don’t judge a book by its cover? Well, don’t judge Marilyn by her wires.” Brad snort laughed.

I smiled charitably just as Missy let out an ear-piercing open-mouthed cackle that reminded me of a laughing hyena. So embarrassing.

“This class will have several goals,” he continued totally oblivious to the fact Missy was ridiculous. “Someday she will



greet my dog here with, “Oh, hello, Chuckie Boy. An egg sandwich with cheddar?”

As usual, Brad laughed at his own joke more than anyone else did, except of course for Missy, who this time stuck her sparkly pinky nail between her front teeth as she giggled.

“Any questions or comments so far?” Brad asked.

One girl crossed her forearms on the table and leaned forward. “Isn’t it true that robots will take our jobs away from people someday?”

Brad’s expression morphed into a seriousness I hadn’t seen before. “The only place robots will take over the world is in Hollywood and video games, but what I do see is a human-robot collaboration. Humans will do the creative thinking humans are good at. Robots will do the repetitive tasks humans get bored and lazy with. For instance, every major fast-food chain is looking to have a robot make your French fries. Ever know anyone who says their life’s ambition is to stand next to hot grease and fry potatoes?” He then pointed over to Marilyn and added, “And after I teach Marilyn to tell some good barista jokes, people will want her to make their drinks.”

I slowly inched my hand up to ask a question and tried to animate my face with serious intellect instead of the look of dread I had when speaking in front of the class. “There’s something about her that really bothers me,” I mumbled and picked at the chocolate chips atop my whipped cream. “I think when she is fitted with new eyes, well, she needs to be able to move them around just like a real barista would. Right now, she has a creepy weird stare.”

I looked down and waited for the snickers to begin. When I saw the other kids nod in agreement, I quit holding my breath and let my face thaw. Brad nodded politely, but

for just for a flash of a second, I swear he turned his head to hide a smirk.

“Good input. No one wants a barista creeping out their customers,” he replied and opened up a notebook with pages full of hand-drawn diagrams and scribbled some notes. “During the course of this specials class, we will be developing Marilyn’s facial recognition capabilities. As I said, she is currently fitted with one camera, which records everything that shows up in front of her face. By the time we complete this session, she will have the ability to recognize all of your individual face prints, which are as individual as your fingerprints.”

I shrank down in my chair. Suddenly my comments about Marilyn’s creepy stare seemed ridiculously childish. Here he was talking about her facial recognition capabilities, and I was worried about what her eyes looked like. No wonder he tried to hide his smirk.

He grabbed a ruler out of his notebook and turned toward Chuckie Boy, still seated on the bar stool staring at the last crust of bread on the plate. “To give you an idea how Marilyn will recognize us, I’m going to go over what we use as facial recognition input with Chuckie Boy’s mug as an example.” Brad wiped the drool dripping from the fur around his dog’s mouth, then wrapped his hands gently around Chuckie’s face and turned it toward us.

“Each of us has facial peaks and valleys that can be measured. For instance, the distance between the eyes.” He placed the ruler over Chuckie’s forehead. “One-and-three-quarter inches.” Then Brad moved the ruler down the side of Chuckie’s face and said, “Three inches of jawline. And let’s see. His little black nose measures an inch across.”

He put the ruler down and tossed Chuckie the last bread crust, then stepped over to Marilyn. “These and other facial

characteristics are then translated into his individual face print that we feed into Marilyn's software so she can have the ability to recognize him. With that said, I will be importing the photos taken for your school identification. The software I created will measure all your facial characteristics. After some tweaking, I'll transfer the images and corresponding measurements into Marilyn's facial recognition memory bank."

This was full frontal freakish—my face would be measured and analyzed exactly the way Chuckie Boy's had been? I flinched knowing what my nostrils looked like magnified in a mirror.

"Simply stated, Marilyn scans each person at her bar, stores it in her data bank, and then compares the facial features to the imported library of known faces. And finally, the most important Marilyn innovation." He placed the tin cup in Marilyn's hand, laughed, and winked at me. "No barista is complete without a tip jar to shake in the customer's face."

Suddenly the entire café buzzed like an attack of angry hornets. Those flipping bracelets needed to be reset to something more peaceful. I silenced my bracelet and glanced back to Brad as he picked up the screws from Marilyn's face plate. He caught me looking, smirked, and said, "Will I see you at the Huckleberry Hollow hot dog cookout before the concert?"

"Well, yes," I said proudly. "Josh just asked me to meet him there."

"Oh," he said, and his smile evaporated. I waited for him to say something smart, witty, or funny. Nothing but a simple *oh?*

Without a goodbye, I turned and left him alone in the company of his best friend, Marilyn.

Sixteen



## Officially Unicorned

By the time I got back to my room, I'd already thought about what I was going to wear to the concert for hours. The more time I spent thinking about it, the more confused I became. I pulled up Teen Time on my computer, along with six or seven other sites, and settled on some yoga pants that fit just right and a blue striped tankini. I stood looking at myself in the full-length mirror, feeling pretty fine.

"You can't be serious," Jericka said, looking up from her book. "Are you going to a yoga retreat this afternoon? Strip off the spandex," she instructed.

Armfuls of summer skirts and a flock of shirts were thrown from her closet and onto my bed. Shoes of every shade and color were tossed on the middle of the floor.

"You know," she said after emptying her closet, "according to the experts, wearing white makes a person twenty percent more attractive. It acts as a reflector when you wear it and lights up your face in a flattering way."

I riffled through her pile of clothes like a dog digging for its favorite bone. “Aha,” I said, grabbing a pair of white jeans. I held them up against my hips. A bit long, but nothing a few rolls at the bottom wouldn’t fix.

Jericka then pasted a black sleeveless T-shirt across my chest and pulled the rubber band out of my ponytail. “Now lose the barrettes you’ve worn since kindergarten, throw your hair over your head, and let it hang so I can fluff it with some spray.”

After I bent over with my hair hanging down, her purple-tipped fingers tossed my hair in a wild mess. She shook her hairspray and spritzed my entire head.

“Now straighten up and close your eyes.” She turned me toward the full-length mirror and stood behind me. “OK, open them.”

I swished my hair and stared into the mirror. “Wow. I didn’t know about such a hair-fluffing trick.”

“Beauty hints like this only bring out what you’ve always had.” She then angled the T-shirt sideways across my chest and sprayed me with perfume.

I closed my eyes, breathed in the lavender smelling mist, and felt...well, pretty.

“Nina,” she said in a serious tone. “I’ve completely done a makeover on you, but not one word about my hair extensions?” She twirled in a circle. A spray of beaded braids jangled with a weave of red and white beads.

I pulled out of my self-centered glow. “Very pretty. And really different.”

“Exactly. Adds wild flame to the mane,” she said with a giggle.

I picked up one of the braids. “What are these little ornaments you’ve woven into the braids?”

“You can’t tell?” she said, sounding disappointed. “Look closer. They’re puny little unicorns. My holograms class is in a section called Holograms for the Holidays. We are making projections as presents, and our instructor sent our images to the 3D printer.” She threw her braids back over her shoulder and rummaged around in her backpack. “And I made one for you.” She dangled a white unicorn attached to a key chain out in front of my nose.

“I love it!”

“Yes, you are now officially unicornd,” she said excitedly.

I pulled the house key out of the side pocket of my backpack and attached it. “Once I get my Rosie yoga girl into an animation, think I could print her off in 3D too?”

“Not sure. The printer is on the Pythia network.” She bit her lip, then added, “But I can ask.”

We pushed the front door of the dorm open and were about halfway to Huckleberry Hollow when Jericka put her hand over her nose. “Guess we follow the scent of hot dogs. How do you think they make them smell so bad?”

“I don’t want to know, but they certainly have a scent of their own,” I replied. It was the scent of Brad. Which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. It kind of gave him a campy smell, reminding me of my backyard marshmallow roasts.

As we approached Huckleberry Hollow, the hot dog smoke thickened and took on the unmistakable scent of burning rubber. A high-pitched engine revved, followed by another and another, until it sounded like we were on a path heading straight for a racetrack. In the distance, a black-and-white checkered race flag waved, and I heard the unmistakable squealing of wheels. I cupped my hand over my eyes to view what looked like a dozen driverless go-karts whipping around the racetrack in tight figure eights.

We walked toward the fence, and I wrapped my fingers around the metal mesh. A fire-engine red go-kart was in first, followed by forest green. Mustard yellow was careening around in an effort to take the lead only to carelessly take a turn too fast, spin out, and hit a stack of tires. I tightened my grip, thinking this was disastrous, but none of the kids standing on the sidelines were the least bit concerned.

The focus seemed to be with untangling a pulley system next to the starting gate. They yanked several times, appearing to raise a huge flag. But it had arms. And then legs emerged with huge, baggy red boxer shorts. One final tug revealed a head with a black crop of hair hanging down on the face and big black letters across his chest—ROCKY BALBOA.

The name was familiar, but it was lost on me until a gust of wind blew the hair off his face, revealing a photocopied mug shot of the guy in the old boxer movie, *Rocky*. The theme music to *Rocky* blasted, and he was slowly pulled into the oncoming go-karts.

I held my breath. Breaks squealed, wheels bumped, and fenders flew in the air. Rocky came within two inches of his life at least five times but made it across untouched. Baseball caps flew in the air. The music was turned up, and the scoreboard titled “Trial and Error” changed to “Rocky 1–The Speed Racers 5.”

“Appears Rocky usually ends up bloodied,” Jericka said.

“Yeah, much like in the movie. Guess we won’t be handing our car keys over to driverless technology anytime soon,” I said.

We went on our way, stopping directly in front of Huckleberry Hollow gate and peered in over the fence. Logs blazed in the firepit. The picnic table was littered with potato-chip bags, and Conner stood in the middle of the yard throwing his Hoberman Switch Ball.

Seconds later Brad kicked the gate open and greeted us with a broad smile. “My fair maidens,” he said with the formality of a British butler, “I’ve been awaiting your arrival. I hope you brought your appetites with you.”

“Yes, I’m starving,” I replied.

Brad smiled, took each of us by the arm, and led us to the picnic table. “You’re speaking my language. I’ve been grilling. There might be a few scraps left.”

I tilted my head toward Josh who stood by the gate with his hands in his pockets. “Coming?” I asked.

He smiled with a look of relief I took as being glad we didn’t ditch him before the night had even begun. There was nothing worse than being ditched. I knew the feeling all too well, since I was never anywhere long enough to be included in a real tribe of friends.

Dried out jars of salsa, empty chip bags, and the remnants of a few burnt hot dogs littered the table. Brad rubbed his chin. “Some locusts must have descended since my last batch of hot dogs. I’ll put a few more on the grill. Be back in a flash.”

I wanted to beg him not to. Hot dogs were on my list of inedible foreign objects. But I didn’t want to insult him. He took off for the grill, and Jericka had moved to the firepit, which left Josh and me standing alone together.

“So I guess you can tell Huckleberry Hollow isn’t known for the food,” Josh snickered. “I’ll check the camper for some more chips.”

Now I was alone. With no one to talk to. I scanned the crowd for anyone I knew, crossed my arms, self-hugged, and looked down in an awkward shame pose (which doesn’t exist in yoga because yogis don’t believe in shame). I kept glancing up to see if Josh was coming back.



A stream of hot dog smoke drifted by. I looked over to Brad leaning over the grill and tenderly inspecting each hot dog, just like a master sushi chef nurturing his rolled-up masterpieces. The kids surrounding him were laughing and joking with no notice that he was even there. He was an invisible loner to everyone. Even at his very own party.

An idea came to me while watching him alone. A lonely person's app. It would send a text to a person so they would appear to have friends. It would say something like, **hey babe, where are you?** Instructions would tell the person to respond while smiling and laughing. The app would be an icon with one big *L* in the middle for LOSER.

I took my phone out. Pressed a few keys and threw my head back in laughter to try on the idea. Silly, but I felt better already.

"Nina." I turned to see Brad standing next to me in a furry dragon hat with a colorful set of Mohawk spikes. "Get it? Puff the Magic Dragon meets The Dragons in concert?" he said and pointed up to his hat.

It was impossible not to laugh until he took my hand, opened my palm, and placed a hot dog in it. My laughter quickly turned into a full-fledged gag reflex.

Seventeen



## One False Friend

Brad's eyes were fixed on my face, watching for me to take a bite. I knew this was important and possibly a turning point in our friendship. I didn't want to hurt his feelings by rejecting his masterpiece. I lifted my hand to take a bite and inched the dog toward my lips in slow motion. Just as I opened my mouth, good karma came my way.

Brad turned his head to whistle one of those whistles only gym coaches know how to do and waved his arm toward Jericka. "Time to abandon ship!"

A second later, I gave the hot dog a heave-ho out of the bun and onto the ground and bit into only the bread. Chuckie Boy wasn't one to miss such an opportunity, and the evidence disappeared quickly down his throat. The phrase *win-win situation* finally made sense to me.

Brad led Jericka and me out the gate on our way toward the concert. Brightly colored helium balloons carried by circus clowns swayed in the breeze, and each entrance was marked with ten-foot sparklers spewing rainbows of shim-

mering light. The white peaks and valleys of the tent were lit with colorful neon lights. My whole body tingled. I pulled out my phone, took a quick selfie with the tent in the background, and sent it to Megan. All the rumors were true. Silicon Valley celebrations were beyond belief.

Josh caught up to us but stayed three steps behind, not really wanting to be with us but not wanting to be left behind. Whatever was going on with him was totally awkward. In fact, *whatever* was definitely the perfect word to describe him.

We joined the large crowd of people lined up in front of the tent's entrance. The music started up. Then the pushing. Suddenly I was slammed into the girl in front of me. I lost my footing and tripped over Brad's foot. We were pushed forward—crammed together—then tugged apart. Josh grabbed me by the hand and pulled me with him. Jericka hooked her fingers onto my belt loop and hung on.

But somehow in the thick of it, we lost Brad.

I blinked, adjusted my eyes to the darkness of the tent, and stood on tiptoe to find him, but the tent was the size of a football field. I pulled away from Josh, found an empty chair, and stood above the crowd, scanning each row methodically back and forth, but hundreds of helium balloons bobbed up and down, blocking my view.

Finally, a headdress of colorful dragon scales popped up over the swirling crowd. Brad. He saw me. Standing on a chair, he waved his arms overhead and pointed down to four chairs. I bounced down and grabbed Josh and Jericka.

"I found Brad," I screamed, pulling them back toward the chairs he was saving for us.

"Awesome," Josh said, but the scowl on his face said otherwise.

I pushed through the crowd toward Brad, reaching out for

him just as his arms wrapped around me in a huge hug. He bowed forward as if I were his princess and pointed us toward our seats, selecting an arrangement of Josh on the aisle and a seat for himself between Jericka and me.

Before I could even warm up the chair, a pair of conjoined clown twins cartwheeled down the aisle, throwing glowing necklaces at us as they went by. I slipped one around my neck, and my eyes widened. A woman, so pale she appeared almost translucent, slowly strolled toward us. Her long flowing dress and dark hair blew back behind her as if caught in a strong gust of wind. In her hands she held a deck of cards. She took a card from the top, tossed it to me, and continued down the aisle.

I pulled my phone from my hip pocket and turned the flashlight on the face of the card—a magician dressed in a red robe and holding a scepter high over his head was on one side. On the other was an inscription:



Shivers ran down my arm. This was not an ordinary card. This was a tarot card known to give away hints of things to come.

I bit my lip. I didn't have many friends, so I'm not sure I would recognize a false one if they were staring me in the face. I turned to look for the woman so I could ask her why she chose to give *me* that card. I mean, there were hundreds of people she could have handed that card to. But she specifically picked me. I gazed over the heads of the crowd, but she was gone.

I was nervously flipping the card around in my hand when out of nowhere a bearded lady plopped a stuffed tiger puppet on my lap. It snuggled up to my cheek and then over Jericka's before jumping to the next row of people. A tattooed man threw a few glowing green Frisbees to Conner's gang, seated a couple of rows in front of us. They grabbed onto them and smacked each other on the head a few times, then beat them like drums.

I turned the card over in my hand once more, then folded it in half and stuffed it in my pocket for safe keeping. Suddenly the lights dimmed. Flames lit the stage. Laser beams shot up toward the ceiling, and music vibrated throughout the tent. Elevators emerged from the stage floor, releasing five fist-punching men with guitars. Cheers engulfed the tent. Glowing orbs dropped from the ceiling. The lasers suddenly shifted to the very back of the tent, focusing their beams of light on three men on flying skateboards.

Josh leaned into me and screamed into my ear. "CEO Betz is on the first hoverboard."

I nodded as the three flying men blew past us on their way up the center aisle and then stopped atop the stage. "WELCOME TO THIS NEW AGE, TO THIS NEW AGE...WELCOME TO THIS NEW AGE, TO THIS NEW AGE!" belted The Dragons.

The crowd stood, stomped their feet on the wood floor planks, and chanted along.

A man dressed in total black leaped off his hoverboard, lit a torch from one of the ten-foot sparklers, and paraded around the stage, tossing his hair from side to side. With his arms extended over his head, he screamed, “Hello, Pythia! Hello P. design students! What a night of celebration!”

Electric energy vibrated through the crowd. Betz jumped off his hoverboard, twisted his ankle, and awkwardly limped over to fist-punch the singers. “Congratulations, Pythia!” he said in a flat wispy voice “Fifteen fabulous years. We certainly have something to celebrate and be proud of.”

He abruptly stopped, stared out at the crowd like a deer in the headlights, and with a wimpy *ahem*, said, “I can’t wait to get this party started, but before we do, I want to introduce a new member of our executive team.” He reached down to crack his knuckles, rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at the third hoverboard. “JJ, please fly in and join us on the stage.”

A dozen beams of light shot from the ceiling and focused on the short bald man hovering above the stage. His body jiggled like he was made of jello as he carefully set down. He stepped off and turned toward the audience. It was none other than the man in the moon with the crystal cap, Dr. Schmidt.

“The executive staff of Pythia could not be more excited to welcome JJ, a brain specialist who will personally lead a project we’ve code-named the “Golden Arm.” Now, to give you a sneak preview of the project....”

Sprays of reflective light ricocheted off the tornado bouncing off the canvas walls and ceiling. It was the same tornado projection we’d seen in our orientation but ginormous. It whipped around the tent as if it were a rocket ship bouncing off the walls, then morphed into a disk and sprayed out colorful confetti.

“Pythia!” Betz screamed with his arms extended. “I present to you the Crystal Cap. The forefront of a new era of thought-computing.”

“It’s like magical fairy dust,” I screamed into Josh’s ear as sprays of confetti coated his head in bright color.

I expected to see him smile and agree. Instead, his face was contorted. He grimaced, crushed the water bottle in his fist, and said, “Not feeling well.” He grabbed the back of his chair, took one more look at the crystal cap swirling overhead, and left.

Everyone in the crowd was looking up toward the crystal cap projection spewing a rainbow of confetti. That is everyone but me. I grabbed the back of the chair with one arm and turned to see Josh walk down the center aisle and disappear into the crowd.

Jericka leaned over and nudged my arm. “What just happened with Josh?”

“Said he wasn’t feeling well. Think I should see if he is OK? I just....”

“Don’t worry,” Brad interrupted and picked a piece of confetti from my hair. “He’s a big boy.”

I never liked being alone when sick. Just sitting there and letting him go off by himself felt so wrong. Could that tarot card have been a powerful clue to my future having to do with Josh? A shiver ran down my spine. I looked over my shoulder toward the back of the tent.

Was I the false friend in the tarot card message?

Eighteen



## Sketchball

Beams of light swirled around the tent, then focused on the skinny man named Betz, who looked like a Q-tip topped with red curly fuzz. By the looks of him, he was totally signed up to the nerd code of conduct—not looking cool, never going to the gym, and certainly not letting a drop of sunshine on his face.

Jericka nudged me in the ribs. “Someone needs to give him some hair styling advice and take him to a tanning booth.”

I laughed, but all I could think of was if Josh was OK.

Betz raised his arms into a V shape and yelled out to the crowd, “This crystal cap is the key to Pythia’s future in prosthetic devices, and we are excited to have Dr. Schmidt to lead us into Pythia’s new age! Welcome to this new age!” He turned to scream up toward the cap. “We will merge the magic of the quartz crystals with our software to take the world into the next era of thought-controlled devices.”

The cap swooped down and spun onto the stage between Betz and Dr. Schmidt. The spinning slowed and displayed tiny gems hanging onto a mesh cap like sparkles on a hairnet. Betz



reached out to the projection, pointed his index finger, and appeared to balance a sparkling crystal on his fingertip.

“Time to reflect!” The Dragons shouted in unison. The number fifteen flashed on the screen behind the stage, then immediately transitioned to faded pictures: a younger version of Betz in a garage with computers strewn across plywood tables; Betz and the executive staff high-fiving each other; Betz and a sporty Tesla. Betz was in every picture. It was like a rolling timeline following the icky evolution of Betz’s peach-fuzz beard.

Everyone stood, cheered, and stomped their feet on the wood-plank floors. The Dragons leaped to the stage, fist-pumping the air, and sang, “WELCOME TO THIS NEW AGE.” Everyone joined in when they started the chorus of “We’ve listened up...We’ve listened up...” Conner stood on a chair, chanting loudly while waving his Frisbee in the air like a flag, but seconds later he jumped down and ran to the back of the tent. Within a couple of minutes, two or three others from his gang followed. Weird how they were leaving when the concert was just getting kicked off.

Brad’s elbow hit me in the side as he pulled his phone from his pocket. He scanned a text, then nudged me again. Inches from my ear, he said, “Seems Josh needs a chaperone. He wants me to get him a bottle of water. Be back in a flash.”

Jericka scooted over to sit in Brad’s seat. She leaned into my shoulder, and we sang along with The Dragons like rock stars. Projections lit up the ceiling with the theme of their songs—a flock of seagulls flew around and red hearts and kissing lips streaked the walls.

Our voices were almost hoarse by the time Josh plopped his body down in the seat next to me. He’d been gone at least a half hour and missed so much of the concert. Sweat was pouring off his face.

“You okay?” I screamed in his ear.

“Better. Think I got a hold of a bad hot dog at Huckleberry Hollow.”

“Did Brad find you?” I screamed in his ear. “He said he went to get you some water.”

Without saying a word, he tilted his head, widened his eyes, and did an overly dramatic shrug of shoulders I’d seen a million times, but usually when girls dis other girls. Rarely done by a guy. And never nice.

I cringed, looked at him sideways, and waited for him to somehow reverse the dis. But instead, he wiped sweat from his face into his shirt and stared up at the jumbo screen behind the stage.

The Dragons announced their last song just as Brad leaned over and smacked Josh in the shoulder with a water bottle. “Where were you?” Brad shouted over the music. “I checked a whole line of stinking porta potties looking for your sorry arse.”

“Ahh, man,” Josh stood and clasped Brad’s hand. “I took off to the other side of the parking lot to toss lunch in the grass. I didn’t want porta potty splash back when the chunks hit. I must have gotten a hold of a bad dog at your place.”

“Bad hot dog? Funny,” Brad said with a sneer and unmistakable stink eye. “No one has ever gotten sick from my hot dogs.”

Josh sank down in his chair just as Brad climbed over us to his seat and said in my ear, “I’m having an after-concert party at Huckleberry Hollow. Can you and Jericka swing by?”

“Sure,” I said wondering if he excluded Josh from the invitation on purpose.

The Dragons gave us a couple more songs after our standing ovations, and we walked out of the tent while Betz got on stage, choking back tears about his pride in Pythia as if it was his first-born child. Jericka did an unmistakable roll of her eyes when

Betz said “Cherish the memories” for at least the tenth time.

Josh walked a few feet behind us, swaying to the rhythm of the music still blasting from the tent, in a world of his own. Then it got awkward. He jumped up, spun in place a couple of times, and laughed uncontrollably while twirling around a light post. Skipping up next to me, he took me by the arm, spun me around, and said, “Let’s surf.” He placed his hands on my hips and positioned me in front of him as if we were on a surfboard. “Once you’ve caught the wave, transfer your weight to the front leg.” He curled his arm tightly around my waist and together we slowly swayed atop our imaginary wave through the parking lot. “You are a natural, Rojo!”

A natural. I liked that. His hand reached on top of mine, clasping it gently and lifting it slightly.

“Keep your arms up. Especially the front one,” he said.

Warm breath hit the back of my neck, smelling of peppermint Life Savers. I leaned back into his chest, but just that tiny shift of my weight threw him off balance, and he stepped on my foot as his arms flailed overhead.

“Whoa,” I said and grabbed him by one arm, which started him on a crazy uncoordinated twirling around and around in tight circles. Confetti flew from our hair, falling to the pavement in glittery streams of color.

“The surf is definitely up,” I said in midtwirl.

We twirled in a few more circles until he screamed, “Argh!” And fell onto his knees. He rolled onto his back, laughing. “The wave took me down, Rojo.”

“Are you OK?” I said, kneeling down next to him.

“Ahoy, mates!” Brad screamed from Huckleberry Hollow. “Still suffering from my nauseatingly bad hot dogs, dude?”

Josh returned, “Ahoy! No, ah...er...roguish wave took me down this time.”

I put my hand into his and, with all my might, pulled him off the asphalt. Stumbling to his feet, he looped his arm around my shoulder. We were just a few feet away from Huckleberry Hollow fence, and I was relieved to see Brad and Jericka in the firelight under the palm trees. We hobbled through the gate and had almost made it past the picnic tables when he pulled away, tripped over his feet, and grabbed the trunk of a palm tree. His skin was gray. He belched, then spewed puke.

“Ahhh, crap,” he said between his gasps for air.

Brad and Jericka rushed over—but not in time to catch him from crashing down onto the picnic-table bench. His body heaved and convulsed. Vomit hit the ground, then splattered all over me. I looked down at Jericka’s white pants dotted in puke and gagged. I was going to toss lunch myself if I didn’t get out of there. I ran to the camper, got a wet paper towel, and rushed back out, then waited for him to stop spewing.

Holding my nose, I knelt down to wipe his face, but he sprang up like a mad dog. “Get away. Leave me alone.” And with a mean slur, said, “I can’t believe you pushed me down.”

My head whipped back. I turned away, hoping to hide my hurt from Brad and Jericka. He was so cruel and hateful. I felt my eyes begin to well with tears.

“Why did you push me down Nina?” he screamed out.

Jericka grabbed my arm. “He’s a jerk. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Why was he so mean? I was only trying to help,” I said, sounding as pathetic and foolish as I felt.

Jericka’s eyes were filled with fire. “He thinks he’s all that, but he’s just sketchball with UMS.”

I stared at her blankly shaking my head.

“Ugly Mood Swings,” she enunciated slowly. “Nice guy one minute, a complete butt head the next.”

Nineteen



## The One Bite Rule

I lay under my blanket like an entombed mummy and listened to the seagulls screeching in competition for their breakfast. At least *they* knew where they stood in a crowd. It was every bird for himself. No false friendships, no pretending, and definitely no twirling dances. People called them dirty birds, but at least they weren't two-faced dirty birds like Josh.

My skin itched all over. Was it possible for thoughts to bubble up into ugly hives? I tossed the sheet off my head and checked my skin. No sign of any eruptions. I'd never had hives, but there was a first time for everything, including being puked on and insulted. Josh owed me a huge apology.

I reached for my phone fully expecting to read a sorrowful text from him. All my phone showed me was a blank screen—which felt like a slap in the face.

I slowly rolled out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom, careful not to wake Jericka. I opened the cabinet under the sink and pulled out my eucalyptus bundle I hung from the showerhead when facing extreme conditions. I stepped

into the shower, soaped myself up, and closed my eyes, letting warm water massage every inch of me. I took a huge breath in to allow the eucalyptus aromatherapy to soothe my soul.

I wanted to forget last night. To lose myself in the running water. But Josh's face was glued to the back of my eyelids. As the water pooled up around the shower basin, I imagined his cruelty puddling up around my feet. I pinched my eyes closed, took a deep inhale, and pictured his contorted face, midvomit, circling the drain. I allowed him to take several dizzy spins before lifting my foot to push his head down through the grate and into the sewer. I could hear his screams get fainter and fainter as he drifted away to swim with the turds.

I kept my eyes closed and counted to ten. Not enough time for him to reach the grimy cesspool of the sewer, but he was well on his way to where he belonged. When I opened my eyes and looked down, small pieces of concert confetti swirled around in the water and stuck to my feet. Just hours ago, the very same confetti had been like a magical fairy dust sparkling in our hair as we surfed together in the parking lot. My chest heaved, and I shut my eyes to seal off the tears that wanted to come.

I had no idea how long I'd been in there, but it was definitely long enough for the sun to rise and stream through the window. As I opened the door of the bathroom, a whiff of warm cinnamon filled the room. Two doughy rolls sat atop a trash can that Jericka had turned upside down and made into a table set for two.

I blinked to take it all in. The scent took me back to the Sunday morning breakfasts when my mom would get up early and wake me with the smell of cinnamon. My stomach

growled in appreciation. I knew right then that Jericka's simple act of kindness sealed the deal. The two of us would be friends forever.

"I decided you need a little cinnamon-roll therapy." She cocked her head to the side. "You OK?"

"Yeah, well," my voice cracked, "guess even a long shower couldn't completely wash him away."

"You need to know," she said and slid a piece of cinnamon roll in her mouth, "whatever turned Josh into an ugly ball of UMS last night, it has nothing to do with you. Something had to have set him off. But no matter. You now must enforce the one bite rule."

Jericka looked down, wiped icing from her plate and licked it from her finger. "Well, my family once had a dog that bit a kid next door. It was reported to the police, and our dog had to be put down due to the one-bite rule." She looked me right in the eye. "Josh bit you last night. Just like a dog, all he gets is one bite. That's the rule. He needs to go away."

"I just don't get it," I shrieked in the same tone as one of those angry seagulls. I swallowed to calm the shrillness in my voice. "I need to know what set him off. It makes my head spin."

With her mouth full, she slurred, "He's shown you exactly who he is. I'm telling ya...one bite rule."

Maybe she was right, but instead of agreeing, I bit into the roll. Goopy and warm. The buns were so heavily covered in buttery icing, a pool of rich goo had formed on the bottom of the plate. I swirled my next bite around gathering up the sweetness. Finally, after gulping down the whole thing, I picked the plate up and shamelessly licked it clean. I was just about to say it was time for another when a message from the P. app lit up both our phones.

Please join us in the executive conference room at 4:30 this afternoon to meet with Dr. Schmidt. Kindly respond that you will be there. Professor Joy.

Jericka held her phone out in front of her face. “What? After school today?”

I shook my head. “What would he want with us?”

So after a full day of classes, we headed off to the executive conference room with still no clue why. Jericka and I pushed open the wood-paneled doors expecting to see a room that looked like a lawyer’s office on television—four white walls, a large oval table in the center of the room, and maybe a side table decorated with a vase of flowers. After taking two steps into the room, I had to grab for the back of a chair to steady myself.

Floor to ceiling windows. Nothing between me and being sucked off the edge of the universe. I dug my fingernails into the fabric of the chair and hung on while my head spun in circles.

The image of the *1000 Ways to Die* guy falling from an office-building window flashed before my eyes. In an idiotic numskull move, a loud mouthed attorney body-slammed a window to prove the glass wouldn’t shatter. It didn’t shatter. But he forced the glass out of the pane, then GERONIMO! He belly-flopped on the sidewalk twelve stories below. I reached up to wipe off the film of sweat forming above my top lip. There were at least half a dozen falling-out-of-windows episodes, but I needed to limit myself to one *1000 Ways to Die* imagination per day.

I backed into the wall, pressed my hands against the cool plaster, and pretended to be interested in the fresh flower



arrangement and tray of cookies on the side table. Meanwhile, Jericka strolled the room, looking at the sun hovering over the Santa Cruz Mountains, like she owned the place. She turned gracefully on her heels like a runway model, then walked from one side of the room to the other while gazing at sailboats gliding around on the San Francisco Bay. Didn't she notice that she was two inches from the edge of a twelve-story fall?

Obviously, she was not designed with the same delicate sensitivities that I was. But still, she emitted an unflappable confidence that could be bottled and sold to every middle school girl in the world. I knew I'd buy it.

I searched for a place to sit down, which was not easy since Jericka had needed to straighten her bangs before we left, causing us to be the last students to arrive. Professor Joy sat in stillness at the head of the conference room table and somehow kept her sanity in spite of Conner's gang giggling as they spun circles in their chairs. I looked around at each blur of a face as it spun by and sighed in relief that Josh was not one of them. He was probably still lying in a puddle of vomit somewhere, which was certainly better than having him anywhere near me.

I walked down the wall toward the back of the room following a strong scent of chocolate and peanut butter coming from a plate of cookies on the center of the table. Whole peanuts were pressed into the tops of peanut butter cookies. Chocolate nuggets the size of quarters decorated golden brown crisps. My mouth watered. Just as I was about to lean over and pick one up, the fingernails belonging to none other than Missy reached in. She snatched up two cookies and then plopped back down in her chair.

She was flipping everywhere. I watched her mindlessly chew her cookies with her iPad up to her face, speed swiping. I felt like being nosy and casually stood behind her to see what

she had up on her screen. I imagined colorful leather purses and shoes with prices that started at a thousand dollars, but instead it was a page full of what appeared to be wheelchairs. I leaned in to get a closer look at the specialized accessories attached to the armrests. What could she be up to?

I quickly reached over her and grabbed a chocolate nugget cookie just as Jericka's elbow jabbed into my ribs. "Let's go sit next to Brad."

Brad. The blood drained from my face. I was in no mood to face up to anyone who had witnessed the worst humiliation of my life. With my head down, I walked to the end of the table and pulled out a chair. Brad glanced up for a second as his fingers continued to prance across his laptop keyboard like a pianist at work.

I sank down in a chair next to him, crossed my arms, then crossed my legs in a full self-protective Eagle pose and almost crossed my eyes when he leaned over, touched my shoulder, and whispered, "Sorry about yesterday. Not how I like a party to end."

The last thing I wanted was to rehash the worst day of my life with Brad. I bit into my cookie. With a mouth full of chocolate chips, I mumbled, "Not your fault."

He nodded. Thankfully that was the end of it, and I went back to chewing my cookie.

"So," Brad began, "can I ask, did either of you get sick last night? I mean like, well, hate to be crude, but from both ends?"

Twenty



## Eye-Mind Coordination

Suddenly my cookie wasn't as tasty as it had been a minute earlier.

I shook my head no, and Jericka piped in, "Nada, why are you asking?"

"Well, Conner and his buddies said my hot dogs could be sold as a quick acting laxative." He scrunched his face up. "They all ate them and had to make a dash to the porta potties during the concert."

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine from eating them, and Nina is too," Jericka said.

A bit of guilt rose up inside me for not fessing up to my sleight of hand with his hot dog, but I nodded in agreement.

The conference-room door swung open. "Good afternoon, everyone. Hope you are enjoying the snacks," Dr. Schmidt said as he entered. "Chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies are in a tie as my personal favorites. I couldn't choose which to serve, so I ordered both!" he said with a chuckle. "I certainly want to thank you for joining us on such

short notice. I gathered you here to discuss your participation in Project Golden Arm.”

I frowned. My participation? Well, that was yet to be determined. I *still* had nothing to offer.

“I certainly hope you enjoyed the concert last night,” Dr. Schmidt continued. “I found it to be an inspiring celebration and exciting introduction of the crystal cap to the company. Today Professor Joy and I will discuss the thought-based computer school competition we spoke to you about earlier this week.” He paused to clear his throat and snickered under his breath. “Of course, we already have a lead on this. The other schools have nothing close to our highly coveted prototype—the crystal cap.”

He stepped from the front of the table, strolled around us with his hands behind his back, and gazed toward the ceiling as if deep in thought. “Professor Joy, I’m thinking you should start with your demonstration of the concentration skills that are necessary for thought-based computing while I attend to some pressing matters in my office.”

Professor Joy’s chair squeaked as she pushed back and picked up a small box from the floor. She slid her fingernail under the cardboard edge and pulled out a piece of plastic about the size of a board game. Immediately she giggled and said, “Oh, gosh. It reminds me of a hamster gymnasium.”

At that moment, Professor Joy’s face softened so she resembled a kindergarten teacher more than she did a director at a Fortune 100 technology company. She looked up at us and with a voice full of childish enthusiasm said, “Now the fun begins. We’re going to experiment with this Mattel contraption called Mindflex that uses brain-concentration levels to control the movement of a ball.”

She set the plastic board down in the middle of the table, put her hands on her hips, and smiled broadly. “We all need to understand the kind of focused concentration required for controlling a prosthetic arm. This, of course, is just a simulation, but it gets to the point that we emit brain waves called EEG signals that will allow us to control the movement of this ball.”

Miniature ladders, tiny basketball hoops, and colorful tubes decorated the white plastic contraption. Professor Joy was right. It could only be described as a hamster entertainment center, but for hamsters with the highest of IQs. No hamster I’d ever met was willing to climb ladders and jump through hoops.

Brad leaned forward for a closer look, sneered, and folded his arms across his chest. He looked over at me and did the kind of eye roll I imagined he reserved only for the most ridiculous situations.

“Just give me a second to explain.” Professor Joy opened a small plastic bag and pulled out a black headband with several sensors. “It’s all about moving a ball through the obstacle course with the power of your mind. This headset captures brain waves, allowing you to control the speed of a fan, which is what lifts the ball or lowers it.”

“Wait,” Missy said, “you mean we don’t get to touch the ball to make it move?”

I almost snickered. She was so used to being touchy-feely, it must have been unfathomable that she couldn’t dig her nails into something.

Professor Joy nodded. “Correct. Imagine concentrating to push the ball up with your mind. When you become distracted or relax, the will ball drop.”

“Kind of like eye-mind coordination?” I said and immedi-

ately realized I'd broken my code of behavior. Never, ever make direct eye contact with a teacher, and more importantly, never participate in class. I knew I was going to pay for my mistake.

"Exactly, Nina. Please come up, and we'll borrow your brain power to demonstrate how this works."

I deserved that. I had no choice but to comply.

Professor Joy pulled out a chair for me to sit directly in front of the Mindflex. She strapped the headset around my forehead, clipped sensors to my ears and pressed Start.

"Remember," she repeated, "if your mind relaxes or gets distracted, the ball drops. Let your mind focus to make it rise up."

No problem. There wasn't one relaxed microcell in my entire body. That little ball was going to do cartwheels off the ceiling as jittery as I felt, but oddly the more I stared at that stupid little ball, the more nothing happened. If I couldn't budge that ball, I'd have to crawl under the table in total humiliation. Just as I was about to give up, a miracle occurred. The ball began to rise an inch or so. It fell back and then began to rise again.

Professor Joy stepped closer. "There you go, Nina. You've got it. She is getting firsthand understanding of how much concentration it will take to control a prosthetic arm with brain waves." Professor Joy stood with her hands on her hips. "Nina, visualize. If you want the ball to rise up, visualize harder. If you want the ball to go lower think about something other than the game."

I squinted my eyes just as I often did when focusing on a yoga Drishti point to strengthen my balance poses. My concentration immediately deepened, and that little ball shot up into the air and over a hoop. It bounced down but flew out of control when I tried to get it through a maze. To settle that ball down, I looked away from the game board. And there he

was. Josh. Leaning in the doorframe. Immediately that stupid ball slammed down to the board, bounced off the table, rolled across the floor, and hit the wall.

I blew air from my cheeks, threw off the headset, and took off for my chair.

“Good try, Nina. Anyone else?” Professor Joy asked.

As always, Missy, the class suck-up, skipped up to the game, panting at the chance to get Professor Joy’s attention. I slumped down, swiveled my chair around, and pretended I was interested in a sailboat race out on the bay.

Within seconds Josh pulled up a chair and squeezed in next to me. “Really?” I whispered into his smiling face. “What makes you think you can sit there?”

“Nina...uh, let me explain,” he stammered.

“Are you oblivious to the fact you insulted me?”

His face lost all expression. Jericka fake cleared her throat in one of those *stop what you are doing and look my way* grunts. I glanced over my shoulder, her eyes had become tiny slits, and she shook her head. But I wanted to hear what flimsy excuse he was going to use to insult my intelligence.

“Nina, I’m so sorry about the way I behaved last night. I’m dealing with some stuff, uh...I can’t go into. But that’s not an excuse for treating you the way I did.” He paused for a moment to take a breath. “I’m really sorry.”

I crossed my arms and said louder than I should have, “You were so mean.”

He blinked several times. “I know, and I can’t believe how I acted. I’m so sorry. It really had nothing to do with you. I have this stuff going on. Can we be friends?”

I swallowed hard. “Sure, whatever. Friends it will be.”

Professor Joy stared at us from the front of the room, shooting us a *stop talking* eye glare. I turned my head away. From

the corner of my eye, I saw Brad covering his mouth to hide a smile. At least *he* was amused by our conversation. I crossed my arms, settled back in my chair, and stared up at the ceiling.

Professor Joy stepped away from the table. She went to the far side of the room, opened up a cabinet drawer, and took out what looked like a wooden jewelry box. “I’m now going to show you the real crystal cap.” She opened the lid. Her eyes widened. Her head shook back and forth. “This can’t be.”

She ran back to the cabinet drawer and ran her hands from back to front, then opened up several other drawers, searching. Leaning limply up against the dark wood, her face as white as a ghost, she murmured, “The cap is gone.”



Twenty-One



## Rosie's Day of Metamorphosis

I looked out from my treetop perch through the branches to the lobby floor below. An army of security guards had created a dirty path on the marble tile from the main entrance to the executive conference room. By the looks of it, they'd had no luck finding the stolen cap.

There was an ugly vibe floating around, caused by the theft. Not what I'd imagined for Rosie's day of metamorphosis. I mean, finally the time had arrived to pull her out of her old gray sketchbook and onto the computer screen, yet the only thing on everyone's mind was the theft of the crystal cap.

I laid my head back in the hammock and fantasized about what she would look like as an animation. I couldn't wait to see her sitting in a perfect lotus pose on a fluffy pink cloud.

My ID bracelet buzzed and *Innovators of Our Time class-Genie's Bottle Classroom* scrolled across its miniscreen. This had to be a joke. Some prankster must have hacked into the sched-

uler software. I'd heard about the notorious pranks pulled at Silicon Valley schools, and I wasn't going to be that gullible girl who went around asking where the nonexistent Genie's Bottle room was while dweebs hiding behind tree trunks laughed.

I closed my sketchbook and rolled myself onto the wooden platform. My bracelet buzzed its two-minute warning for class, which made it seriously time for me to figure out where I was going. Like a hawk on its perch, I scanned the lobby. Off in the distance, at the edge of the forest stood several classrooms: Worm in the Apple...Computer Bug...Genie's Bottle. Brad was right. Guess it followed: wacko names for computer companies and wacko names for classrooms.

I bumbled my way down the rope ladder and to the entrance with thirty seconds to spare but was stopped dead in my tracks by—love beads? Colorful strings looped with plastic beads of all shapes and sizes dangled down over the classroom door. I'd seen strings of love beads hanging over the entrance at my yoga studio, but at a technology school? I swept the beads aside and stepped into a circular room with lavender walls. Furry purple, green, and yellow pillows were thrown all over a zebra-print carpet. Yellow, green, and blue lightbulbs hung so low one knocked me in the head as I passed.

Of course. A genie's bottle. But the room was a train wreck. The last class must have ended in a wild pillow fight. I sank into a leopard-print chaise lounge as a full-body projection of Steve Jobs holding an iPhone appeared on one side of the room. Conner appeared on the other side. Standing on a foot stool, he made sure all eyes were on him, then screamed, "Indeed, Steve Jobs was *gifted*. I just wish I had the gift of being part of his multibillion-dollar trust fund!"

The teacher looked down over her glasses. "Young man, find a seat. Yes, Steve Jobs was indeed gifted, but don't ever

make the mistake of assuming people's gifts come without effort. Creative genius is achievement." She paused to click her tongue and cross her arms. "And for your information, it wasn't all about making money for Steve."

"Well, if it wasn't for money, then what?" Conner snickered.

"Steve Jobs had uncanny intuition and a belligerent belief in computing possibilities that motivated him to create the first Apple computer."

Conner fake coughed. "Oh, please. Belligerent belief in padding his wallet, that is. He stepped all over his friends for money. Can't say I blame him. I'd do *anything* for that kind of money too!"

"Young man. Get off the stool and sit down," she commanded. "This class is about technology leaders and not their bank accounts." She then pointed up at a glistening glass plug set into the ceiling. "The intention of this class is to inspire you to pull the plug on your personal genie's bottle and allow your creative genius to flow out of you, just as all the great technologists we will study have done."

I tucked a pillow behind my head, leaned back, and relaxed while the teacher circled the room babbling on like a Wikipedia of Silicon Valley Innovators. But all I could think about was Rosie. Her coming out of the sketchbook day, her true birthday.

The teacher's circling got closer and louder. "Steve Jobs' computer design concepts stemmed from his creative study of small appliances."

Which got my attention since it sounded so completely absurd.

"He took some of Cuisinart's ideas of simplistic lines, curves, and bevels and imbedded them into the first Apple. It was the first time anyone thought to make a computer attractive to users," she continued, just short of designating Steve

Jobs as a saint. “To him, the hardware was the body and the software was the soul—two inseparable elements with no choice but to work together as one.”

Software had a soul, and we all had a genie’s bottle cork to pop? This teacher was as wacky as they came.

A girl on a purple pillow raised her hand high in the air. “I thought it was funny that he actually had to explain to the tech community that they had an attitude of ‘If you don’t get how to use technology, it’s your own fault.’”

“Exactly! Steve Jobs’ biggest accomplishment was making computing accessible for everyone, from elementary school students to their grandparents!” She paused and asked, “Any questions about Steve Jobs before we move on?”

A hand raised from the guy sitting on a putrid-orange pillow. “Let’s not forget Steve’s dark side—the denial of his own daughter even after a paternity test. Maybe he should have downloaded a soul for himself from that software he created.”

The room went silent. Did this kid have a social IQ of zero? The teacher cleared her throat and seemed to be barely resisting the urge to throttle his. In a quivering voice, she said, “Steve Jobs was complex and imperfect, just like the rest of us. But he overcame his shortcomings. In time he did embrace her and even named the Lisa computer after her.”

She crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “OK, well. That was a spirited start to our first day of class. It’s going to be an interesting semester.”

She took a few breaths and went on to describe the innovators we would be studying. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk.

“As an example of how far the computer industry has evolved, we’ll start with a quote from Ken Olsen, president of Digital Equipment Corporation in the 1970s. ‘There is no rea-

son for any individual to have a computer in their home.' Now before we judge him for his lack of vision, we should realize he was simply an example of the imprisoned thinking of his time. The goal of this class is to teach you to think like a visionary."

The teacher snapped her fingers, and a projection lit up the middle of the room, displaying a website. "Go to the site and download the Steve Jobs book for this week's reading assignment. Also, while you are there, go ahead and get the Bill Gates biography. We'll be..."

"Great segue!" Conner screamed. "OK, I know this sounds like a joke, but I swear it's not. Did you hear that Steve Jobs once told Bill Gates he could be more imaginative if only he would go on a yoga holiday and partake in earthy substances? Can you imagine the look on Bill Gates' multimillionaire four-eyed face when he heard that?"

The teacher's eyes narrowed.

Lucky for Conner, all our bracelets buzzed the room. My heart skipped a beat when I saw my bracelet stream, *Animation Lab with Professor Joy-Room 333* across the bottom.

"Just one more thing important to add." Conner stood back up on his stool. "Now this is a bit more personal, but I have it from a reliable source that Bill Gates had a tough time dating because, well,"—he paused for effect—"his manhood was micro soft."

The teacher pursed her lips tightly. "On that most inappropriate interjection, please excuse yourselves."

Twenty-Two



## Making Cookies from SCRATCH

I jumped from my chair, stood at the door, looked both ways for any sign of ferret face, and then tucked my head and took off down the hall toward the Animation Lab.

I stood in front of room 333. The doorway into Professor Willameana Joy's office? Really? Her name was Willameana? I never pictured her with a name that could be a horse in the Kentucky Derby. She definitely was more of a sophisticated Caroline pronounced with a long *O*.

I peeked around the doorframe to see her standing behind a glass desk, her spine straight as an arrow; with her shoulders pulled back in a perfect yogi Mountain pose.

I knocked lightly. She looked up over her reading glasses, smiled, and said softly, "Oh, please, all of you, do come in."

All of us? I looked over my shoulder. Josh and Missy stood behind me. Bet their animations would be very revealing of their personalities. I couldn't wait. Missy would probably ani-

mate a fingernail technician carving out her sharp daggers. And, well, Josh—he'd of course have animations of himself admiring his reflection in the mirror.

Professor Joy opened her arms to welcome us as if we were honored guests rather than a bunch of seventh graders. "Please, take a seat at the conference table and make yourselves comfy."

The room was elegantly white. Calm and serene. A white orchid sat in the middle of a round glass conference table surrounded by tall-backed white leather chairs. My eyes wandered off to the full wall of glass providing a view of the courtyard garden. Miniature palm trees surrounded a small pond full of enormous ferns. A waterfall swirled through a set of mossy rocks finally making its way down with a huge splash to the water. Everything screamed feng shui!

"Would you like to join me for a cup of ginger tea?" she asked, motioning gracefully for us to sit down.

"Yes, I would like some tea, please," I said with my best manners and walked around to a chair with a view of the pond.

Missy, the ever-present teacher's pet, jumped right in front of me and sat in a chair directly next to Professor Joy's. Just like her to sit down, clasp her hands together, and nonchalantly press back her cuticles into perfect half-moon shapes.

Professor Joy went to a mahogany cabinet, took out several little teacups, arranged them on a wooden tray, and slowly poured our tea out of a small metal pot. She placed a container of cream and a plate of sugar cubes surrounded by shredded ginger coils on the table. Finally her ritual ended with her palms together at heart center. "Please help yourself to the condiments," she said softly.

I loaded up my tea with a couple of helpings of ginger, stirred, and took a sip. Instantly my throat caught fire. Tears filled my eyes. I hacked. Coughed. Choked. And finally swallowed.

Professor smiled slightly and poured cream into my tea up to the brim of the cup. I supposed the cream was to help extinguish the gingery burn. I glanced at her cup. A single piece of ginger floated on the surface of her tea. I then looked down at the thick ginger stew I had made of mine. Clearing my throat, I fished out ten or so pieces and vowed never to make that mistake again.

“Let’s keep this informal today,” she said as she stirred her tea. “Just get to know each other a little bit.”

I liked that idea, so I nodded in agreement and waited for her to start up class introductions, but instead, she simply sipped her tea, which gave me a moment to scan the room. Carved wooden elephants filled one entire shelf over her desk. A couple of clay figurines in dance postures were arranged on a small table with a large marble sculpture of a women’s head in the center. *Pythia* was carved at the sculpture’s base in large swirling letters.

The face on the sculpture was familiar to me. My eyes widened. I shivered. She looked just like the translucent woman who had thrown me the tarot card at the concert. It would have made me appear crazy, but I opened my mouth and was about to ask if Pythia spirits were known to give out tarot cards.

But before I could get the words out, Professor Joy looked over my head and said, “Ah yes,” “I was wondering if you would remember to come. I believe you have all met Reggie when he gave us a tour of his server room.”

My throat clamped down midsip. I coughed and wheezed. The last I’d seen of Edgy Reggie was when he got all jail warden on us about hacking.

“Well, you asked me to put it in my calendar, didn’t you?” he snapped back and walked to the side of the room for a bottle of water.



So rude. But Professor Joy ignored him, slowly stirred her tea, smiled, and said calmly, “Reggie has a background in animation, and I thought he would be a good addition to our group. Please take a chair, Reggie. We are just getting started.”

She poured some tea for him and politely moved the condiment tray so he could reach it. Without one ounce of civilization in his bones, he ignored her offer, took a swig of water, and then wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

“Let me begin with some of my thoughts,” she said gently. “Creating an animated masterpiece is similar to any artistic endeavor. There are processes to follow, which we can teach, but cultivating your inner creative spirit will be up to you.” She set her cup down in the saucer, rose from her chair, and went to the wall to hit a white button. “But before we dive into animation techniques, we will begin by examining some website design concepts.”

I blinked at the projection hovering above the table; it was so putrid my eyes watered. Purple cruise ships on a yellow background were topped off by a lime-green medical symbol. It was nothing short of a death spiral of nauseating colors culminating in an orange edging—a color that always made me want to puke my guts.

Professor Joy raised an eyebrow, looked up at the 3D mess, and said, “Commercial website design was the initial focus of P. design’s sponsoring company, Pythia. This particular example displays one of Pythia’s first major customers, a cruise-ship line.”

She strolled to the other side of the projection and pointed up to the medical symbol of two snakes winding around a pole. “Pythia’s newest efforts are in the health-care industry, robotics, and driverless vehicles.” She paused and smiled up at the projection. “By the way, does anyone think there is something wrong with this display?”

A better question would have been, how many of you just barfed in your mouth? She held her hands out, welcoming an answer, which immediately forced me to look down at my lap and scratch an itch on the back of my neck.

“Anyone?” she asked. “No need to be polite.” She paused for one of the suck-ups found in every classroom to respond, but even they weren’t stupid enough to say the website was vomit-worthy. “Well, let’s start with the color selection. That factor alone would cause anyone to quickly exit this site. In this class you will learn how to create compatible color combinations, trendy animations, and balanced layouts.”

Professor Joy pressed a button on her remote. “I’ve just initiated an animation software package called SCRATCH, which we will use in our development effort. It is free of charge and just as good as the animation software packages you could license for a lot of money. In fact, some of the kids in the video gaming competition being held at this very moment in the lobby developed their games in SCRATCH.” She paused and looked toward Josh. “Is that the animation package you have used for your game development?”

He beamed a proud smile. “Yes, yes, it is.”

She continued to tap the keys on her computer, then glanced up at the monitor. Seconds later a pink donut with sprinkles filled the screen; it was so realistic my stomach growled. “I’ve just opened one of the SCRATCH tutorials to demonstrate the process of importing an image. Sometimes these videos move too fast, so I’m passing out a printout of the instructions and will also load them into the online class folder. If you run into issues, the online tutorial can help get you through it.” She paused, smiled, then said, “Think of following the instructions just as you would when making your favorite sugar-cookie recipe.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. Somehow I doubted there was any comparison between typing in a set of software instructions and baking cookies. Making cookies was a sacred event. Mom would roll the dough out on a floured countertop, then I'd cut the cookies out in shapes of stars, crescent moons, and comets. The scent of warm baking cookies would fill the house for hours. Thinking about the process made me wonder if she would be making cookies without me, not even noticing I was gone.

A loud British voice pulled me out of my warm kitchen and back to a projection hovering inches above the table. It was a tutorial describing the ten simple steps for creating an animation, but he was racing through them so fast, I don't think he even took a breath. I tried my darndest to follow, but even the little white mouse he used as a pointer screeched about on the screen like a star shooting across the sky. By the time he finished, I felt like one of those old cartoon characters who has been knocked over the head and has stars circling above him. Thankfully my bracelet buzzed, signaling the end of class and drowning out the buzz going on in my brain.

"Oh, and one more thing," Professor Joy said. "Please come to our next session prepared to show the image you have imported into SCRATCH and your animation plan."

My eyes widened. Show an animated Rosie in our next class? Impossible! She was still sitting in black-and-white pencil diagrams on the pages of my sketchbook.

Mortification crawled up my spine.

Twenty-Three



## Rosie Takes Flight

“Hey, Roho,” Josh said leaning over the table, “come check me out in the gaming competition. It’s in the main lobby. I’m almost up. Free popcorn. See you there.”

Before I could say a word, he’d raced out of the room and down the hall. I spun my bracelet around to check my schedule. Done for the day. Well, truth be told, study hall was listed, but everyone knew that really meant free-to-do-whatever-you-want time. Video games weren’t my deal, but with no better offer, I turned down the hallway and followed my nose in the direction of the buttered popcorn.

Rows of soft overstuffed couches were lined up like bleachers smack in the middle of the lobby. One video screen showed a couple of boxers duking it out with blood dripping from their lips looking like vampires just back from midnight snacks. A bit overdone, if you asked me, but no one was asking. The other screens were games that I was more used to: armies of people in a variety of shoot ’em up styles. I must

have looked like I finally fit in when a guy walked by and put a hot buttery bag of popcorn in one hand and a cold Mountain Dew in the other.

Since I had to eat my snack somewhere, I figured I'd make myself comfortable and found a spot where I could watch the gamers transform themselves into mythical warriors. Screams of terror spread throughout the lobby. The capture of armies was followed by cheers or gasps of defeat.

I sideways glanced at a couple of the guys who were actually kind of cute. But I'd met their type. They would never notice a girl, even if she walked in butt naked. The dance of the thumbs was way too seductive. These were the guys who played constantly, and if they weren't playing, they were thinking about playing.

"Winner, winner! Level five, level five!" screamed a guy in the front row with his arms over his head in a victory stance.

I pushed my back into the cushion. Josh? I leaned forward. It was Josh. He did a quick spin dance with his controller over his heart; then he and his partner fell back into the deep cushions and went back to the game.

If Rosie ever got on a real video screen, we would at least have a real purpose, rather than always trying to get to the next level. We actually practiced yoga to stay level.

I smeared my fingers around the bottom of the bag, sucked off the buttery salt, and unwrapped my straw. All the games had three things in common—blood, torture, and death. Totally gross but totally realistic. If I could make Rosie just one iota as realistic, I'd be thrilled. The more I studied the animation, the more excited about Rosie I became.

The time had come. I settled deeper into the leather couch and unfolded Professor Joy's instruction sheet to import Rosie.

**Step 1:** Go to SCRATCH from

<https://SCRATCH.mit.edu>

**Step 2:** Follow instructions to create your account by clicking on Join Scratch.

**Step 3:** Load jpg formatted image into your system.

I used my phone to take a picture of a drawing of Rosie in my sketchbook, emailed the picture to my account, and saved it in my photos.

**Step 4:** Click on Create at top left side of menu bar. Delete the sprite kitty cat character by clicking on X within the kitty icon found on the lower right. On lower right, click on the kitty face and then the Up arrow to upload your image.

Tears filled my eyes—happy ones. On the screen stood Rosie in a perfect triangle pose. A miracle had occurred! Pencil thin but definitely on the screen.

**Step 5:** Center your image by experimenting with numbers in x, y, size, and direction boxes on the middle of the screen.

I entered a few numbers in a willy-nilly anything goes fashion.

Argh! Immediately Rosie exploded, beheaded and belly-up like a dead fish. I covered my mouth and let out a gasp.

What had I done? And how was I going to get her back to where she was two seconds ago.

I backspaced. Pressed Delete. Hit End.

I closed my eyes. Cupped my hands over my face. Nothing brought her back from the dead-fish pose I put her in. I couldn't do this. I hugged the back of my legs, tucked my head between my knees, and landed in a Rabbit pose—a sniveling scared-out-of-my-mind Rabbit pose.

The section of the couch next to me sank down, followed by a deep, “ahem.”

Tilting my head sideways, I peeked through my fingers. Brad. Oh, please. The last thing I needed was someone like Brad to snicker as he watched Rosie float all over my screen like an inflatable kiddie pool caught in a gust of wind.

“It's probably not as bad as you think,” he said.

“Yes, it is! I turned her into a headless blimp,” I said, pointing my finger at the screen. “And I can't find the Undo button on the keyboard.”

“Code and cars have one thing in common.” He arched one eyebrow. “Reverse. Looks to me like you got her all scrambled up in the grid. You need to imagine the screen as a grid with zero being in the middle. All those numbers you fat fingered? Blew her right off the screen. Mind if I take the controls?”

I nodded.

“Good. We'll go back to where you were before you turned this poor girl into the Starship Enterprise.”

With a couple of magic strokes on the keyboard, he shrank Rosie back down. We worked through all the instructions until she became the yoga instructor I dreamed of. I was so struck with pleasure I reached over and hugged him. The scent of campfire smoke mixed with hot dog stench never smelled so good.

“What did I do wrong?” I asked.

“Funny. I said those exact words when I couldn’t figure out why my roommate didn’t want my company. I usually like to blame Chuckie Boy for all my social failures. He doesn’t seem to mind except for when I say he’s responsible for my bad gas.” Then he did a horrible Groucho Marx imitation, and said, “But he forgives me when I throw some bacon his way.” He then wiggled his eyebrows up and down just like Groucho in the old movies.

I giggled. And caught what actually looked like a blush in his cheeks.

“What happened? I mean with your roommate?”

He shrugged. “I thought we were getting along, then out of nowhere he says he can’t live with me.” He crossed his arms and leaned his head onto the couch. “Wasn’t a huge shocker, really. I can’t make friends like other people do.”

“Well, maybe you guys just weren’t compatible.” I looked around at the room full of people that reminded me of Brad. “Have you ever joined up with these gamer types?”

He glanced around the couches. “Not exactly my style to join up,” and he put air quotes around *join up*. He then squirmed a bit and picked some dog hair off his black socks.

“Well, you are my friend forever!” I said. “You helped to create my Rosie. I wish there was a way to repay you for your help.”

“Rosie?” He blinked several times. “You name your images?”

“She’s not just an image,” I said. “At least to me.”

“OK, gotcha. I’d better get back to Marilyn. I’m sending her to charm school to work on that creepy staring issue.”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t mean to insult her.”

“No worries. She takes constructive criticism well.” He leaned forward as if getting ready to go. “So, just execute the instructions Professor Joy gave you step by step, but without



the fat fingering and your...er...what did you call her...Rosie? She will become exactly as you want her to be.

“Guess I’d better go,” he said again, but instead of getting up to leave, he leaned back into the couch with a smile as big as Texas on his face. “By the way, people say yoga will change your life, but I think that’s a bit of a stretch.” He tapped his hand to his forehead and saluted, “Namaste, Nina and Rosie.”

For the first time since arriving, I smiled—a real smile. “Thanks for your help,” I said.

He then pushed himself forward to leave. This time for real.

“But,” I whined in a high-pitched voice, wishing I could reach out, grab onto his leg, and beg him to stay. “Um, if I hit a snag, can you help again?”

“Of course. Anytime. I’ll give you my number.”

I typed it into my contacts and was tempted to label it something like “Rosie’s hero” but settled on “Brad.”

“Can I ask you something a bit off topic? And maybe kind of weird?” I asked.

“Off topic and weird are my best character traits. Shoot.”

I looked around, lowered my head, and in a hushed voice, said, “Well, I kind of overheard an argument when I was up in one of the atrium trees. A man said he owned a kid because he had his IP address. And he said he’d caught him hacking.”

He raised one eyebrow, “The old eavesdropping while in a tree trick, eh?”

“I didn’t mean to...I mean...well, maybe I did crawl out on a branch to hear what they were saying...I couldn’t see their faces through the leaves...except for a man with a ferret face... but...” I mumbled, trailing off into oblivion.

He scratched his chin. “Let’s see where this might be going. Having someone’s IP address is not typically threatening, unless of course your IP address shows up where it shouldn’t

be. Like when hacking into a computer network. And these days that can mean jail time.”

“Yeah. And the kid was being poked in the chest by this mean, ugly ferret faced man. And he made the kid real nervous. The poor guy hiccupped like crazy. Then the man came after me, and I had to escape by flying down from the tree in a hammock,” I said in rapid-fire chipmunk speed.

“Wow.” He covered his mouth and widened his eyes in an imitation of a surprised face. “Hold on. You’re saying there’s a mean ferret faced man and a hiccupping hacker on the loose?” His voice dripped in sarcasm. “Quick everyone,” he shouted, “grab a hammock and fly for cover!”

I shrank down in my skin. Suddenly the whole story did sound ridiculous. If I weren’t involved, I’d probably laugh too. Had my imagination blown the whole thing out of proportion?

Twenty-Four



## Steve Jobs' Earring

So inconvenient. The ping of an incoming text came at the exact moment Rosie and I'd kicked into a headstand to clear our heads. Brad was must have thought I was out of my mind. The ferret face flying hammock *was* a ridiculous story. The more I thought about, the more I realized I must have had a total brain fart due to the stress of starting a new school. Rosie and I agreed that standing-on-your-head pose was our go to for flushing out off-base thinking, but ignoring a text ping proved irresistible. I pressed my left hand into the yoga mat, stretched out my right arm to grab my phone, and read the text upside down from Brad.

You are cordially invited to the Wednesday night Shipwreck party at Huckleberry Hollow! Come after dark. Costumes supplied.

Jericka received the invite, too, but had the advantage of reading it while upright. “I knew I liked his style. Well, I should say I’m *learning* to like his style. Hmm. After dark,” she said. “Really, why can’t a math freak like Brad be more specific on a time? He’s probably one of those odd types that believes time is an invisible invention mere mortals created to control people.”

I kicked down from my headstand, shook off the ick that had accumulated in my brain, and sat in a cross-legged position on my yoga mat.

“Brad’s different all right, but he did me a huge favor today. He helped to bring my Rosie back to yoga size after I managed to blow her poor body up into a puff pastry on the screen.”

I was trying to defend Brad, but I might as well have been talking to the wall. Jericka completely ignored me, stuck her head out the window, and said, “Well it’s dark, but we don’t want to be the first to arrive.”

“I can smell the sweet whiff of pigskins on the grill, so I think the party has started,” I announced. “Kind of cool that Brad is supplying the costumes so we don’t have to worry about what to wear,” I said, stepping into my flip-flops.

“What makes you think you don’t have to worry?” She said and raised an eyebrow. “Brad’s idea of costumes could be as off center as he is.”

We skipped down the stairwell steps two at a time, pushed through the lobby doors, and heard the beat of tropical steel-drum music drift through the parking lot. Huckleberry Hollow palm trees twinkled with white lights. A spray-painted SOS sign hung from the gate, and a plastic Halloween skeleton missing one arm swung on a rope.

I kicked the gate open and immediately got that queasy awkward feeling in my stomach. Josh might be there. I looked

for him over the fence and held my breath while scanning the crowd. I didn't want to see him. But then again, so what if he was there? As he put it, we were friends.

"Welcome back, fair maidens," Brad yelled to us from the grill with a Jamaican flair. "Wait right there. I've been working on your cloaks of many colors."

He turned over his hot dogs, picked up some balled up clothes, and headed our way. "Only the fairest in the land can wear island attire with the style you two can. And I must say, these tired eyes are ready to see something other than unscrambling the security pad code. Seems the thief hacked the software after he stole the cap to cover up the use of his bracelet. The last twenty-four hours has been like untangling furballs out of Chuckie Boy's hair."

"Don't they have security guards and Edgy Reggie to do that stuff?" Jericka asked.

Brad raised his fingers in front of his face. "Remember, girls. Magical code springs from these fingertips."

He unwound the ball of costumes and handed one to each of us. I cringed. A costume made of orange terry cloth. Just a glimpse of the color orange made me nauseous.

"Now go get your shipwrecked style on," he said.

"And I see you have a style all your own. Who might you be?" I asked and pointed to a strip of silver duct tape stretched down the center of his face and body. On one side of the tape, a tattered black pirate jacket, a straggly beard, and a dangling gold earring. On the other side, a white T-shirt, short-cropped hair, and little nerd glasses.

He spread his arms out in both directions to display the name tags that were pasted on his chest in bold letters: **Edward Snowden—NSA Computer Security** on the nerd side and **Blackbeard the Pirate** on the other.

He tilted his head and extended his arms. “Come on. Please tell me you get it.”

I shrugged my shoulders and looked to Jericka for help. She shook her head.

“Here’s a clue. Both were pirates.” He paused, waiting for us to figure it out. “OK, so Edward Snowden, the guy who stole tons of classified government documents? And now takes up space in Russia? Some say spy; I say pirate. But a definite bad-guy pirate.” He pointed to the other side of his body. “Now, take good ol’ Blackbeard. Just a simple old-fashioned treasure thief who at least was honest enough to admit what he was.”

“A split personality costume as complex as you are,” I said.

“Yes! You score.” Brad beamed as if that was actually a compliment.

He grabbed us both by our arms and led us to an old wooden canoe filled with colorful leis. “Hawaiian symbols of affection,” he said, bowing down. “Please, allow me.” He picked up a yellow for me and a pink for Jericka and placed them around our necks. “And here is your shipwrecked attire. Go ahead and change into the costumes. The camper is all yours,” he said, waving us toward the door.

We stepped immediately into the kitchen, an area so small I could reach the stove, refrigerator, desk, and closet without ever having to move my feet. The kitchen cabinets were tidy with a fresh coat of white paint but ruined by the weird bumper stickers he had plastered all over them that said stuff like, *Talk Nerdy to Me* and *Nerd on the Outside, Rebel on the Inside*.

On the far side of a lower cabinet, another poster was taped to the wood. I crouched down and cocked my head to see a poster of Steve Jobs. Brad’s Pythia ID bracelet dangled from a hook glued to his ear.

“Very avant-garde of Brad to give Steve Jobs an earring with a picture of himself,” I said and pointed it out to Jericka. “Let’s see. At the bottom it looks like Brad wrote something on it.” I crouched down further and read, **YOUR TIME IS LIMITED, SO DON’T WASTE IT LIVING SOMEONE ELSE’S LIFE. BY STEVE JOBS.**

“Well, that sure nails Brad. He’s definitely his own man,” Jericka snickered. “You know, I heard Steve Jobs’s final words on his deathbed were, ‘Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow.’ I think he must have seen angels directing him toward heaven. His relatives were in the room, and they swear by it.”

She stepped into the bathroom to change. I studied Steve Jobs’s face. Looking into his eyes, I tried to picture what he must have seen in his last breath. He died so young. But at least his relatives were by his side and not off at some enrichment experience. The door to the bathroom creaked open. I quickly stood up and pretended to be interested in a few JAVA Programming manuals neatly piled on the countertop.

Jericka stepped out in her costume with her hands on her hips. “Am I a sultry shipwrecked maiden or what?” she exclaimed. She extended her arms above her head, twirling around in a tight circle. It was nothing but a tattered rag that at one time had been a respectable minidress.

“Brad made sure it was torn in all the right places,” I laughed. “And no one’s going to be disappointed in how you fill it out.”

She giggled like a little kid, pinched my side, and said, “Now quit nosing around Brad’s geek shelf and get changed. Meet you outside.”

I unrolled my costume and held it up by the straps—a terry cloth beach cover-up that would barely cover my butt cheeks. There was no way I could go out there hanging out all

over the place. I looked around his camper for something else. Nothing but a decorative plastic pineapple Brad must have forgotten to take outside. But it was worth a try. I wrapped the terry cloth around my head and stuck the pineapple in the middle, instantly becoming the Chiquita Banana lady.

Then in a moment of inspiration, I took off my pants, yanked down the nasty checkered curtains in the window and wrapped them around my waist. It was more of a Little Orphan Annie look than a cool Pirate Girl look, but at least my buttocks were covered.

I stepped out onto the camper stairs and immediately felt terribly out of place. Knowing no one, I searched the crowd for Jericka, but instead, my eyes landed directly on Josh dressed as Captain Hook with a girl in a grass skirt next to him. I'd stay away. I had no need for a repeat performance of the last party at Huckleberry Hollow. His mean streak was probably already brewing.

Suddenly aware of how stupid a fake pineapple wrapped in orange terry cloth perched on my head must have looked, I reached up and threw it on the ground, hoping that no one had noticed me.

Just my luck. Who reached down, picked up the pineapple, and began walking my way but Josh.



Twenty-Five



## Huckleberry Hollow Limbo

“Hey, short girl, you first. We’re lining up in height order,” Brad yelled over to me and pointed to a set of bamboo limbo sticks lying on the ground. I jumped off the camper steps before Josh got close and ran toward Brad.

“My kitchen curtains?” He did a double take of my skirt and pointed his finger. “Very resourceful. And I must say they have never looked so good!”

I bowed and immediately kicked off my flip-flops. A limbo competition and wedge flippers would not be a good mix.

“May I do the honor?” Brad extended his arm and escorted me to the front of the limbo line as if I were a princess. He positioned me next to a bamboo stick lying on the ground and looked directly in my eyes. “After seeing you dressed in blue checkers, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to look at my curtains the same way ever again.”

It was dark so he couldn’t see my face change from pale white to red. He bent over and kissed my hand. He was charming. But he was still...well...Brad.

He released my hand, climbed atop a wooden crate, and waving a pirate flag, yelled, “OK, mates and maidens, here’s the limbo lay of the land. Bend backward under the bamboo stick, which we lower a few inches each round. Only way to win is to be the last person to get under the stick without touching it. But”—he paused, dropped the flag, and picked up a lei with neon flowers — “I am adding another category for the creative, the courageous, and the brave! I call it the shake and shimmy competition for the wildest calypso limboer in the land. And the winner will take home this highly coveted neon lei!”

He held the lei against his chest, and Conner raised his hands over his head to lead us in clapping. Brad jumped off the crate and picked up one end of the stick, while Conner grabbed the other. “Let the limbo party begin!” he yelled.

*Limbo Rock* blasted from the camper’s open window, and we all clapped to the rhythm of the song. Brad gave me the nod to begin. Or was it an invitation to shed the sad-sack skin of the last Huckleberry Hollow party and move into a different version of myself? The bamboo stick was positioned a few inches from my chest. I spread my arms out like a bird taking flight, executed a slight standing backbend, and shimmied in Camel pose under the stick with as much hip-hopping as I could muster. Then I raised my arms over my head in a victory dance. The kids behind me clapped to the beat of the music. I bowed and ran to the back of the line.

“Beautifully done, Rojo.” I turned my head toward the whisper, and Josh was two inches from my face. His breath was sweet, as if he’d been sucking on cherry Life Savers. “Bet I can out limbo you,” he teased.

I took a step back. His eyes danced in the light of the torches. He leaned in closer and whispered, “Have lunch with me if I win?”

I pushed my hair behind my ears and reminded myself that he'd acted charming like this before. Who's to say this wasn't just another one of his creepy party games. I bit my lip and looked directly into his eyes. Two could play this game.

"And what if I win?" I said with a smile.

He nodded as if to say *game on*. "Awesome, Roho. If you win, you can still have lunch with me!"

"Is this your wager with all the girls?" I motioned with my head to the girl in the grass skirt.

"No reason to wager with the other girls," he said without missing a beat.

"Guess we'll just see how it goes, shall we?" I asked.

"We shall." He smiled and extended his hand. "Go with me?"

I studied his face. This was the nice Josh. The one who carried my Girl Scout Cookie Mocha on orientation day at the Robot Café. This was the Josh who taught me to surf in the parking lot. I took his hand. He interwove our fingers into a tight clasp, looked me in the eye, winked, and gave my hand a tight squeeze.

With several people in front of us in line, I stood on my tiptoes to see Jericka limbo. She lifted one arm up in the air, swirled that disgusting orange terry-cloth costume over her head, and hugged the plastic pineapple to her chest. Slowly she shimmied up to the bamboo stick. Her back arched, she looked toward the sky, and she rocked her body to the beat of the music, not even close to touching the bar.

I raised my arm and cheered along with everyone else. Brad put his arms over his head to silence us. "We have a winner in the calypso shimmy-and-shake dance category." He bowed and handed her the lei. She bowed to him, slipped on the lei, and in full-fledged Jericka style, executed a perfect twirl. Conner whistled and cheered her on. The limbo music

was turned up as a signal for the limbo game to continue.

We all clapped in sync with the music, except for Missy, who didn't seem to understand what rhythm was and even embarrassed herself when her clapping went on and on long after everyone else had stopped. I even kind of felt sorry for her but got over it fast when she went over to Jericka and hugged her. It's a well-known rule you don't try to steal someone's best friend. Missy was out of touch with more than the beat of the music.

Josh grasped my hand tighter and said, "In surfing the saying goes, 'You can't catch a wave if you don't lean into it.' So get ready to lean."

The bamboo level dropped at least a foot. In unison we arched backward on our approach. Just inches away from making it under, Josh began to stumble and jerked sideways. His grip on my hand tightened, and he fell backward as I fell onto his chest.

"Ahh, Rojo," he said pulling me closer, "we didn't have a chance. You OK?"

I brushed the hair out of my eyes. Inches from his face. His eyes sparkled.

"All good," I said.

"Sorry, I'm such a klutz." He stood, grabbed both my hands, and pulled me up.

"Funny," Brad sneered as we walked by. "I always thought surfer dudes could rotate, rock, and roll every which way on those ten-foot waves," he said in a voice that dripped in sarcasm. "Seems you have a habit of falling down at my parties."

"Maybe next time you'll do me the favor of not lowering the stick as I go under," Josh replied and jutted out his chin.

Brad frowned and then fake smiled. "Won't be a next

time for you, pal. Landing flat on your back means you're out of the game."

With an exaggerated shoulder shrug, Josh took me by the hand and twirled me. The music changed from *Limbo Rock* to steel drums.

I couldn't help but glance back toward Brad, who stood alone in the crowd, still holding the limbo stick. Suddenly, I felt oddly protective of him.

Twenty-Six



## Marilyn Speaks

Brad was right. If I followed the SCRATCH directions step by step, without fat fingering the keys, Rosie had the chance to become the yoga instructor she deserved to be. I only had to call him six or seven times to get Rosie's body parts pieced back together. We'd end up chitchatting for hours. Jericka would roll her eyes more than once about our conversations but ended up laughing and quoting what she called *Bradisms* after every call. She'd never admit it, but Jericka was warming up to him.

I wrote down the steps to get Rosie out of the sketchbook and moving so I wouldn't forget:

Step 1: Take pictures of Rosie in the different poses and input them into SCRATCH as a series of postures called costumes. Cut away the background with the editing tool.

Step 2: To move her through a sun salutation, start with one costume pose, then switch to another costume pose to create the movement.

That part of getting Rosie moving was easy. Getting her to move smoothly was going to require a lot more detail work. A challenge I'd leave for another day. I had homeroom to get to.

The Castle Roundtable room had a chill in the air. I self-hugged and found a chair next to Conner, whose face immediately cringed when it was me and not Jericka who sat next to him.

Conner leaned over the table. "What did you guys do yesterday?"

"Um, just some laundry. How about you?" I replied.

"Well," he said loudly in his typical center-of-attention way, "my dad and I went down to the docks in Sausalito. The breeze on the bay was just right, so we took his hundred-foot sailboat out on the water, cruised the bay for a few hours, then met up with some of his friends at the Yacht Club."

He finally paused to take a breath and glanced around to see if Jericka was listening. When he saw she was busy watching a hologram pig fly out of her phone, his face fell in disappointment. His voice then went a full octave higher. "I'm going to make my first million by the time I'm twenty. Want to know how?"

"Sure," I said and giggled, getting ready for one of Conner's corny punch lines.

"The way the Chinese do it. By imitating existing technology, but not so close that you could be charged with patent infringement."

I shook my head. “Wait, what, are you joking?”

“No.” His eyes widened. “My father is one of the best patent attorneys in the city and knows just how close we can get without crossing the line.”

Jericka leaned forward. “That’s disgusting. You basically want to steal other people’s discoveries?”

Conner waved his hands in front of him as if trying to erase the conversation that now had Jericka’s attention. “No. No. I call it piggybacking. It’s all perfectly legal.”

“Perfectly underhanded, you mean,” Jericka said loud enough for everyone at the table to hear. “What are you going to call your company? Leach.com?”

The whole table roared. Conner’s face turned beet-red.

One of the blue-ball gang lifted one side of his butt off the chair, fake farted on his arm, and yelled, “What a way to backfire!”

Conner cleared his throat, took a swig of water, and immediately opened his laptop to hide in his email that was probably titled, “I might be rich, but I’m an idiot.”

Professor Joy strolled into the room, set her computer bag on the table, and slumped down in her chair looking tired. “So sorry to keep you waiting. I was just getting an update on the theft of the crystal cap.” She paused to sip her drink. “There is really nothing to share, except we have been able to narrow our focus. Any questions?”

I looked around the table. Brad cleared his throat. Josh looked up from the game he was playing on his computer, and Missy picked at her cuticles.

Professor Joy continued, “Now, since we’re getting a late start today, I’ll summarize the key takeaway from the thought-computing article you were assigned to read. Let’s begin with the example of the man who was paralyzed for a



decade due to injuries sustained in an accident. Three years ago, a thought-computing chip was inserted into his brain. Since then, he has learned to use his mind to control a robotic arm, which gave him the ability to shake hands and even drink a cup of coffee.”

She paused, “Does anyone know the difference between the approach used in the article and the crystal cap’s method of thought computing?”

Brad gazed up over his laptop. “The crystal cap has a wireless capability while this guy has a Frankensteinian computer chip buried in his skull that can cause brain infections, strokes, or internal bleeding.”

I swallowed hard. Nothing like Brad to cut to the chase.

Professor Joy’s eyes widened. “Yes. Correct and well stated. I can tell you’ve done your homework.” She got up from her chair and strolled around the table. “In a nutshell, the crystal cap is a safer approach because it is not invasive. And as mentioned in the article, quartz crystals are commonly used in electronics since they are able to receive, process, and transmit vibrations in a precise pattern, which is needed to properly interpret the brain waves.”

Our bracelets buzzed. Mine said *Specials–Robot Café*.

I turned to Jericka, “Guess I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, go sip a flavored latte for me,” she said. “It’s time again to meet up with my good friends X and Y.”

Rays of sunlight beamed down on the path through the atrium, shiny bright on the wet stepping-stones and creating a warm glow where they had dried. I jumped from stone to stone on my way, as if playing a giant game of hopscotch. I stopped to look back at my wet footprints stamped on each stone, and out of nowhere a pang of homesickness hit me. I wondered if my parents remembered when we would walk the beach, leaving

a path of our footprints behind—back when we were a family, rather than just a collection of people to be enriched.

Brad was seated at the bar, looking down at his notebook, absorbed in his private world of robots. I stopped and stood in the entry, far enough away that I could see him without him seeing me. He was scribbling on the paper with a focus I'd rarely seen on anyone. He was so studious. It was no wonder he was able to create someone like Marilyn Monroebot.

"Excuse me," Missy said, almost grazing my ribs with her supersized red leather bag as she walked by. She plopped herself down on a stool next to Brad and pasted on her megawatt smile. Jericka had told me that Missy was really nice. Why didn't Jericka see what a phony she was? Always up in everyone's face, leaning in and rubbing up against them.

Brad shifted on his stool and politely moved his books over to give her some room. I walked into the café and took a stool on the other side of Brad. Marilyn Monroebot rolled up to the bar and said in a hushed female voice, "Good morning, Nina and Missy. What can I get you?"

I grabbed the edge of the bar to keep from jumping a foot in the air.

"Surprised?" Brad said with a laugh. "I upgraded her facial recognition software with all the student and employee information over the weekend." He smirked and raised his eyebrow. "She is proud to say she has memorized who's who at the Pythia Zoo."

"Wait. How did you get our faces in there?" I asked.

"You've all been in there. She just wasn't up to the challenge of recognizing you until this weekend. Do you want to order anything?"

"Oh, gosh. Um, a mocha chocolate latte, please," I said.

"Missy, anything for you?" Brad asked. "Marilyn is waiting to take your order."

“Oh, oh.” She seemed to stumble for words. “Nothing, thanks.”

Brad leaned over toward me. “So do you remember the camera rotating around your head as they took your mug shots the first day?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Unbeknownst to you, Nina Shiner’s unique face print is probably loaded into more databases than we could ever count. Days of walking around anonymous are history.”

I looked back at Marilyn. She probably knew more about my face than my own mother. I tried to remember if that picture was taken before or after my new face cream started to work and was mortified to think it was before.

He got up and went around to the other side of the bar to straighten Marilyn’s wig, which was always tilted off center, then looked back at me and said, “As I recall, you happen to have a heart-shaped face, full lips, wide-set brown eyes, a slender chiseled nose, a dimple in your left check when you smile, and”—he paused for effect—“a *beautifully* defined philtrum.”

“A what?” I asked.

A bar stool squeaked, and Missy yanked her purse off the counter, got up, and blurted in a disgusted squawk, “OMG, Brad. How inappropriate.”

“Oh, calm down you. I said nothing out of line,” Brad said, sounding slightly insulted. “The philtrum is the crisp indentation between your lips and your nose. Some are flat and nondescript. But take a look at Nina’s, which is a perfectly chiseled specimen.”

Missy immediately turned all splotchy red. The look on her face was one of pure embarrassment. I was struck with pleasure.

“Oh, I misheard you.” She quickly turned away, went to an empty table, and nervously fiddled around with her earrings. I was kind of disappointed she had not grabbed for her purse mirror to check out her philtrum.

“Here’s your drink,” he said sliding it across the counter.

With a big smile he pointed to the bright shiny new barista tools Marilyn had in her hands.

“No more rust and, er...” He stumbled midsentence, then the sparkle in his eye was suddenly extinguished.

Twenty-Seven



## The Disappearing Text

*A deep crease formed between* Brad's brows.

"Brad McNealy?" a deep gruff voice asked.

I turned and gasped. It was none other than the ferret faced man dressed in a green security guard's uniform.

I grabbed on to the counter. My heart pounded, and I felt my lungs tighten.

"Yes," Brad answered.

"Please hand over your ID bracelet. We have instructions to escort you from the premises," he said in the same mean voice I'd heard in the tree.

"And why would that be?" Brad asked.

"You are under suspicion for the theft of the crystal cap," he said gruffly.

Brad jumped to his feet, knocking the stool to the floor. He looked the security guard square in the face with a look of disbelief. "What? What are you talking about? I worked side by side with the security guys all night to help find the thief."

One side of his nasty ferret face wrinkled up and twitched.

“Correct, but the data shows it was your ID bracelet that opened the conference room in the timeframe the cap was stolen,” he stated flatly.

Brad threw up his arms. “Wait just a minute. Why would I fix the hack on the ID badging software if I was the one who stole the cap? And for your information, I was at the concert the whole time—nowhere near the conference room.”

“All I can tell you is what the data shows.” His beady ferret eyes narrowed. “Can you prove you never left the concert area? Anyone who can vouch for you?”

“Well, er, I did have to leave.” He looked away, up at the ceiling, then back to ferret face. “But only for a few minutes—to get some water for a friend.”

“Can you prove that?” the ferret face snarled.

“Sure. I have a message from the guy who asked me to get him the water. He said he was sick.” Brad’s typically bright eyes were heavy and serious. He scrolled through his phone, back and forth up and down. “Yeah, so I got him the water, and uh...I looked for him everywhere. But I didn’t find him.” His words were fast. Breathless. “Weird. I seemed to have misplaced the text. Has to be here somewhere.”

“Brad,” ferret face said sharply, “let’s go. Now.”

Pale and confused, Brad looked at me and shook his head. His mouth opened and closed like a trout on a hook. “This... this is ridiculous.”

“It’s ferret face.” I wanted to scream, but the fear in my gut allowed only a pitiful whisper.

Brad looked sideways at the ferret, and his jaw tightened. He shook his head back and forth. His shoulders slumped. He snapped his fingers at Chuckie Boy to follow. Seconds later the lobby doors swooshed open, and Brad walked out

with ferret face by his side. The doors swooshed closed. And he was gone.

I sat frozen. My brain was muddled. A heaviness settled into my chest. I suddenly felt cold and picked up the warm cup and held it against my chest with my hands at heart center.

Brad would never have stolen the cap. His core was pure.

I had to talk to Josh. His text would prove Brad left the concert to go for water and not to steal the cap. Once we got hold of the text and showed it to security, this would all go away.

I looked over my shoulder. If anyone had noticed that Brad had been escorted out by a security guard, the P. design gossip channel would light on fire. Gossip could be deadly to a loner like Brad. But everyone was heads down, focused on some form of handheld technology, immersed in their happy places.

I sat down, spun around on the bar stool, and took out my phone.



Call me!

I texted to Josh.

I laid my phone on the counter and stared down at it, willing Josh to call me back. I wanted to send out an SOS of NOW. But I also didn't want to freak him out. I gulped down my mocha and tapped my fingertips on the bar to order another. Marilyn's little wheels showed up just as my phone lit up with "JOSH." I stepped over to the far side of the café to ensure no one was fake looking into their phone but secretly eavesdropping on my conversation.

"Josh. Thank god. Brad's in trouble. We need you to vouch for him."

He hesitated. "Wait, what? He's in trouble?" I could hear his breath quicken in the phone.

"I'll explain. Meet me by the big atrium oak tree in five minutes," I said.

"Well, uh. OK," he mumbled.

I took off, shooting down the atrium path and making it to the base of the oak tree in seconds. I swayed back and forth, from one foot to another, and checked the time. Five minutes turned to ten. Finally Josh strolled through the atrium door, stopped to adjust his ball cap, and started walking toward me with that same slow swagger he'd used the first time I saw him walk to the whiteboard in orientation.

"Josh," I called out and waved. "Over here. Hurry up!"

His walk quickened. "What's up?"

"Brad's in trouble," I said and stopped to gulp in a breath. "They think he stole the crystal cap."

"Wait, Brad? That's crazy," he responded flatly, "but how can I help?"

"Find the text when you asked him to get you a water. The crystal cap was stolen during the concert, and the only time he left was to get you a water."

"Um. He left to get me a water?" Josh said, taking off his baseball cap and running his fingers through his hair. "You know I was feeling bad that night. I don't remember it very well."

"Well, I do," I said and stared into his perfectly blank face. "Get your phone out and look at your texts."

"OK." He reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone, tapped open his text icon, and scrolled down through his messages. "Bummer. Nothing here. Could someone else have asked him to get a water?"

"No," I glared at him. I stepped in and looked at his phone. "He said *you* sent him the text."

"I don't get it." He shrugged. I looked into his face. A deep



crease formed between his brows. “If he says I sent him a text, well, why doesn’t he just pull it up?”

My breath hit the back of my throat. Josh stared at me blankly with his lips buckled tight across his jaw.

“None of this makes any sense. Brad doesn’t have any proof of the text. And they don’t just go poof and disappear,” I said.

I leaned into the tree. It *was* his bracelet that was used to enter the conference room where the cap was stolen, and he was brilliant.

Could he also use his savvy smarts to be a great liar?

Twenty-Eight



## Conner the Con Artist

*My bracelet sounded and scrolled Innovators of Our Time-Genie's Bottle.* I barely flinched at the buzz. Just the thought of Brad being a thief made my head spin in circles.

Acting one way when you are really another is bad. But if Brad blatantly lied to my face, well, that would mean he was lower than pond scum. But then again, if Brad were the thief, would he really steal the crystal cap, run back to the concert, but think stop at the concession stand to get Josh a bottle of water?

"Earth to Roho." Josh said waving his hand in front of my eyes. "Let's meet up today for lunch at the cafeteria. You owe me one, ya know."

"How can you think about food when Brad is being accused of theft?" I snapped.

His smile faded. "You're right. I just wanted to hang out." He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. I'm sure this will all get figured out."

"I'm not sure about anything anymore," I said and stomped off toward the Genie's Bottle classroom. I blew

through the love beads hanging over the doorway and was instantly tangled up as the strings caught the trinkets Jericka had woven through my hair.

I yanked, pulled, and flailed like a fly caught in a spider's web. Luckily no one in the class noticed my hot mess because their eyes were glued to Conner, who was once again blabbering at the top of his lungs.

"Bill Gates might appear to be a dull dweeb, but he has spunk," he said, then paused for effect. "When he was a kid, he had a nasty argument with his mother at the dinner table. His father lost it on what a stinking turd he'd raised, picked up a glass of water, and threw it in his face. But Bill was quick on his feet. He looked at his dad and said, 'Thanks for the shower.'"

Waves of laughter filled the room just as I decided the only way out of my war with the love beads was to yank them down, like pulling hair out by its roots. Once freed, I kicked a pillow from my path, walked through the maze of chairs, and plopped down on a furry purple stool, and then one by one pulled out the streams of love beads stuck to my head.

"Conner, get off your soapbox," the teacher said.

My eyes narrowed on him.

Maybe it was because my blood was boiling from seeing ferret face haul Brad away, or maybe I was mad because of the love beads caught in my hair, but Conner's once funny comedy routine suddenly seemed idiotic. His malarkey was too thick with show-offy stupidity. The bragging about a technology piggybacking gig—or rather, thieving—he and his dad planned was sickening.

Then a light bulb went off in my head. All Conner's festering faults flashed in bright red.

Conner. The guy who made a big deal about having to leave the concert because he was sick from Brad's hot dogs.

And wasn't he the one who said he'd do anything for money? Including his piggybacking scam?

"Today we'll be discussing Bill Gates," the teacher began. "Bill was once quoted as saying, 'No segment of the world economy is more dynamic than the computer software industry.' You could say Bill Gates was the true innovator of the digital world we live in today."

The teacher's meaningless concoction of words were drowned out by Conner's name ricocheting around my skull. I leaned back on the wall and sorted through the events of the night of the concert, minute by minute.

After we'd left for Huckleberry Hollow, Conner had stayed behind and could have easily taken Brad's ID bracelet off the poster of Steve Jobs and then used it to access the conference room to steal the crystal cap.

The perfect name for a con man—Conner.

I pulled out my phone and texted Jericka.

Meet me in the lobby. We're going to Huckleberry Hollow for lunch.

Are you kidding? For one of his hot dogs?

I'll explain on the way.

By the time Jericka and I had crossed the parking lot, I'd told her the whole story. When I got to the part about Conner being the thief, she looked at me sideways. "How do you know Brad always leaves his bracelet hanging on Steve's ear?"

I mean, you shouldn't go accusing Conner when you have no real evidence."

My eyes widened at how naive she could be. It was so obvious. Couldn't she see that Conner, the scum bag of a human being, had a reason to steal the cap?

"Come on, Jericka. Conner practically admitted to being a thief in homeroom. I mean, didn't you hear him brag about his piggybacking scheme, which is really a plan to steal technology?"

"Well, sure, but that's not enough to accuse him of stealing the crystal cap."

We stopped in front of Huckleberry Hollow gate and could see Brad was lying in a hammock with one leg swept over the side, pushing himself back and forth. Classical music blasted from the camper's kitchen window, and Chuckie Boy was curled up in a small ball at the base of a palm tree.

A dragon fly flitted from one end of the hammock to the other as if sending Brad a message. "Oh no. Look there," I pointed and said in a whisper. "In all parts of the world, the dragonfly symbolizes change and transformation. Could it mean Brad is being prepared for being hauled away to juvie no matter what? Does that dragonfly represent his next stage of life?"

Jericka crossed her arms. "No, I think it's called an insect Nina." She shook her head in disgust. "Now ring the bell so we don't make him jump out of his skin."

"Hate to disturb his symphony," I said, quietly opening the latch.

We tiptoed in unnoticed and sat down at a picnic table next to his hammock. Chuckie Boy stood up, stretched in a perfect Down Dog pose, and then pushed his chest through his front legs into an Up Dog. Just a couple more moves, and he'd

have a perfect sun salutation. He gave us a couple wags of his tail, walked over, and put his head on my knee.

I had just started to give him a good scratch behind his ears when Brad's eyes popped open and stared at us through the ropes of the hammock. "Chuckie Boy, what kind of watchdog are you?" Brad said, pointing his finger down at Chuckie's head. He kicked his legs over the side of the hammock. "How long have you two been here?"

"Long enough to know you have a secret life of listening to classical music," Jericka said.

"Oh, Mozart and I do a bit of relaxing together now and then. I thought about becoming a musician, but high tech pays a heck of a lot better." He checked the time on his phone. "Ah, you are just in time for lunch. Join me in a hot dog? Might be your last one. I expect security to whisk me off to juvenile detention anytime now."

Both of us shook our heads no, but within seconds, he was pouring charcoal from a paper bag into the grill. He struck a match on the cinder-block steps and threw it in, and a flame burst up, almost singeing his eyebrows. "Whoa, and they say lightning doesn't strike twice—burned by Pythia this morning and now my own grill tries to light me up."

"Actually," I raised one eyebrow and said, "California's atmospheric conditions aren't right to experience a lot of lightning strikes. The cool water from the Pacific Ocean keeps the air cool too. Which of course makes the atmosphere more stable."

They both stared at me. I stopped and wanted to stuff the words back in my mouth. I must have sounded like a freak.

"Are you auditioning for the weather channel?" Jericka asked.

I pushed my hair behind my ears. How could I tell them about the *1000 Ways to Die* lightning-strike episodes without admitting my addiction to the show?

“Guess I’m just a wealth of useless information,” I said and leaned over the table. “Brad, I know you didn’t steal the cap. We just need some proof.”

Brad held the grate of the grill up to his face. “You mean to say I don’t belong behind bars?”

“Stop. This is serious,” I whined. “So after that ferret faced man escorted you away, I met up with Josh and asked him about the text he sent about getting him water during the concert.”

Brad put the grate on the grill, pulled up a lawn chair, and sat down across from us. “Let me guess. He didn’t have a record of sending it?”

“Um...yeah.” I said, biting my lower lip. “How did you know?”

A crease formed between Brad’s eyebrows. “Still figuring my way through that, but I’ll get there.”

Twenty-Nine



## The Art of Special Permission

Brad got up, grabbed a metal stick, and poked at the charcoal. He pulled out his phone and changed the music from classical to dark, hard-metal rock.

“Yeah, I figured Josh would be involved somehow. Just hope I can figure out what happened with that text before Pythia straps some handcuffs on me and hauls me away like yesterday’s garbage.” He paused and looked around his campsite. “Not sure I could ever get over losing my slice of Huckleberry Hollow paradise by the dumpster.”

“Come on,” I said. “We gotta figure this out. What about the security cameras? They must have caught something on tape.”

“Yeah, Pythia security had me looking at them all night when I was fixing the ID software. Whoever broke into the conference room hacked whose bracelet was used to break into the conference room. Still don’t get why, since the bracelet was mine, but anyway, the video footage is worthless.” He



paused to stoke the flame. “I saw the thief’s image that one of the cameras captured, but it was just a blur of someone in a hoodie, jeans, and sneakers. Could be any one of a thousand people. But just between us, girls,” he said, rolling up his sleeves, “whoever took that cap was smart enough to avoid the cameras.”

“So you think an employee or student at Pythia stole it?” Jericka said and sat forward.

He cocked his head to the side and shrugged. “Makes sense to me. And it had to be someone who knew I left my ID bracelet on Steve Jobs’ left earlobe, as well. I only wear it when I need to go into the special access areas, and I certainly wasn’t going there during The Dragons concert.”

“So anyone who knew your bracelet was there could have done it,” I said.

“Yep. Anyone, that is, who had access to my camper that night, which doesn’t exactly narrow it down.”

At the moment, as my mom would say, the stars aligned in the sky. “So, anyone with access to Huckleberry Hollow could have stolen the cap,” I repeated in Jericka’s general direction.

With nothing to say, she cocked her head, shrugged, and scrunched up her face at me.

Seconds later we were covered in a cloud of greasy smoke. I coughed and put my hand over my nose, but there was no escape. I rubbed my arms in a lame attempt to keep the grease from sticking to my skin. Queasiness bubbled up in my stomach and growled like a wounded animal trying to scratch its way out.

I got up from the table to get out of the direct line of smoke, leaned against the camper, and watched Brad blow into the coals. Sparks flew up, swirled in the breeze, and then disappeared into thin air. I watched the fleeting specks of light.

There for a moment, then gone. There had to be a glimpse of something that would help us find the real thief.

“You know that security guard who hauled you off was the ferret faced man I saw threatening the kid in the tree. It can’t be a coincidence that he is involved in both the threatening of the hacker and pinpointing you as the thief.”

“Because?” Jericka asked.

“Because there are no such things as coincidences in the universe. Says so right on my yoga poster.”

“Oh, such a reliable source of information,” she said. “Maybe we should ask my unicorns what they think.”

I ignored her and turned to Brad. “Isn’t there a clue on the video tapes that could at least eliminate you as a suspect,” I said. “Let’s look at them together.”

“No can do.” Brad turned the hot dogs over and took a big whiff of the smoke coming off the grill. “I have no Pythia network access as of this morning,” he said, pausing to sneer. “They cut me off from the very network I helped to set up.”

“Maybe you can’t log in, but Nina and I still can,” Jericka offered.

“Not as easy as that,” Brad said shaking his head. “You two only have P. design student accounts. An actual Pythia account is required to reach those files, and that is limited to employees or students with special permission. Like I used to have.”

*Special permission.* I hated those two words when used together. The mysteries of getting special permission were tricky. Figuring out who could give it and an excuse to get it could take more time than we had to spare.

Brad poked a hot dog off the grill and folded a white piece of bread around it. “Ketchup?” he said and shook the bottle briskly. But without waiting for my answer, he doodled a

bright red stream right down the center of the hot dog. He held it out proudly as if it were a work of art.

I looked down at it in the palm of my hand. He watched. Waiting for me to take a bite. And who pops into my head but Sicko Suki. The *1000 Ways to Die* wacko who had an overwhelming desire to be vomited on. She decides to attend a hot dog eating competition to satisfy herself. After stalking the winner, Suki gets him to vomit on her by jamming her finger down his throat. He heaves chunks of undigested hot dogs all over her, but mostly down her throat, and she falls over choking into a puddle of her vomit. The grossest episode ever.

But there was no escape from this without insulting Brad. I put the hot dog up to my mouth and took a bite. I crinkled up my face, pinched my nostrils shut, and chewed. I took another bite. The more I chewed, the better it tasted.

Thirty



## The Luck of a Unicorn

I had to use all my mind clearing yoga techniques to forget that I had just eaten a hot dog. And worse yet. I liked it.

I turned down the hall toward Professor Joy's animation class, swept a braid under my nose, and took a deep whiff of hot dog residue. I'd need a full-service car wash with rotating soapy brushes to rid me of such a greasy Huckleberry Hollow hot dog stench.

Just outside her office, I peeked through the crack in the door, scanning the room. Missy, of course, sat directly next to Professor Joy, looking like a perfumed miniature poodle fresh from the groomer. At the head of the table, Edgy Reggie slumped over his laptop wearing a shirt that looked like it hadn't seen a washer in weeks. Lucky for me he would be the last person on earth to notice my eau-de-hot-dog scent. I walked in, pulled out a chair, and sat down next to him.

Wheeling up to the table, I took a nosy glance at his laptop and let out a small gasp. An animated version of the crystal

cap filled his entire screen. It slowly rotated, and a thousand points of light reflected off the cut stones.

Edgy Reggie's head jerked toward me. "Oh...eh....hi, there. Didn't notice you come in." Immediately he shifted his chair and slammed his laptop shut. Nerd language for *mind your own business*.

"Looked like a pretty good animation of the crystal cap," I said and swiveled my chair to face him.

The more I looked at him, the more he reminded me of a cave troll, dull and angry. I wondered if he even went home after work or just lived in the computer room surrounded by greasy pizza boxes.

Nervously he pulled on his eyebrow. "Yeah, thanks."

I thought back to how Brad described the thief: gray hoodie, jeans, and sneakers. Exactly the description of what Edgy Reggie wore every day of the week. Brad said it could be a million people, but Reggie was the one person who knew how to dodge all the security cameras since he probably designed the layout. And one of the few people that would know what to do with the crystal cap once he had it.

I twirled my hair. Edgy Reggie—another potential thief. Brad was getting further and further from being hauled away and sent to juvenile detention with every new suspect I counted.

"Hello, all," Professor Joy said from her chair. She pointed a wand toward the blinds, which caused them to slowly descend down the windows. "To kick off class today, we'll show off some of your 3D images, then move on to a tutorial on how to load backgrounds into our animations."

"Nina, would you like to go first?"

I didn't need to answer because Rosie never liked sitting back and getting nervous waiting for her turn. I opened my

laptop and brought her out of the cloud. Professor Joy gave me the cable to connect her to the projector. Immediately Rosie's cute body snapped open on the screen. Her eyes sparkled with joy. She was as excited to show herself off to the world as I was.

"This is Rosie, the instructor I've created for the yoga website I am developing."

"Very nice sun salutation. I can tell you took the time to input several variations on the poses. Good job, Nina," Professor Joy said and held her hands to her chest and nodded.

"Thank you," I beamed, "and Rosie thanks you too."

The group laughed as I unplugged my laptop from the projector, and Professor Joy said, "Missy, can you show us your image?"

I couldn't wait to see what sort of thing Missy would pick to work on. Maybe a ten-carat diamond ring to go with her megawatt nails? A minute later a rotating 3D wheelchair filled the screen, fitted with all sorts of techie gadgets and whiz-bang knobs. I shrank in my chair. Not only was her animation incredibly detailed, but Missy stood up there like some kind of saint. Which made me sick.

"One of the reasons I'm here at P. design is to learn about coupling artificial intelligence with products to help the disabled." Missy looked at all of us and beamed a huge glistening-white smile. "Motorized wheelchairs are usually controlled by a joystick, but one day artificial intelligence may be able to help severely disabled people drive their chairs by understanding facial expressions."

Professor Joy nodded. "Missy, you have done an exceptional job with the use of 3D, as well as an inventive use of shading to highlight the mechanics of the chair," Professor Joy said

with enthusiasm. "I'll be interested to see the development of this project, maybe someday in our innovation lab."

I wanted to hurl. Josh went next. His animation was of a regular old gray-and-white skateboard with a tidbit of shading. Rosie was looking good again.

Professor Joy loaded up the YouTube on how to create backgrounds for our animations, which put an end to our 3D show-and-tell. I sat forward in my chair trying to follow the SCRATCH tutorial guy, but his cursor jumped around the screen like a race car. I got dizzy trying to follow his menu clicks, launched at rocket speeds. I would never get this. I blew my cheeks out and let them deflate slowly. When the video stopped, Professor Joy opened her notebook and pulled out copies of typed instructions.

"These YouTube tutorials are great, but who can keep up?" She smiled and passed them around the table.

She was a mind reader. I took a sheet from the top of the stack and stuffed it in my backpack. Suddenly my finger felt like it had been bitten by a snake. Which was impossible. There wasn't a chance any snakes were crawling loose around my backpack, but just the same my fingertip was bleeding.

I clicked on my purse light and waved it around in the darkness of my pack. Harmless yellow markers. Dull pencils. But sticking out of the mesh side pocket was a white spiral horn.

The unicorn key chain Jericka had given me. I lifted it out, squeezed it in my hand, and got an idea.

Thirty-One



## It Takes One to Know One

“I’d like to now cover some of tomorrow’s logistics,” Professor Joy said, circling the table. “All of you will be showing the first phase of your full-motion animations to the class, and rather than meeting here, we will use the overhead projection system available in the North Star conference room. Oh, and we start earlier than usual since nine was the only time I could get access.”

I shivered. Tomorrow? Rosie wasn’t near ready. She looked great in 3D, but her Warrior flow was as choppy as a vintage cartoon.

“Any questions?” she asked.

I inched my hand up slowly. It was now or never. With as much meekness as I could muster, I said, “I was just... uh...wondering. This is a little off subject, but it’s about my yoga girl, Rosie. I’d like to ask if I can print off a 3D version of her as a gift for my mom.” My voice nervously quickening. I



swallowed. “I miss her so much”—I sank my head to my chest for effect — “her birthday is coming up, so I’d like to give her something from my heart. Would you give me special permission to access the 3D printer so I can give my mom a model of her?”

Professor Joy’s face melted like butter. She nodded in that pathetic way adults do when they feel sorry for a kid. “I know it’s hard for kids your age to be away from your parents *and* hard on your parents to be away from you. I’m sure she would cherish a model of Rosie.” She turned her head. “Reggie, would you please give Nina access to the 3D printer?”

Edgy Reggie gulped. His oversized Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “Well, uh, um, that would require she have access to my network.” He clenched his teeth, and his jaw muscles pulsed. “You know, I can make it a whole lot easier than having Nina do it,” he said in a sweet sing-songy way. “How about you send me the file of your animation, and I’ll print it for you.”

He said it real nice, but again his eyes turned dark and shark-like—the same look he had when he threatened us about hacking into *his* systems. My stomach twisted, but I couldn’t back down. Brad needed me.

“Oh, uh...I might want to experiment with a few poses, so I’d like to do it myself.” I slowly said with a quiver in my voice. I innocently swirled a braid between my fingers and smiled sweetly. “I’m just not sure which pose my mom will like best.”

Professor Joy tapped her pen on the table impatiently. “I don’t see how giving her access to the printer for a day could hurt.” She cocked her head to the side. “Nina, this will be very special to your mom. Nice idea, dear. Reggie give her the instructions to access the printer. Now.”

“Thanks. She will love it,” I said steadily, despite my heart beating double time against my chest. I hated lying to her, but

it wasn't *really* a lie. I would be printing Rosie off for Mom—right after I downloaded images of the thief.

Edgy Reggie scribbled on a page in his notebook, ripped it out, and slid the paper across the table to me. “Here’s the link to my network. The password will be good for twelve hours. Finish with your printing tonight,” he said sharply.

“Thank you,” I replied, resisting the urge to ask him when Pythia’s network became *his* network.

“Very good,” Professor Joy said, with an edge. “Let’s move on to the next SCRATCH tutorial on creating dynamic movement in your animations.”

Smugly as smug could possibly be, I leaned back in my chair, closed my eyes, and thought how incredibly easy deception could be. I’d never really tried it on before. Professor Joy didn’t have a clue, but she would be so disappointed if she ever found out.

A stab of guilt crawled up my spine. But it was just this once. I would find the security images and see something in them that would eliminate Brad as a suspect, and everyone would start looking for the real thief again. My intentions were good, so hopefully that would cancel out the bad karma I’d gotten myself into by lying.

Our bracelets buzzed, announcing the end of class.

I pushed my laptop into my backpack and zipped it up. Josh rolled over next to me, still in his chair. “Hey, Roho, it’s Waffle Day in the cafeteria. Want to go with me?”

“Uh...er,” I stammered. I was in no mood after telling the lie of my lifetime but I couldn’t come up with an excuse. “Well, OK.”

The walk with Josh toward the cafeteria was damp. The sidewalk misty and dreamlike. Rain had dappled our path around the bay to the cafeteria with puddles reflecting pink

and orange streaks of the sun behind the clouds. The lonely squawk of a seagull in the distance seemed louder than usual. Maybe telling lies to the nicest teacher in the world made me more in tune with those dirty birds.

I avoided the puddles and listened to Josh tell me his California surfing stories while I tried to become the person I needed to be. Nina, the girl who was at P. design to create a yoga website without any other care in the world. Who would have ever thought I was the girl who was only hours away from breaking into the Pythia network.

Josh pulled open the cafeteria door and immediately said, “Ahhhsome.”

I hated when kids slurred *awesome* as if it were sixteen letters, trying too hard at being cool. I picked up a deep-dish plate and nodded yes to the worker who filled it with a waffle and an overflowing ladle of hot apples soaked in brown sugar. The scent of warm butter mixed with sugar had my mouth watering.

I looked around the cafeteria for Josh and spotted him waving his arm around at a table by the window. On my approach, he pulled some fresh daisies out from under his jacket and arranged them in a small plastic cup in the center of the table. I stopped in my tracks. It was sweet. And thoughtful. All the things I thought he wasn't.

I set my tray down, and he stood to pull out my chair. “See, Roho,” he said with a sly smile, “even though we are only in the Pythia cafeteria, this is to celebrate the limbo bet I won.”

I exhaled the stale air from my lungs and looked at him with different eyes. “I think we both won.”

He cocked his head to the side, and his blue eyes sparkled. “Yes, we both won.”

I lifted the cup up to smell the scent of daisies. “Thank you,” I said. “They are perfect.”

“You know, I’ve never gotten the chance to ask how you came up with the idea to create a yoga website,” he said.

I took a bite of waffle and looked at his face to be certain he wasn’t laughing under his breath. I mean no one ever asks me about Rosie or my yoga practice, and I figured Josh would be the last person on earth to think of asking.

“Well,” I said with some hesitation. “I started doing a lot of yoga to control some anxiety I was having, and then I got the idea from one of my instructors to create a website for kids who don’t have access to live classes.” I studied his face. He was truly listening. “So I started sketching Rosie in all sorts of yoga poses, and now with the SCRATCH software, she’s a 3D animated figure.” I looked down at my waffle. “In fact I need to get back soon to load a background in and smooth out some of her, well, rough edges, before class tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and you may have noticed my skateboard needs some work,” he said, then laughed.

I looked out the window at the mountains. “Rosie will be moving in full motion in front of the class for the first time. I’m kind of nervous for her.”

A slight smirk came across this face. “You talk like she’s real, Nina.”

“Yeah. She is real,” I said and looked away. “Well, to me, anyway.”

He slowly reached across the table, took my hand, and gave it a little squeeze. “I like that about you. How much you care.” Then he picked up his water and took a sip. “Have you heard anything from Brad? I texted him a while ago, but he didn’t answer.”

“Jericka and I went over to see him during our lunch break. He’s pretty confused.” I pulled my straw out of the paper and stuck it down into my glass. “He didn’t steal the cap. So it

sure would be helpful if you could figure out what happened to the text you sent him.”

He smiled, which was weird. Who smiles about a lost text?

He leaned forward and asked, “And you know he is innocent, *how?*”

It was the same sarcasm I’d heard the night he insulted me at Huckleberry Hollow. I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms. I’d seen this side of him before, but this time I was ready.

“Because Brad is not a thief.” I said crisply. “Simply not in his DNA.”

I shifted in my chair and pushed the half-finished waffle toward the center of the table.

“I saw Reggie’s screen today in class,” I said. “Why do you think he would he create a 3D animation of the cap?”

Josh squinted his eyes in thought. “Maybe in preparation to sell it on the dark web?”

“Yeah, maybe. And here’s a coincidence: the security images show someone who wears the same clothes as he does—hoodie, jeans, and sneakers,” I said thinking out loud.

Josh leaned forward in his chair. “There are images. How do you know that?”

“Brad saw them,” I said.

Josh crossed his arms and rocked back and forth in his chair. “You might be onto something. Reggie could have easily hacked the security pad to make it look like Brad entered the conference room. He thinks he owns this place and slinks around threatening us like we are criminals when I bet *he’s* the criminal.” He took a bite of waffle and said out of one side of his mouth, “You know the old saying, ‘It takes one to know one’?”

An annoying chill ran up my arms. I shook my head, as if a good shake could clear my thoughts. *It takes one to know*

*one*, ricocheted around my brain. In this case, it takes one to know one would mean Josh is a thief and he knows how to spot one.

I stared at him. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. A baseball cap turned backward. Way too good looking and charming to be a thief. But he did leave the concert, and he had easy access to Brad's bracelet. I wanted to smack this thought down—file it away as ridiculous—but every bone in my body screamed, *Is Josh a thief?*

Thirty-Two



## It's Time to Stop Playing It Safe

I carefully balanced a plate of waffles in one hand and pressed the fob to open our dorm room door with the other. I immediately halted to do a double take. Thousands of white caps glistened on the bay like a buffet of sparkly orange snow cones.

“Look at the bay, Jericka,” I said. “Snow cones everywhere!”

Jericka turned in her chair. “Oh, wow, and some of them look like creamsicles with streams of white creamy froth running through them.”

“It’s magic,” I whispered.

“No, the sun is low in the sky and hitting them with streaks of orange.”

“Oh, well, looks like magic to me,” I said, realizing this sounded way too much like something my mom would say, then set down the plate in front of her. “A waffle just for you, my friend.”

She lifted the plate an inch from her nose. “Covered in butter and maple syrup. You are the dream roommate.”

“You won’t believe how much stuff I have to do tonight,” I said. “I need to smooth out Rosie’s animation and load in a beach scene. She is going on the big screen tomorrow, and I don’t want her to be embarrassed.” I could have stopped there, but we were friends, and real friends don’t hide things from each other. “And, well, after that I’m breaking into the Pythia network.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“I’m breaking into the network to prove Brad is innocent. I’m going to download the images of the person who stole the crystal cap.”

“Are you crazy? What makes you think Pythia hasn’t already looked at them?”

I pursed my lips. She had a point. “Because if they had looked, they would know Brad didn’t do it,” I snapped.

“Nina, come *on*. Hacking into a network is a felony. And remember Edgy Reggie’s warning?”

“He’s lame, and for all we know, he could be the thief. And besides, I’m not hacking in,” I said and crossed my arms. “I have special permission to get on the system to print Rosie off in 3D as a gift for my mother. Edgy Reggie gave me instructions.” I took the directions out of my pack and waved them in her face. “And as I’m printing, I may just happen to stumble upon the security images of the thief.”

“You’re joking, right?” she said as if she were suddenly my mom. “What you’re doing is wrong. Anyway, do you think those images are just going to be sitting there waiting for you to find them? Pythia’s network has to be ginormous. And this place is full of smart people. They are going to catch you.”

My face turned crimson. I tugged on my sweatshirt sleeve



and lifted it over my head. “You’re probably right, but am I supposed to just let them falsely accuse Brad of stealing the cap?”

“It’s *your* life.” She then did one of those irritating exaggerated shrugs of her shoulders. “I don’t want to fight with you, but have you ever thought Pythia might have some evidence on Brad we don’t understand. He’s not like us, Nina. I mean, he is in a category all his own.”

She shot me a narrowed-eyes sideways glance and shook her head, not saying anything more. I hated people judging Brad like he was something bad just because he was different.

“Brad is in a category of his own, but that doesn’t make him a thief,” I muttered to get the last word.

She was spot on about one thing—it could take me years to figure out where the images were stored, and my network access would expire in just a few hours. How could I be so stupid? I crinkled up the 3D printing instructions Reggie gave me into a tight ball and threw it in the trash, sat down on my bed, and pulled my knees up against my chest. Maybe I just needed to work on Rosie and let whatever happened with Brad happen.

I rolled to my side and picked up the beach-scene picture off my nightstand. Half Moon Bay on Mother’s Day two years ago. My parents and I were perched on a rock, smiling into the camera, happy. Looking back, I realized we were in the best of times. I touched their faces with my fingers.

Reminiscing about that day made me ache with loneliness. As if I were in a dream, I took myself back to the day of picnicking and climbing around the huge boulders on the beach. I’d been scared to jump from one rock to another. Not that I couldn’t make the jump. I was just afraid of falling. In my head, I could hear my dad’s voice say, “*It’s time you stopped playing it safe. Take my hand. I’ll help you make the leap.*”

But this was different. My dad could not help me. But there was someone who could.

I pulled the crinkled paper from the trash, smoothed it out on my desk, and started typing out Edgy Reggie's chicken scratch and gasped when the red Pythia logo popped up on my screen.

I was in Pythia's network. I picked up my phone and texted Brad.

I'm on the Pythia network. How do I find the security tape?

Are you crazy? How did you get access?

I'll explain later. Answer my question.

Get out of there. What you are doing could get you expelled!!!!!!

I buried my face in my hands. He was right. I could get expelled. My dad would flip out if I got expelled for hacking. *Stop playing it safe*, I whispered to myself.

Don't care. Just tell me.

I told you they took away my network access so I can't see it. But I've been where those files are a million times. Open a browser. Type in <https://pythiadocs.corp.pcloud.com/documents/>

OK, I'm there.

My hands froze over the keyboard. Several thousand files scrolled filled my screen.

Now what do I do?

I can't let you do this. For all we know Reggie is watching your every key stroke right now. He's like a vampire sucking on his servers and never goes home.

Tell me or I'll search every nook and cranny of this system on my own. And I'll never eat another one of your hot dogs.

LOL. You know how to hurt a guy. Do a documents search with `security_images` in the last part.

Pages and pages of jpg-image files stared me in the face. My heart beat double time, and my hands shook as I clicked through images that showed nothing but tops of heads or lines of people in the hallways and cafeteria.

There's too many. I'll never find it.

Silence was his answer. Which was never a good sign. I lay back on my pillow and closed my eyes. A text ping on my phone exploded.

Are there dates linked to the images?

“Of course!” I said out loud.

“Obstacle course, first course, golf course, second course,” broke through the silence. Jericka’s sleep talking. I was so heads down I had not even noticed she had gone to bed.

My heart sank. We always chatted after we got into bed, when it was dark and we could admit the idiot things we had done that day. She may have even said something before she tucked herself in and thought I was mad when I didn’t answer.

But I’d have to think about that later. I typed in the date and hit the little magnifying glass at the top of the page. Several black-and-white fuzzy images came up. I clicked on the last one conveniently labeled “EVIDENCE.” Just as Brad had described, a person with a hoodie, jeans, and sneakers walked across the screen—but it could be any one of a million people.

I exhaled, looked up at the ceiling and then back to the video. I searched for a hoodie brand. Or a type of sneaker. No labels. Nothing. The only thing unique was a hand that came

out of the hoodie's sleeve. No rings, but there was a bracelet. I leaned in closer and ran the video again.

A student bracelet hung around the wrist, which confirmed it was definitely one of P. design students. OK, so that eliminated Edgy Reggie. I ran it a third time. A bulge in the side pocket of the hoodie that was the size of a Hoberman Switch ball.

I fell back into my pillow. Yep, it was Conner. Just as I thought.

I then downloaded the video stream and saved it on my laptop.

It's Conner! I've got the footage on my laptop. Will show you tomorrow.

Conner?!?! Think your imagination is playing tricks on you. Now get off that network before Reggie finds you! Good night.

Good night! Sleep tight. I still have stuff to do on Rosie now. She is on the big screen tomorrow morning doing her yoga flow for the class.

Good luck, Rosie! Where is the show? Maybe I'll get my ladder and binoculars out so I can watch.

Funny. North Star  
conference room. My mom  
would love the name!

Jericka rolled over in her bed and within a few minutes began a new grocery store shopping spree, “Bananas, apricots, kiwi.”

I looked over at her sleeping. We would make up tomorrow, but now, I needed to print off Rosie on the 3D printer so my access to the network looked legitimate. I smoothed out Edgy Reggie’s sheet of instructions on my desk and slowly entered each command. Just as I expected: the directions were exacting and worked without any errors. Final step was sending my Rosie to the printer. I hit the Enter key and sighed in relief.

A message came into my email that my print job was in process. Every muscle in my body softened. I yawned and checked the clock. Close to midnight, but it felt like 4 a.m., and Rosie still needed her beach background loaded. I was so tired, but I couldn’t let Rosie stand against a white wall for the demonstration the next day

I quickly scanned through the SCRATCH beach backgrounds, which was pretty easy since there were only two. They weren’t bad, but not good enough for Rosie. I glanced back at my Half Moon Bay picture. She deserved only the best, and that is what she would get. I found the image in my picture file, zoomed in on the beach area I wanted, went to the background load in SCRATCH, and brought it into my computer.

Rosie looked perfect up against the cliffs, and I never realized how much detail would show up after zooming in. The rocks were smooth. The sand was rough. My eyes widened.

Tons of microscopic details crawling all over that picture the naked eye could never see. Why had I not thought of zooming in on the security image for more tiny detail?

I pulled up the security video saved on my computer. I panned and zoomed in on a nondescript nose sticking out from the hoodie. I panned lower and leaned into the screen.

My mouth dropped open. From the sleeve of the hoody hung sparkly fingernails.

Thirty-Three



## Rosie's Big Day

Jericka shook me by the shoulder. “Nina, wake up! Nina, you slept through your alarm.”

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. Eight thirty. Seconds later my night gown was off, and I was grabbing my jeans from the pile of clothes on the floor. Only thirty minutes until Rosie was front and center, executing her yoga flow for the class. Definitely rushed but not impossible. I could make it.

I jumped on one foot and pulled my pant leg on. Jericka tossed me a clean shirt from her closet. “Just so you know, this is not the day to be wearing a wrinkled worn-out sweatshirt.”

I took her word for it and pulled on her lavender Lycra shirt. Luckily Jericka had expertly braided my hair, so I didn't even need to brush it. After stuffing my laptop in my backpack, I slipped into my flip-flops while Jericka dabbed some blush on my cheeks, muttering, “Look your best, be your best. This is some of the finest stuff in the universe. Missy gave it to me.”

“Missy's blush?” I felt my face scrunch up. “What are you doing with it?”



“She wanted me to have it. Said it was better suited for my coloring.”

Jealousy pulsed through my veins. My eyes darted to my “Walking the Path of a Yogi” poster. Great. Just as I thought. Envy, jealousy, and unhealthy competitiveness is disavowed.

“Are you guys, like, actually friends?” I asked.

“Yes. She is really sweet.” Jericka looked away. “I can tell you don’t like her.”

“We need to talk about *her* later. I’ve really got to go now,” I said.

Panting and gasping for air, I stepped through the North Star conference room door at exactly nine o’clock. The room was in chaos with everyone popping their chairs up and down with the fancy controls and screaming, “Elevator up, elevator down.”

Was I the only one the least bit nervous about their animation demonstration? I went to find a chair and was nearly run over by two guys in the midst of wheeling themselves backward in a chair race around the table. Snaking my way toward the back of the room, I caught sight of Edgy Reggie out of the corner of my eye.

Immediately a knot of guilt formed in my stomach. I settled into a chair, straightened my shirt, and avoided eye contact. As guilt turned my stomach sour, I realized Edgy Reggie, being as suspicious as he was about anyone touching his systems, may have set controls up to monitor searches. It would be just like him to take the opportunity to rat me out in front of the whole class so he could make an example of me.

But I had to put him out of my head. In no time Rosie was going to be up in front of the class, and I had not even rehearsed what I was going to say. Speaking in front of a group of people without rehearsing a hundred times was a fate worse than

death. If I could get through the first thirty seconds without stumbling over my words, then maybe I could make it through the next thirty seconds, and so on.

Suddenly I felt someone hovering above me. I looked up into Edgy Reggie's face. I saw stars and felt dizzy. His scraggly bearded face inched closer, and the sour knot of guilt in my stomach turned to nausea.

"I see you were successful." His foul breath hit me in the face.

I stared unblinking like a frightened rabbit. His balled-up fist slowly inched its way down in front of me. His hand opened, and he gently placed a 3D model of my Rosie on the table. I went limp.

"She looks good," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "Might need a bit of sanding here and there, but I think your mom will really cherish her."

I nodded, felt twenty pounds lighter, and was finally able to take a breath. He then disappeared under the table to pull cables for the video equipment. I stared down at Rosie in all her Triangle pose glory. She was cut from a white plastic block, but her body shimmered like a fine imported porcelain figure. So delicate I was almost afraid to touch her, I carefully cupped her in my palm and stroked the top of her head. Edgy Reggie was right about one thing. Mom would cherish her.

"Good morning," Professor Joy said from the front of the room. She paused and slightly smiled. "Let's all have one last pop and spin of your chairs so we can start the demonstrations of your websites."

Dressed in a light-blue suit with a string of wooden beads around her neck, she looked like a New York model. Never would I understand why she chose to be in this techie place when she could have walked the runways in the fashion shows of Paris.

"Based on our time constraints today, I think we can easily

view and critique four presentations. Who wants to kick us off?”

Before Professor Joy even finished her sentence, a class suck-up sprang out of his chair in such a rush he bashed his chair into the wall, snatched the cables with both hands, and immediately plugged his laptop into the projection system. I clenched my teeth. Rosie liked going first. The more time she and I had to sit there, the more nervous she got.

He pressed the clicker, and the big screen lit up with, *How to Perfect Your Frisbee Golf*. I bit my lip to hide a smirk. I leaned back in my chair and waited for his arrogance to take flight, but instead his skin went pale, and I swear, his face turned into one of those sad emoji expressions. He opened his mouth to speak, but his lips silently opened and closed like a fish out of water trying to take a breath. “Ah,” he finally stammered, “I’ll be showing off my website....er,” he said talking directly to his armpit. “I mean showing you my website about how to have a perfect Frisbee golf game.”

I started to feel sorry for what a sad-sack loser he was. Video streams of a perfect Frisbee toss were displayed, and maps of local courses with guidance for game strategies followed. Kind of interesting if you are into that, but his grade was going to blow. Few of the website design techniques were applied, and he never even created an animated Frisbee game. The only clue he was done was that he tripped over his feet in an attempt to make a quick exit.

He dove for his seat just as I jumped up from mine. Our bodies slammed together, and laughter filled the room. I got all flustered. Then a guy yelled out from the back of the room, “Finally some action in your presentation, dude!”

I laughed, grabbed for the projection cables, and quickly pulled Rosie out of the cloud. I’d always been told to make direct eye contact with my audience, so I looked up at the

class to begin...and gasped. My mouth went dry and my throat squeezed up. I moved my lips, but my mouth popped open in the same fish-out-of-water motion I'd snickered at just moments ago.

There in the back of the room, leaning against the wall, was a guy wearing sunglasses, a hoodie, and a fake mustache—Brad giving me a big smile and a thumbs up. Heat rose up my neck and covered my face.

Sounds of ocean waves and seagulls squawking filled the room. The death grip on the display controls must have caused me to press the Start button, but I needed time to settle, time to collect myself. Before I could press Stop or Pause or even clear my throat, Rosie's life-size body was standing on the beach at Half Moon Bay in her brand-new royal-blue yoga pants.

Chills ran up my spine and down my arms. Standing next to me was a full-size Rosie. She was beautiful. I could not help but smile up at her.

"Hi. I'd like to introduce you to Rosie." I swallowed. "She is the animated yoga instructor on my website, YogaByNina.com. The site offers yoga and guided meditations. Rosie will lead beginner and intermediate classes for kids twelve and up."

I pressed the next key, which moved Rosie into her yoga flow. My heart beat out of my chest as she moved into Warrior II, shifted herself back into Reverse Warrior, slid down into Extended Side Angle, then straightened her front leg into a perfect Triangle pose. She finished by extending her arms over her head into a Star pose and then placed her hands at heart center.

Professor Joy clapped, and the entire class joined in. My face flushed again, and I glanced back at Brad. He was clapping, with his hands extended out in front of him, and grinning.

As I stood there beaming at Rosie, all I could think about was how much I wished my parents were in the room to see

how far Rosie and I had come. An emptiness washed over me. I should have been overjoyed, but I wanted to share Rosie with them.

“Very well done, Nina and Rosie,” Professor Joy said. “It’s obvious Nina has worked hard to lift her drawings of Rosie out of her sketchbook to create this beautiful animation. And your custom beach background is perfect.”

One girl raised her hand and asked, “When do you plan to launch your website?”

“I have a lot to work on. I want Rosie to teach several yoga styles, so it might be a couple of months. And I need to add the audio instruction, which is what I’ll be working on next.”

I unhooked my laptop, turned to sit down, and glanced back toward Brad. He was gone. Without him, the room’s energy seemed, well, less energetic.

“Once again, Nina, well done,” Professor Joy said with her hands clasped in front of her chest. “We all look forward to seeing more of Rosie in the future. OK, who’s next?”

I was relieved to collapse into my seat and feel my heart-beat settle. I closed down my laptop once the other presentations were over, picked up my 3D Rosie figurine, and wrapped her in a couple of napkins before putting her in the side pocket of my backpack for safe keeping.

Noticing that the line at the café bar was short, I stopped to celebrate Rosie’s successful debut with a latte. While scanning the menu for the latest creative concoction, a warm hand pressed into my back, and I heard a whisper in my ear.

“That was incredible, I mean, *really* incredible.” I turned. It was Josh.

His eyes sparkled. Dimples appeared on his cheeks. So cute.

“I think you should continue with Rosie’s Hawaiian beach theme and go for the Toasted Coconut topped with

shredded macadamia nuts,” he said, then waited for an answer, as if my latte decision was the most important thing in the world.

“You’re sweet. I know you aren’t one for Marilyn’s drinks, but you should try one of these fancy mixtures. I think you might like it.”

“No, never can get over how sweet they are,” he answered.

I stared at the menu. But all I really wanted was to tell my mom about Rosie.

“Do you talk to your parents much?” I asked. His expression changed as if I’d thrown our conversation into a random alternate universe. Which I guess I did.

“Um, well I talk to my mom every other week or so,” he said.

“Well, I need to go call mine. I finally have something, well, enriching to tell them about.”

But first, I had to talk to Brad.

Thirty-Four



## Missy Sparkles

The wind was whipping up against the lobby doors like an invisible force field trying to keep me from telling Brad who was the thief. Once I was outside, sand pelted me in the face, making my eyes sting and my braids stick out straight behind my head like arrows directing me to turn back in the direction I had come.

I tucked my head, gathered my fleece up at the neck, and turned my head down in the wind, willing myself toward Huckleberry Hollow. Was the power of Mother Nature herself telling me I was on the wrong path? To turn around? But I was too stubborn to listen. Someone had to prove Brad was not a thief. I'd now opened Pandora's Box with the proof that Missy was the thief, so I had to close it.

The wind seemed to blow right through me while I followed the path around the last set of buildings directly on the bay. The only sound cutting through the whistle of the wind was the high-pitched buzz coming from the go-kart course. I peeked up from under my hood to see a group of

kids on the sidelines and several cars maneuvering around the course in a perfect figure eight formation. Slowly they raised a flag that whipped around in the wind like an out-of-control kite. Just when I realized it wasn't a flag at all, the theme song to *Batman* started to blast from the speakers, and a giant dummy in a black cape swung back and forth on the rope that crossed the track.

Four of the go-karts careened around the corner and immediately shifted to avoid the dummy trapezing across their path, but the fifth kart smacked him square in his bat chest. His mask flew a foot in the air, his arms and legs twisted in the wind, and then he dropped to the center of the track—very much dead.

“Another One Bites the Dust” blasted from the speakers, just as the wind caught Batman's hood and blew it into a tree. One of the guys standing on the sidelines grabbed himself by the back of his head, spun around in a tight circle, and looked up at the sky as if pleading for help from the universe. It was nothing short of a perfect pose of trial and error if I'd ever seen one. Someday I'd have to teach that pose to Rosie.

The squeaks of the Huckleberry Hollow gate bouncing around on its rusty hinges brought me back to the mission at hand. I tucked my chin into the wind and got back on my way. Chuckie Boy saw me and wagged his tail from his perch on the picnic table. By the time I got to the fence, his front legs were up against the gate, and he was looking over the top at me.

I reached down, cupped my hands around his head, and said, “I'm not letting you go without a fight, Chuckie Boy.”

With no sign of Brad in the hammock, I rang the string of bells. His head popped out between the checked curtains, and seconds later the camper door was flung open, banging up against the metal siding.



“Lookie what the wind blew in. Chuckie, bring that lone shipwrecked survivor in here before she’s swept away,” Brad yelled in his sea captain voice.

I skipped up the cinder-block steps. The door slammed shut behind me. Brad reached for a glass and filled it up with orange juice. “Here you go, my computer hacking friend. You must have worked up a thirst on your way over.”

I ignored his humor and took a gulp of orange juice. “I know who stole the cap.”

He blew air from his cheeks and sat down on a stool next to the counter. “I appreciate what you are doing. But really? Conner? He’s such a numbnuts, he can’t chew gum and play video games at the same time. And *you* think he could pull off a heist?”

“No, no, it’s not Conner.” I took my backpack off and pulled out my laptop. “Did you ever zoom in on the picture?”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Actually, no. But a person in a hoodie and jeans? What’s to zoom in on?”

I pushed a stack of books on the table back to the wall to make room for my laptop. We stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning into the screen as I pulled up the video clip. “OK, there is a hand. See it? Watch this,” I said and zoomed in. “First the student bracelet. Now see the light reflected off the index finger and the thumb?” I zoomed in until the fingers were magnified ten times larger. “Look, there on the nails. Missy sparkles.”

He exhaled heavily. “You have gotten incredibly far on the hunt for the thief but I get this feeling you are trying to make more of this picture than you should.”

“Just look closer. It’s Missy. She wears sparkly fingernail polish,” I pressed. “Just hear me out. She was at the preconcert party. Right? She could have easily taken your ID bracelet. She stole the cap.”

He didn't nod as I expected; instead, his eyes seemed to dull.

"Missy did it," I said again.

"Nina. You are seeing what you want to see. I do the same thing sometimes." He paused and rested his eyes on a water stain on the ceiling. "Last night it was Conner. Now Missy? It's like this; you can't believe everything you think. You haven't even thought about image imperfections or possible reflections of light on the fingernails."

"No, no, look closer," I said. "This is the proof we need to show it's not you. I'm going to tell Professor Joy you have been falsely accused."

"Nina, please listen. Don't." He stepped directly in front of me and took me by both shoulders. "You hacked into the Pythia network to download the image. It's...."

I put my palm up to stop him. "I don't care. Once they see that it's Missy who stole the cap, they will thank me."

With every shake of his head, the more hurt I felt. I slammed my laptop closed, steadied myself, and swallowed the lump forming in my throat. I stuffed my laptop in my backpack, zipped it closed, and headed for the door. I'd worked so hard to figure this out. Maybe Brad knew technology, but I knew people.

I nodded to avoid speaking since any dislodging of the lump in my throat could throw me directly into a full-fledged sob. I took hold of the doorknob just as my phone pinged with a text sound I'd linked to Josh.

"It's just Josh. I'll read it later," I said.

Brad's head cocked backward in thought. "Let me ask, when Josh messages, does he use regular texting? Instagram? Facebook? MessageMe?"

"Regular texting," I said and held up the phone to show him. "Why?"

"Just curious."

Thirty-Five



## Rock Solid Hunch-Think

I stood just outside Professor Joy's office door, watching her fingers tap lightly on her computer keyboard. I nervously studied her, willing myself to reach out and knock on the door. Her hands stopped momentarily, hovering over the keys.

Hands shaking, I reached out and knocked.

"Oh, Nina,"—she stood up and motioned me in—"so nice to see you. Please sit down. Can I get you some ginger tea?"

This had to go fast. Lingering over tea would increase the chickening out that was creeping around just under the surface of my skin.

"No, thank you. I need to talk about Brad. Well, Brad and the image of the person caught on, er...the security footage of someone stealing the crystal cap," I said and sat down.

Her eyebrows raised. "Oh." She pulled out a chair across from me, sat down, and leaned in over the table. "I'm listening."

My fingers clamped down on the armrests. A rock settled in the pit of my stomach, and its jagged edges grew with every second that passed. "Probably better if I just show you than try

to explain.” I pulled out my backpack, brought up the image, and turned the screen toward her. “This is an image of the person who stole the cap. See the hand?”

She leaned closer in. “Yes, I do.”

I zoomed in and zoomed in again until the grainy hand filled the screen. “See the sparkles on the nails? That hand does not belong to Brad. He doesn’t wear sparkly fingernail polish.”

“Can you zoom out a bit?” She leaned in closer and picked up her phone. “Reggie, can you come up immediately please.” There was a long silence. “Yes, now please.”

I crumpled down in my chair. Oh, please. Anyone but Edgy Reggie. How was I going to explain how I got the image?

She set her phone down and settled back in her chair. “Are you sure I can’t get you some tea, my dear? You look a bit pale.”

I could not take in a full breath, but I found a way to squeak out, “No, thank you.”

Moments later Edgy Reggie swept through the door. “Good god. Is there a fire?” he said, his voice full of sarcasm. “I was in the middle of a system upgrade.”

“Please sit down. Nina has something I’d like you to review.”

He extended his palm my way and did an exaggerated headshake. “You pulled me away from a system upgrade because *Nina* has something for me to review?”

“Yes, Reggie. That is exactly what I said,” Professor Joy crisply replied. “Please sit down.”

I showed Reggie the video just as I had for Professor Joy, but my voice quivered and cracked. By the time I zoomed in and out several times, he was up out of his chair, pacing the room.

“First things first. How did you get that image?”

The tension in his voice made me shrivel further down in my chair. “When I used the 3D printer,” my voice cracked, “I went to the documents section, b-b-but only because I need to prove the thief is not Brad, then I downloaded the image.”

His mouth dropped open. “So you hacked into a secure area on the network?”

“No, I didn’t hack in. You gave me access,” I said.

“You only had access to print your stupid little figurine, not to steal Pythia documents.” He got shrill. His fists opened and closed tightly like a prizefighter in a ring.

“I had to. Brad didn’t steal the cap.”

Edgy Reggie turned his back on us and stared up at the ceiling. My back pressed up against the back of the chair as if I could escape into the leather.

“OK, smarty pants, who stole it?” he snarled.

My mouth turned to sawdust. “Missy.”

“Missy?” He rolled his head back in laughter. “Missy. OK. OK. But let’s be thorough. Let’s get her in here. If she’s the accused, she should be here so we can compare her hand to what’s in the footage.” His face reddened even more. “I’m sending her an urgent P. message, telling her to come immediately since she has been accused of a crime.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. I looked to Professor Joy, who looked away.

Edgy Reggie reached down, unzipped his backpack, yanked out his laptop, and slammed it on the table. His two index fingers poked the keyboard like war drums rallying the troops for battle.

“Guess you know hacking is a felony?” he said as he pounded the keys.

I ripped a broken nail off under the table, winced, and waited without taking a breath. Within a couple of minutes, Missy showed up at the door.

“Come in, dear,” Professor Joy instructed. “Please take a seat. We’re going through some security footage, and your name came up.”

Edgy Reggie turned the laptop screen toward me and pressed play. The grainy video footage of the hooded person walking through the lobby began. The person walked slowly with their arms swinging back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. No sparkles in sight. I deflated in my chair like a punctured balloon. But at the end, for two seconds the sparkles lit up the screen. “See, see there?” I pointed. “Those nails belong to Missy!”

“Yeah, yeah. I saw it too,” he paused to snicker. “But notice the location of where this footage was taken. The so-called Missy fingernail sparkle was a momentary glare from the lights of the Robot Café.” His smile was like an evil grimace. “I’d say you owe Missy an apology.”

Missy’s face was as pale as a sheet of paper. I looked over at Professor Joy. She returned my gaze, wearing a mask of disappointment. Tears began to well up in my eyes.

“Obviously,” Edgy Reggie blurted out, “she has a school-girl crush on Brad, and to clear his name, she steals documents and creates a cockamamie story to frame Missy.” He turned to glare at me. “Shame on you, Nina.”

“I’m so sorry, Missy,” I eked out before the lump in my throat robbed me of speech. The room spiraled. A high-pitched ringing pinged against my eardrums. I sat there frozen like a statue of stupidity.

With sad eyes, Missy nodded, slowly pushed herself out of the chair and left the room without saying a word.

“Nina needs to be expelled,” Edgy Reggie said, pressing both palms against the table.

Their words shot back and forth across the table like bullets. *Dishonesty—reckless lies—good intentions—punished—call to her parents—probation—expelled.*

*Probation* ricocheted off the walls a few times, then landed with a thud between them, followed by silence and narrowed eyes.

I sank down in my chair, wishing I could disappear.

“Nina, I’ll be calling your parents. I’ll need to decide what probation restrictions you will be under,” Professor Joy said as her mouth became a thin line across her face. “Please excuse us so we can finish our discussion in private.”

My stomach turned inside out. I hung my head. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry that you lied or sorry you got caught?” Edgy Reggie spat.

Bile bubbled up in my throat. I covered my mouth, ran from the room, and took a quick turn around the corner to the bathroom. After locking myself in the stall, I threw up. Orange juice splashed into the toilet. I flushed and tried to swallow, but my mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. Cold sweat covered my face.

I crouched down, leaned up against the metal stall without moving, and concentrated on my breath. One inhale and exhale at a time.

The door to the bathroom opened, and I heard the sound of heels clicking across the floor. “You know, I agree with your assessment of Brad.” Professor Joy said just outside the door to my stall. “The theft is not his doing. I don’t support how you accessed the photos, but your hunch-think on Brad is rock solid, Nina.”

Her heels clicked. She came closer to my stall. “I honor your intuition. Seems I have something to learn from you, my dear. Keep the faith.” The clicking of her heels went toward the bathroom door. It opened and slammed shut.

Her words “*your hunch-think on Brad is rock solid, Nina,*” were food to my soul. She believed in me. I finally was able to take a full breath.

Yanking at the toilet-paper roll, I pulled off a few sheets and wiped the tears off my face. I stood up and gave a few shakes to my legs that had fallen asleep. Opening the stall door put me in direct line with the mirror over the sink, which showed a girl I hardly recognized. Blotches of red mixed with black streams of mascara ran down my face. I splashed some ice-cold water onto my cheeks and stared at my reflection, wondering what kind of person I’d become.

I pulled out my phone to text Jericka.

Can you meet me at the Robot Café? I’ve made a fool of myself and I’m being put on probation.

Yeah. Missy called me. We should all talk.

NOOOOO! I’m too embarrassed.

Just trust me. You need to talk to her. Be there in a few.



Thankful for small favors, I found the Robot Café deserted. Marilyn Monroebot wheeled back and forth across the bar, nervously scanning her surroundings for some piece of trash to pick up or cup to refill. I pulled out a stool and sat down.

She rolled up right in front of me, paused to take some footage, and said, “Good afternoon, Nina. Girl Scout Cookie Mocha or a Macadamia Nut Mocha Chocolate Latte?”

She talked. And she was good. Well, Brad was good. Knowing her camera was recording every inch of my blotchy face, I cupped my hand over my forehead for cover. Her footage could be labeled “Nina, not in her finest hour.”

I leaned over the bar and looked down at the menu. The only thing that even came close to a drink that would settle my stomach was an Italian vanilla soda.

I peered through my fingers and ordered just as Jericka slid in next to me. “So a bad day, huh?”

“That’s the understatement of a lifetime,” I moaned.

“Before Missy gets here,” she leaned in and covered her mouth with her hand, “you need to know something about her, but don’t feel bad when I tell you, OK?”

“Come on. I can’t feel any worse than I already do. Spit it out,” I whispered.

Thirty-Six



## Eyes That Never Sleep

Jericka sighed. Shifted in her chair and cleared her throat. And sighed again.

“Oh come on. Nothing is as bad as what I’ve already been through with Missy,” I said shamefully.

“OK. Missy presses up against people and gets too close because she is hearing impaired,” Jericka said. “She has to because she reads lips.”

Blood drained from my face. Suddenly it made sense. How she stole my chair to sit next to Brad. How she always got up in people’s faces. Her odd accent and her getting all flustered that day when Brad and I were talking at the bar with Marilyn.

“Oh no. I’m such an idiot,” I said and covered my face with my hands.

“Yeah, well, she didn’t tell me until yesterday. I’ve acted like a bonehead a few times, myself.”

“She must hate me after what I did today,” I said. “I so messed up.”

“Not exactly. She saw the flicker of sparkles on the video too.” She sighed. “And she saw something else she needs to tell you. Oh, here she comes.”

I felt my insides contract with guilt at the sight of her. I took a deep breath and immediately said, “I’m so very sorry, Missy.”

“Don’t worry.” She reached out and touched my shoulder. “I’m used to kids misunderstanding me.”

Ouch. Stab me in the heart. Toss me in the pile of insensitive kids who don’t make the effort to understand people like Missy.

“But, I really get it because I saw the fingernails sparkle too,” she said.

Now she was being nice. Way nicer than I would probably be.

“But did you notice the way the person in the video walked?” she asked. “It’s not Brad. I’ll show you. Can you pull up the video again?”

“Sure.” I pulled out my laptop and set it on the counter.

“Look, see the back-and-forth motion of the upper body? Kind of like a saunter? That’s not Brad.” Missy leaned in and pointed at the person’s shoulders. “I might not hear very well, but I notice little things other people don’t”

I played it again. And again. And once more. Not enough proof it wasn’t Brad. It was just a walk. Missy and Jericka ordered a drink while I went into a world of my own. I swiveled myself around on the stool, turning my back on Marilyn Monroebot. I was in no mood for her constant staring.

“Your vanilla soda,” Marilyn’s monotone voice said as she set the soda down.

“Thank you, Marilyn,” I said.

I turned back to grab my drink, swiveled back around, and caught sight of a security guy propping up a ladder under one

of the cameras in the lobby. I watched him tweak a few things with a screwdriver then move on to the next camera down the line. I counted at least ten cameras throughout just this small area. So there was at least ten times more footage of the thief. Worthless footage that is.

I turned and put the empty soda glass onto the counter. It was unnerving how Marilyn stood wide eyed, filming every single move I made. Flipping cameras everywhere, and not one of them had a clear image of who stole the cap. I leaned over the counter, picked up the bright red cherry from the bottom of my glass, and pulled off the stem between my teeth.

It was almost embarrassing how Marilyn knew all my habits. If I ate cherries or left them behind. If I put a napkin under my drink or left a ring on the bar. That little blue-eyed busy body knew everything about everybody. I chewed some ice, staring at her while she stared at me. I pushed my glass away and tapped my fingertips nervously on the bar.

Then a thought came to me. It started out like background chatter. But it grew louder. I shook it off as ridiculous—until the thought became a drumroll inside my head, daring me to play along with the hunch-think.

I looked at her camera and down at my hand on the bar. It was well within range to film both my face and my fingertips. I stuffed my laptop in my backpack. Stood up. And turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Jericka asked.

“I’ve got to talk to Brad again.”

The wind had calmed, and the sun sent streaks down between the clouds. I ran down the path toward Huckleberry Hollow, with nothing slowing me down but the view of a dummy of the Wicked Witch of the West from “The Wizard of Oz” at the driverless go-kart track. The black attired body sat

limply atop a bike with a basket on the back and a stuffed Toto sitting inside. Behind the wheel of one of the cars sat who else but a Dorothy mannequin, a Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion were lined up in cars next to her.

The engines revved. Smoke filled the air. The kids on the sidelines started to pull the witch around a lane on the track to probably test the car's ability to avoid a bike. I cringed. Maybe Toto was just a stuffed animal, but I couldn't bear to watch and took off toward Huckleberry Hollow.

I kicked the gate open and darted across the yard toward Brad, who was in the middle of untying his hammock from a palm tree. His hair was more crazy chaotic than usual, but he probably thought the same of mine.

I ran up to his side, leaned over, and gulped for air. "I have an idea about catching the thief." I stopped to take in a breath. "It's about Marilyn Monroebot."

Brad raised his eyebrows. "Now you are accusing Marilyn of stealing the cap?"

"Be serious." I waved my hands around as if I were erasing my stupidity about Missy. "OK, I admit I jumped to conclusions earlier. It's not Missy. Or Conner. I have another idea that will lead us to the thief. One that will stick."

"Better be fast. I've been told by the Pythia sheriff I'll be vacating by high noon tomorrow," he slowly slurred in a cowboy western accent.

I sucked in a lungful of air. "So I was sitting with Marilyn, having a vanilla soda. She was staring at me..."

"Yeah, I know she still needs some work on her staring," he interrupted. "I was thinking maybe install some big fake eyelashes?"

"No, no, never mind all that." I shook my head. "Let me finish. I was looking around at all the security cameras in the

lobby. There must be ten of them. Then I realized Marilyn's camera has a perfect shot of everyone who walks by the café or gets a drink from her."

"OK," he said, rolling the hammock up. "Don't know what that buys us unless she got a clear shot of the thief's face."

"No, no. I'm going in a different direction." I shook my head. "We need to compare the hand in the security video with all the hands Marilyn has filmed at the café. When we match the hands, we'll zoom out on the film and see whose face shows up. If you can do facial recognition of a face, why not a hand?"

He stared at me blankly but said nothing. He got that far away look. His eyes blinked rapidly. He tilted his head slightly and gazed up toward the top of a palm tree.

"Almost everyone gets a drink at the café." I leaned in and said, "Marilyn films their faces as well as their hands when they pick up their cup."

Brad's eyes focused back on mine. "Well, it's possible. There is now a technology to identify people by scanning their hands for cashierless checkout. Called a palm signature. The technology apparently identifies people's hands by analyzing characteristics like wrinkles, veins, bones, and length of their fingers."

"Right. And Marilyn has scanned everyone's hand who reaches for a drink," I pressed.

He mumbled to himself and looked back up into the palm trees. "We could use the same code I programmed to do the facial recognition but change things up to analyze hands."

Just hearing him think out loud made the idea seem feasible. Suddenly I felt dizzy. The adrenaline rush that got me to this point evaporated. I sat down on the cinder-block steps and leaned my head up against the camper door.

He gazed at my face, and it felt like a gentle touch. "I knew I loved that woman for a reason," he continued to mumber to

himself, then blinked as if waking from a trance, and added, "Marilyn, of course."

"Of course," I said.

"Let's think through this," Brad said quickly. "I need to show you how Marilyn works."

He sat down at the picnic table and opened his laptop. I stepped over the bench and sat down. Chuckie Boy jumped in between us. I leaned into him and put my arms around his neck in a big bear hug and nuzzled my nose into his fur. Dogs have a friendly scent that soothes me like nothing else.

After Brad typed in a few commands, his screen filled with what looked much like a page of framed faces from a high school yearbook page. Their foreheads, noses, lips, and eyes were all outlined with varying sizes of triangles, boxes, or circles. He leaned toward me and pointed to one of the faces. "The information within the triangles and boxes is all tagged with measurements relating to the size and shape of each facial feature." He looked into my eyes. "You follow?"

"I follow, but I can't help but think they look as though they all are dressed up as geometry problems for Halloween," I said, immediately wishing I had something more intelligent to say.

"You do follow! I've often thought this facial recognition stuff is kind of like a masquerade ball of geometric shapes dancing around in computer memory waiting to find the right face partner."

"Nerd humor alert," I snickered and pushed my shoulder up against him.

"Takes one to know one," he shot back and pushed right back into me.

"What?" I sat straight up on the bench. "I'm the least nerdy person on this earth."

“Agreed,” he nodded. “You’re what I call an accidental geek girl. You have the unique ability to present yourself as an everyday middle school girl, but underneath that normalcy, you have this highly analytical mind.” He cocked his head and continued, “Pretty decent combo, if you ask me.”



Thirty-Seven



## Facial Rodeo Roundup

Something surfaced in that moment that changed the order of everything. It was like a seismic shift within me that Brad pulled forward. But mostly it was me looking at myself through different eyes. He was right. I was good at thinking through a problem. I might stub my toe a few times in trial and error, but I guess that was just part of finding the right solution.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small object dart around on the blue checkered curtains. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. As if in a rhythmic dance, a dragonfly flitted up and down the fabric. The symbol of change and transformation wasn't for Brad at all. It was for me.

"Earth to Nina," he joked. "Now let me tell you about Marilyn's secret sauce of figuring out who's who at the zoo."

Brad would only laugh if I suggested that dragonfly was giving me a message I was in transformation. I cleared my throat. "This is great, but why are you showing me all this?"

He stopped typing. "Because you're lead cowgirl in this rodeo roundup of faces," he said sounding exactly like a tough

guy in an old cowboy movie. “Remember, I’ve been kicked off the network. We need access to the Pythia servers to churn this out. This heavy-duty artificial intelligence stuff can’t be done on a laptop. You have the ability to use your student account to run it on a real computer.”

“Me? I c-c-can’t...” I stammered. “I have no idea how to do it.”  
“You will in a few minutes.”

My head spun. I needed to wiggle out of this. But I couldn’t let Brad and Chuckie Boy be evicted from Huckleberry Hollow and hauled off to juvie or worse.

He typed in commands as he talked. “Just think of facial recognition as a set of puzzle pieces that are specially carved out to fit your nose, mouth, and eyes. When Marilyn is staring you down at the Robot Café bar, she really only sees your face as a jigsaw puzzle. Before she can recognize you as Nina, she goes on a sort of scavenger hunt in her memory bank of puzzle pieces. Once she finds a match to your nose, mouth, and eye pieces, she can then assemble them as you.”

He took out his phone. Snapped a picture of his hand. Within seconds the image of his hand filled the screen.

“Main thing to remember—all this stuff about artificial intelligence? It’s artificial and not so intelligent. Just think of AI as creating a mouthwatering chocolate chip cookie. But rather than mixing up brown sugar and flour, you stir in geometric patterns and mold them together to create an AI masterpiece. But let’s say you forget to add butter to the mix.”

“Which, of course, is the most important ingredient to any recipe,” I interrupted.

“Right. Well, that’s when you get bad results. This AI stuff is only as good as the cook who created it.”

“And a cookie without butter would be an inedible rock-hard chocolate chip brick,” I responded.

“Right. You are obviously one smart cookie,” he said with a smile.

He stopped and stared at the picture of his hand on the screen, then opened up his software to outline his nail beds as circles, create a square from his wrist to his knuckle, and measure the length of his fingers. He turned the screen to face me.

“Voilà,” he said in a very bad French accent. “This is the map of the most incredible tool ever created or ever will be created—the human hand. But that’s another subject. For the rest of the afternoon, I’m going to modify Marilyn’s code to compare all the hands in her memory to the hand in the security image.”

“Wait. How are you going to get Marilyn’s memory data? I thought you said Pythia took away all your access.”

“Indeed,” he paused to raise his eyebrows and smile, “but they can’t take away something they don’t know about. I created Marilyn and manage her capabilities wirelessly from my laptop.”

“Ah, then tell me again why you can’t run the whole thing on your laptop?” I asked still hoping to wiggle out of this.

“It would take days to run on my laptop, and my laptop would probably blow up before it could finish. Artificial intelligence is a computer hog. We need to run it on the most powerful Pythia servers.” He stopped, blinked, and looked back up at the top of the palm trees, then back down to me. “But you need to be careful. Reggie will notice the load. This will bog down the servers, and he watches the CPU usage charts like rich people watch stock market fluctuations.”

I scratched my head. “I don’t get this. You’ll send the program to my email, I load it onto the server with my student account and run the analysis. But how do I avoid him seeing the load?”

“As an old cowboy, out riding the range would say, ‘Life is tough, but it’s tougher when you’re stupid.’ We have to be smart. You will need to do it when he sleeps, which is almost never. Lord knows, I’ve worked with him on all kinds of issues during his vampire hours, but he usually collapses in his nerd cot or goes home to his dweeb cave around two in the morning.” He blinked rapidly. “So to be safe don’t start until 2:30 a.m. and quit by five a.m. Not a lot of time.”

“But what if...?”

He took my hand and looked directly into my eyes. “There are so many what ifs in this deal they could never be counted, but you need to know, no matter what happens, I am touched you are doing this for me. This is an incredible idea you came up with.” With a deep sigh, he paused. “But without more time to perfect the code, it’s a toss of the dice. Random odds are one in a million that this will fly.”

“The narrator on *1000 Ways to Die* said being struck by lightning also had random odds of about one in a million,” I said thinking out loud.

“That’s my favorite show! You watch that?” He smiled and poked me in the ribs. “Wow, you really are a geek girl. Tell me. What is your favorite episode? And don’t say when Suki chased down the hot-dog-eating competition winner and died in her own vomit.”

“Just thinking of that one this afternoon, as a matter of fact,” I said as I packed up to leave.

I slowly passed the wicked witch still doing bike laps. Her hat was sitting in the middle of the track, Toto was safe in his basket, and the “Trial and Error” scoreboard was in Dorothy’s favor. I grabbed the links of the fence. Trial and error—the perfect phrase for testing out anything new. Seems everything and everyone is ruled by the trial and error scoreboard. No

matter what has been created, invented, or discovered. It was just part of the process.

“Hey, wondering where you were. Just got back from the cafeteria with a pizza,” Jericka said as soon as I walked through the door.

I looked down at the time. I hadn’t realized how late it was. Darn it. Josh sent me a text this afternoon that I never read.

I pulled out my phone.

Hey girl! What’s up? Dinner tonight?

The pizza would certainly be enough for the three of us.

Sure. Pizza here in the room. Swing by.

He replied immediately.

Be there shortly.

“Hope you don’t mind. I just invited Josh to come up for pizza. He’ll be here any minute, and before he gets here, there’s stuff I need to tell you.”

She sat down on her bed, and her eyes got wide. “Spill it,” she said.

I collapsed onto my bed, hugged my pillow against my chest, and told her about the hand analysis. I’d hardly touched on how I was running Brad’s code that night when her eyes narrowed into tiny slits.

“You shouldn’t be involved in this.” Her face clouded over. “You’re already on probation, already accused Missy of being

the thief. Do you want to be expelled? Why don't you just hand the whole thing over for Pythia to investigate?"

"Pythia security just wants to pin it on Brad. They stopped looking for the thief the minute they found out Brad's bracelet was used to enter the conference room. And somehow ferret face is involved. He's now dressed in a security uniform and was the one who hauled Brad out."

"Nina," she shook her head, "you don't *really* know Brad. I mean just look at his clothes and the way he lives in that beat-up old camper. What if he did steal the cap because he needs the money? Have you thought maybe he's manipulating you?"

Thirty-Eight



Stinky Eye

“Manipulating? Brad? He’s the last person on earth who would manipulate anyone. And didn’t you hear me? I’m the one who came up with the idea.”

But before I could finish defending him, there was a loud knock on the door. “Don’t say anything to Josh about this,” I said in a hushed voice. I didn’t need them to gang up against me. No doubt I’d be pitted up in a two against one situation, which would ruin the evening as well as a perfectly good pizza.

She turned away from me and nodded, but not before I saw the crunched up half-sneering half-worried look on her face. I should have kept my big mouth shut. Not telling her would have burned a hole in my soul. We were besties, and I wanted her to believe in Brad too—to say she understood, that she would help if I needed it—but I had no time to deal with her attitude.

I pushed the button by the door. The tinted glass cleared. Josh stood under the bright hallway lights. He was wearing a Cheshire cat smile and had on a dark-blue golf shirt so crisp it

looked like he had just pressed it with an iron. I kind of liked that he dressed as if seeing me was a special occasion and that he cared about what he looked like. I pressed the button again, and the door swooshed open.

He stepped in and held out a plastic container filled with a colorful assortment of cookies. “Sweets for the sweet,” he said.

The sugar glistened on a thick coating of pink and yellow icing. “I haven’t heard ‘sweets for the sweet’ since...well, forever. My grandfather used to say that.”

His smile faded. “Reminding you of your grandfather isn’t exactly the effect I was hoping for, but I guess there are worse things,” he said jokingly and reached out to hug me. I stiffened at first, surprised by his embrace, but as he pressed me closer, I couldn’t help but soften into him.

I probably clung too long. The last hug I’d had was with my mom when she dropped me off. We stood in this very spot, and she repeated her favorite saying, *Allow yourself to feel the magic at work in the universe. It won’t disappoint you.* Someday I’ll have to ask her what she meant—that is, if I am ever enriched enough to go home again.

“Hi, Josh,” Jericka said as she flipped the trash can upside down, threw a towel over it, and placed the pizza box on top.

Her quick-thinking solution for a table reminded me of Brad—creating something out of nothing. I looked down at the pizza box and figured Brad was in the middle of grilling hot dogs for dinner. Which made me kind of sad. Tonight might be the last time he would light up his grill and smoke his dogs, as he would say.

I sat down in Half Lotus pose on the floor and leaned up against the wall with some pillows behind my back. Maybe I should have taken some dinner over to Brad. I got up on one knee to snag a piece of pizza and looked up at Josh staring down at me.



“Oh, sorry, so rude,” I said. “I wasn’t thinking. Let me find you a place to sit.” Or more accurately, I *was* thinking, but not about him. I got up off the floor and pulled my desk chair over next to the trash can. “Here take this,” I said and handed him a slice on a paper towel.

“Smells good,” he said, sitting down and crossing his legs. “Must be meat lover’s night. Look at that stack of pepperoni and sausage.”

I nodded in agreement and swallowed hard to suppress a gag reflex. Leaning back to avoid the smell, I scraped off the inch of processed meats and revealed a glistening gook on the top of the cheese. So gross. It took two entire napkins to wipe all the orange sausage and pepperoni ick left behind.

“Um, your favorite?” I asked sweetly, with hopes I could hide my disgust.

“Sure is,” he said and wiped a dribble of orange grease off his chin. “Another great dinner special at the cafeteria is waffles with fried chicken.”

“Yeah, definitely a crowd pleaser,” I said.

We went through all the cafeteria specials, but there wasn’t much to say once we sorted through our favorites from the ice-cream sundae bar. The silence got loud. And then awkward.

Jericka lay across her bed, stuffing pizza sideways in her mouth and staring into her phone. I tried to figure out something to say next. Jericka certainly was not in the mood to help, so I turned on some music and started up some nodding and bobbing of my head to the beat since I didn’t know what to say. Josh chewed his pizza crust and wobbled his foot around on his knee totally out of rhythm, but at least he had the courtesy to fake like he was having fun.

I looked up at him from the floor with a clean shot of the underside of his face. He had one of those superhero square

jaws that someone running for political office would have. And his hair was perfectly shaped, like one of my Ken dolls. Exactly Brad's opposite. Suddenly the thought occurred to me. *Do I like Brad?* It hardly made sense. I wanted to like Josh and leave it there. But as I stared up at the white wall across the room, it wasn't Josh's face I saw there.

He threw his last bite of crust down into the box with a thud and said, "How about we take a walk?"

I glanced at Jericka scrolling through her phone. "Sure, good idea." I grabbed my hoodie and opened the door. "Be back soon."

"OK," she said numbly.

We turned the corner to the stairwell, and Josh immediately blurted, "Can you help me out? I can't tell if that was regular eating-pizza silence or an awkward silence."

"Oh, it was most definitely an awkward silence. I told Jericka...uh"—and immediately caught myself—"well, something in confidence, and she got upset. She started acting like she's the boss of me, and well, I had to remind her that I have a mind of my own."

"Ah, well, I'm relieved," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "I thought it was something I did. And then I started thinking maybe I wasn't really welcome tonight since it took so long for you to text me back."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. I got caught up with other stuff and forgot about texting you," I replied.

He took my hand, and we walked the path that swirled around the edge of the bay. It was so much easier to talk to him in the dark, looking up at the stars and moon instead of lamely over a cardboard pizza box. We still hit some weird silences, but the gentle sound of the tide lapping up against the shore and palms swishing above us filled in the gaps.

“Wow, what a clear night. Look at all those stars. One of my favorite things is sitting around my backyard and looking at the stars with my mom.” I sighed and longed for her. “She’s an astronomer and knows the night sky like the back of her hand.”

The path led us out onto a narrow strip of land that was a scenic lookout, with picnic tables and several large boulders at the water’s edge. Surrounded by a rocky beach, Josh went down to the water’s edge, picked up a stone, and skipped it across the water. I leaned back on one of the boulders, watching him draw his arm back and toss one stone after another into the water.

A text pinged on my phone. I tensed up, turned away from him, and pulled my phone from my pocket—a text from Brad.

It’s all in the email I just sent.  
Remember it’s a million-to-one  
odds. So don’t worry if this  
doesn’t work out.

“What is it?” Josh asked.

“Oh. I’ve got to get some work done,” I said.

“Oh, right. Well, why don’t you visit me in the server room tomorrow? I’ll be helping out in there most of the day.”

I nodded. “After my classes are over.”

The moon had gone behind the clouds. An eerie blue mosaic pattern formed above us.

“Look,” he said, pointing up to the sky, “The clouds look like arrows cast out from a bow somewhere in the horizon.”

“Yeah. Only thing that could make the sky more eerie would be the Wicked Witch of the West flying on her broomstick,” I said and smiled. “I just saw the Wicked Witch riding

around the go-kart track today, so I imagine she is still over there doing laps.”

“Oh. What were you doing over at the track?” he asked.

“Checking in on Brad. Pythia is getting ready to either send him to juvie or evict him. He’s supposed to leave tomorrow.”

“Sorry it got to that,” he said and combed his fingers through his hair.

Thirty-Nine



## The Tarot Card Revisits

*Dread pulsed through my veins.* I imagined Jericka was lying in wait like a tiger in the tundra—ready to pounce on me with more reasons not to run Brad’s code. The dorm room door swooshed open and closed behind me. So quiet. Too quiet. It wasn’t that late, but Jericka was already asleep. I probably exhausted her with my stupidity. A shiver ran up my spine. What was wrong with me? Jericka was right. I shouldn’t be involved in this.

I scratched at my neck, yanked off my hoodie, and tossed it on the bed. Suddenly it felt as if a thousand mosquitoes were poking their hair-like suckers into my arms, then my legs and stomach. I scanned my skin for an invasion of biting red ants. But there was nothing under my clothes except my pale freckled skin and the itch of anxiety.

I sat down on my bed, felt the crunch of paper, and pulled a crumpled pink note out from under my butt.

Sorry about tonight. You're right. Brad is a good guy. While folding my laundry tonight, I found this card in my white jeans hip pocket. Yours? ♥ Jericka



The tarot card from the concert. Surely this meant nothing. Just a weird coincidence. But there were no coincidences in this universe. So who could the false friend be? Or could this be just a piece of trash randomly thrown from an actor hired to entertain us at a concert. I crinkled it up in my fist and tossed it onto my nightstand.

I looked over at Jericka, hugging her pillow against her chest. Her lips began to quiver, then some murmuring, "Lily-green, olive-green, violet-green, forest-green, turquoise-green..." Seemed she was happily taking stock of her crayons.

Lucky her. A peaceful sleep stroll through the inside of my kindergarten crayon box would be a perfect diversion from what I had to do.

“Just accept it will be a bad night”, I whispered to myself.

Why didn't I tell Professor Joy to make Pythia security do this? “Because they might not do it,” I answered myself. Especially since ferret face was involved

Trying to make myself as comfortable as possible, I fluffed up my pillow, propped it up against the headboard, and stepped into my pajamas. With my laptop positioned on my legs, I opened up the screen. Brad's email popped into my in basket in the dark bold print of unread. No turning back. I clicked it open.

Good evening, Nina,

First, I want you to know what a good friend you are. I'm amazed how you thought up this idea and truly touched you are willing to see it through.

There are three steps and line by line instructions are attached for you to follow. In general, the code interfaces with the video footage from Marilyn Monroebot and the security image of the hand. First the program will narrow down a set of closely matched hands focusing on length of the fingers, which should eliminate 90 percent of the hands. Second program run applies techniques that will search for fine details such as knuckle size and fingernail bed shape. This will narrow the results significantly. Third program locks down every possible detail including count of lines at the knuckle and visible veins on the back of the hand. This run will link up the hand to the face.

Remember, avoid Reggie. Only run between 2:30 and 5:00 a.m. Call me if you need to or even if you don't!

Cheers!

Just like Brad to end with a "Cheers." I grabbed my phone and typed out a text to him.

Got your email. Hate that I have to wait so long to get started.

I know. But Reggie craves the dark of night so he can have the computers all to himself. He's like a vampire who sucks CPU cycles after sundown rather than blood.

When I see the face connected with the hand, what's next?

Send me an email of results. Then bow out and leave the rest to me. I need to verify and verify again before anyone makes a move to tell Pythia the results. Title the email: "Here's looking at you, kid." (Very famous line from Casablanca, in case you wondered)



LOL. BTW I've named this Project Face Chase. 😊

Oh, I like that! And remember, this is only as intelligent as I could make it in a limited time. Final results need to be examined carefully and run again several times with more variables to be sure it always results with the same face. Pass the results to me, and I can run the final analysis on my laptop. Don't do anything with them! Got it?

Got it. Good night, dweeb.

Good night, geek girl.

I yawned and looked at the clock. Three hours and forty-five minutes before I could start. With nothing more to do, I set my alarm for 2:15 for a 2:30 start time. I turned off the light and stared up at the ceiling, rolled over, and adjusted my pillow.

“Lemon-yellow, canary-yellow, mustard-yellow, mellow-yellow...” The murmur carried across the room.

I turned on the light. Jericka had struck again.

“Submarine-yellow, toxic-spill yellow, cleanser yellow...”

No doubt she would be on the oranges soon, which would drive me crazy. The clock read eleven. Still a few hours before

I could start. I grabbed for my robe, stuffed my phone in the pocket, and went to snag a snack from out of the hydroponic garden.

Crooked and dried out, a few sad carrots sat in their white liquid containers. I had hopes the strawberries would be ripe, but only mini green morsels clung to the vines. I chomped down on a misshapen carrot, then checked the time. Ten minutes had passed. Too anxious to sleep, but too tired to stay awake—I pulled some fresh lavender from the herb garden, smashed the magic sleep flowers between my fingers, and snuggled into a beanbag chair.

Forty



## The Face Chase

I woke to the sound of my phone alarm.

The face chase bewitching hour had finally arrived. With no time to lose, I raced down the hall to our room. Step by step, I went through the instructions. Everything went exactly as Brad said it would. At four o'clock in the morning I ran the last set of code.

The spin of a symbol showing the program was still running was hypnotizing. I stared into the screen until my eyes dried out. Finally at 4:45, the spinning abruptly stopped. It was complete.

I took in a big gulp of air. All I needed to do was click on the jpg file, open the image, and see the hand connecting to the face. I reached out to double-click. I flexed my fist open and closed. I blew hot air into my fisted hand like gamblers do for luck when rolling dice in Vegas and double-clicked on the file.

I gasped. Coughed. And felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach. I stared back down at the image on the screen. It was fuzzy, but there was no mistaking his face. In full smile,

with his head hovering close to mine, stood Josh. One hand was wrapped around my Girl Scout Cookie Mocha, the other pressed into the bar counter. Orientation day when he picked up my drink.

My head spun. I laid my head down on my pillow and entered a time warp. The image of Josh swirled through my brain. But there was something else to figure out. I sat up and searched the web for how to make text messages disappear.

The popular chat app MessageMe has a self-destructing message feature. Tap the timer icon inside the message field to set an expiration time—it can be anywhere from five seconds to a day—as soon as the message has been viewed, it will disappear.

I read it three times. It all started to sink in. But why? I brought up the image again and stared into his face. Josh didn't have the face of a thief. There had to be a reason he needed to do this.

Forty-One



## Blue, the Color of Truth

I opened the blinds and watched the sun rise. Early morning flights going to all parts of the world crisscrossed the sky. How I wished I could be on one of them. I didn't care to where. Just anywhere but here. And what was I going to tell Brad? He would be expecting the results by dawn. I put my elbows on the windowsill and let my head drop down.

"What's wrong?" Jericka said from her bed. "Are you crying?"

I sucked in a huge breath and turned to look at her. "The hand analysis worked."

"Oh, wow." She looked confused. "And that made you sad?"

I closed the blinds, and sat down next to her on the bed. Tears started spilling out of my eyes. I put my hands over my face and wailed into them.

"Oh, honey," she said and brushed the hair from my face. "What is it?"

"It's...it's Josh."

Her face fell, and her eyes widened. “What about Josh? Was he mean to you last night? I should have stopped you from going out there alone in the dark with him.”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” My body shook. “It’s his face that came up as the thief, and I don’t know what to do.”

Jericka leaned back into the headboard. Moistening her lips, she looked down at the end of the bed. “What do you mean you don’t know what to do?”

“What if he can explain it all? Maybe he is in some kind of trouble and had to steal the cap for a good reason.”

She shook her head. “I’m not following you. He stole the cap. Set Brad up to take the fall. Yeah, he’s in some kind of trouble, all right, and a sociopath to boot.”

I got up and paced the room. “Pythia must not have enough evidence to charge Brad with the crime or they already would have.”

“Are you completely out of your mind? So what Brad isn’t being charged with a crime. Do you think it’s OK that he’s been falsely accused and kicked out of school for something he didn’t do? As well as letting Josh get away with stealing?”

“So maybe Josh has a bit of a character flaw,” I said.

“No, Nina. A flaw is something you can sand out. Josh has a character defect to set someone else up to take the fall.”

“I could say the software didn’t work,” I replied, free-falling into despair. “That the code blew up in my face. Returned nothing.” I swallowed and took a breath.

“Are you kidding me? You are seriously thinking of burying the fact Josh stole the cap?” Her eyes flashed with anger. “Nina, why would you even consider such a thing?”

I sat down on my bed across from her to put some distance between us. “No one will ever know. Not if I don’t tell them.”

We sat in silence, both staring down at the empty space between us.

“But you would know,” she whispered.

I went into the bathroom, turned the water on full blast and let the cold water run over my face until it was numb and on the verge of frostbite. I looked like I’d been sucker punched. In a way, maybe I had been.

I still hadn’t texted Brad. And oddly, he had not texted me, either. It was just after nine, and Josh had said he would be in the server room all day. If all went well, Josh would explain himself and figure out a way to get Brad off the hook, and I’d get to Professor Joy’s animation class on time. But the nauseous feeling in my gut made me think it wasn’t going to be that easy.

After rehearsing what I was going to say all the way through the parking lot and down the server-room stairs, I was totally ready to face Josh by the time I stood in front of the big metal door. I held my ID bracelet up to the pod and waited to hear the metal-against-metal click of the door, but when it snapped open, I immediately felt all my courage drain and pool down around my feet.

I wrapped my fingers around the handle and pushed it forward. Cold air rushed into my face. I jumped when the door slammed behind me. The eerie darkness was even worse when I was alone. I walked through the mass of blinking lights toward the pod of offices. Josh was head down, with earbuds in, at a system. I watched his fingertips tap the keys lightly.

“Hi, Josh,” I said.

His hands flew off the keyboard, and he quickly turned, “Ah, Roho. You scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to.”

He got up from his chair and came over to give me a hug. I took a step back. “Can we talk for a second?”

He looked at me blankly. “Um, sure. Look, I thought about calling after we said goodnight. I know a lot of girls need that kind of reassurance,” he said and did one of his exaggerated shoulder shrugs, “but I thought we were good.”

I let out a laugh. “I wish it was that simple.”

His face dropped. “What then?”

I drew in a huge breath. “Are you OK? I mean are you in some kind of trouble?”

He sat back down in his chair, shook his head, and kind of smirked. “I don’t follow.”

“Are you in trouble? I mean, I did hear the same security guard that escorted Brad out of the building threaten someone. Was that you? Something about having your IP address?”

He froze. His smile faded, and his face lost all color.

I rolled up a chair next to him and sat down. I felt so weak. I just needed to say it straight. “OK. I’ve been working with Brad. He created a program that compared the hand of the crystal cap thief caught by the security camera to the hands Marilyn Monroebot scans at the bar.”

I looked into his eyes and did not want to say the things I needed to say. Had to say. I pushed my hair behind my ears.

“I ran Brad’s code on the Pythia servers last night that compared the hands.” I looked down at the floor. “Your face came up as a match.”

A deep crease formed between his brows. His lips slowly flattened across his jaw, and his blue eyes were almost black. He put his elbow on the table and leaned toward me. “Let me get this straight. You think I stole the crystal cap because of some science-fiction hand comparison?”



He blinked his eyes wildly. “Number one, this was Brad’s code? Who, let me remind you, is the accused thief? And this code just happens to pin the theft on me? Sounds like you’ve been manipulated.” His voice went three octaves higher. “Follow me?”

He was talking superfast. Breathless. Then he got two inches in front of my face and spoke slowly, like I didn’t understand English. “Number two, I never go to the Robot Café, so it’s impossible that my hand could show up on any footage. I don’t drink that stuff. Remember?” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you see? Brad is totally manipulating you.”

Exactly the same words Jericka had used.

I thought back to the night before. Josh and I walked together. But did that really mean that I knew him? I wanted to believe him. He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair. Brad was right. It would be so much easier if people had error messages.

His eyes suddenly widened. Blue eyes. The color symbolizing truth. He was not a person who wanted to lie. I knew he wanted to tell the truth.

“Please, Josh,” I begged. “Tell me the truth. Maybe I can help you.”

He took in a deep breath. “Why are you drinking his Kool-Aid? Brad just wants to blame everything on me.” He shook his head wildly, and his eyes narrowed. “Are you really that naive?”

His words cut me like a knife and sliced up whatever pathetic lie I’d been telling myself about him. There I was, face to face with the truth of who he was, only it didn’t match what I wanted him to be. The Star Wars saying ricocheted through my head: *Searching for the truth is easy. Accepting the truth is hard.*

Forty-Two



## Know Thy Self, Know Thy Strength

I got up from my chair and narrowed my eyes on him, while shaking my head from side to side. “No, no, no,” I screamed. “Brad has always been exactly who he is, but you, you, well, I have no idea who you are. And the disappearing text? Did you use the MessageMe app when you texted Brad during the concert?”

His face went pale. He coughed like he had a fish bone stuck in his throat.

“OK, wait,” he said. “Calm down, and let’s just back up. Say you have me in an image at the Robot Café that I never go to. How do you know the picture hasn’t been all doctored up in Photoshop? Bring the image up for me. Show it to me.”

“I don’t need to show you anything,” I said backing up. “But I’ll tell you, your hand and your face were captured by Marilyn the day of orientation when you snatched up my mocha off the bar.”

He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling.

“Coming back to you?”

“Look,” he said pulling on his eyebrows. “If Brad hasn’t been taken off to juvenile detention yet, he probably won’t be. They must not have enough evidence to press charges.”

“No, you look,” I said. “I want to help you. I’ll ask again, are you in some kind of trouble?” I looked into the ice-blue rings of his irises. He stared back like he was trying to work some mind voodoo on me, willing me to believe him.

“It’s complicated.” He took in a huge breath. His shoulders slumped forward. And then, a huge, “Hic-hic-hiccup,” blew through his lips.

I took a step back. The hiccupping hacker. My brain froze.

“I was an idiot,” he whispered. “It started out as simple hacks to the online games so my team could win big competitions. Later I got into a hacker challenge club, where we broke into all kinds of servers. Police departments, schools, government offices. You know, just for fun. For the challenge.”

He shook his head and exhaled heavily. “But one night I screwed up and didn’t mask my IP address. I hacked into a medical-research company, and they came after me. But they wanted to make a deal.” His lips tightened. “If I’d agree to gather confidential information from high-tech companies, they would not prosecute.” His gaze turned to the floor. “They knew Pythia was starting up a new brain-computer interface capability with the crystal cap. They told me all I needed to do was steal it and they’d let me go free and clear.”

He shrugged and suddenly looked very tired. He rubbed the back of his neck back and forth several times. “I tried to act like I couldn’t get it done, but they got a fake security guard to track my every movement until I stole it. They kept threatening me.”

“Right, the ferret face,” I said. “So why didn’t you tell your

parents to hire a lawyer?”

“Tell my parents?” He threw his head back and looked up at the ceiling. “They’d disown me. At the time it seemed like I could fix it myself.”

“Some fix.” I said and swallowed over the stinging lump that had formed in my throat. “Why didn’t you just leave with the cap when you had the chance?” I said quietly. “I mean, why are you still here?”

He sighed heavily. “The memory chips that store the software hadn’t been installed. The cap is just a bunch of worthless crystals without the software. I had no choice but to stay. Wait for a working prototype and try again.”

He paused, looked up at me and his eyes widened. “But of course, I’m not...” he said and he reached out to take my hand.

I threw my hands up in front of me, slapping his hand away. “But of course you’re not what? You’re not going to admit that you set Brad up with a disappearing text, stole his bracelet to make it look like he broke into the conference room, and are just waiting around until you can steal the software? Is that what you are not going to do, Josh?”

“Look I tried to save Brad from this whole thing by hacking the ID system in the conference room. If Brad had not unhacked my hack, they wouldn’t have been able to tell whose bracelet was used. I didn’t want it to be pinned on him. It all went bad.” He leaned closer and rubbed my shoulder. “I’m sorry, but what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t care what you do. All I care about is what I do.”

“Roho, please don’t,” he said and reached out to touch my shoulder. “We can find a way to work this out. Just give me some time to think it through.”

“No. You are the false friend on the tarot card,” I said.

“What?” he said blankly.

“Never mind. You wouldn’t understand. But understand this: I’m not your Roho. My name is Nina,” I snapped and my voice started to quiver. “I should have listened to Jericka when she told me about the one bite rule, but I wasn’t ready to see the truth about you.”

I turned so he wouldn’t see the tears that filled my eyes and ran out of the server room and up the stairs toward Professor Joy’s office. Every minute that went by was closer to the time Brad’s camper would be towed out of the parking lot. He would be charged. And sent to juvenile detention.

I’d totally lost track of time, so when I skidded to a stop in front of Professor Joy’s door, the entire animation class was sitting around her table, watching a SCRATCH tutorial on YouTube. My stomach lurched forward, throwing hot bile up into my throat.

Reminding myself to take a breath, I backed away from the door and nervously moved from one foot to the other. I shifted to the right. Then to the left. Maybe Brad was right. More testing was needed. I should turn the results over to him for more verification. But Brad was depending on me, and I was playing hopscotch with the truth.

Professor Joy glanced up at me. It was as if she knew, in some kind of unspoken exchange, that what I had to tell her could not wait. While still looking directly into my eyes, she picked up the remote and paused the lesson.

“I’m going to need to excuse class a few minutes early today,” she whispered.

Edgy Reggie whipped his head around, looked directly into my face, and glared. Immediately I knew he knew. My skin went hot and flushed and prickled. All it would have taken is for him to take one glance at a CPU activity chart and the Nina Shiner student account.

I crossed my arms over my chest and met Edgy Reggie's glare with a glare of my own. The results could not be denied. He shook his head like I was a small child caught in the act of doing something incredibly wrong, but what I did was incredibly right. His intimidation tactics to twist my insides into a tangled hair ball were over. The fear of what to do with the truth had bottomed out, leaving me with a feeling of total calm.

I stopped leaning into the doorjamb and straightened up to watch the butterflies perch on lotus flowers in the courtyard garden. The entire class strapped on their backpacks and filed by as if I was invisible. Which was fine by me. Except when Missy walked by, she knotted up her fist, held it out to me for one of those supportive bumps of our knuckles, and whispered, "You go girl."

Professor Joy looked toward the doorway with a pleasant gaze and waved me in. Surely she knew I'd used the servers for my own use. Edgy Reggie probably ratted me out before sunrise. "Please join us, Nina," she said and picked up her teapot. "Any ginger tea for you today?"

Edgy Reggie raised his arms and threw his pen across the table, making a high-pitched screech against the glass. "She broke into the servers last night. Used valuable company resources. And now you're asking her if she would care for flipping ginger tea?"

"Yes, Reggie, you heard me correctly."

His face burned like a forest fire. He stood and leaned over the table with both hands braced on the glass as if he was preparing to pounce on his prey.

"Nina?" she said and motioned her teapot toward me.

"No, thank you." I sat down, put my backpack on the floor, and calmly said, "I have something to tell you."

“Indeed,” she said and sat back down. “Please proceed. You have the floor.”

She was curt, but polite. I opened my mouth to speak. It was dry. Like cotton balls had been glued to my tongue. The saying, *a picture is worth a thousand words*, shot through my head. Instead of talking, I reached into my backpack and pulled out my laptop.

While logging in, I said, “Since you already know I was using the servers last night, I guess I don’t need to say I was running an artificial intelligence program...”

“There, satisfied?” Edgy Reggie barked and pointed his pen at me. “An admission. Expel her! She has shown a blatant disregard for...”

Professor Joy held up her hand. “Let her continue,” she commanded.

Edgy Reggie leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“The program I ran last night compared Marilyn Monroe-bot’s video footage of every hand ever filmed at the bar with the hand caught in the security image. This is what came up.” I turned my laptop screen toward Professor Joy with the image of Josh. “This is your thief,” I said plainly.

Edgy Reggie’s head shook from side to side. “This is just another fabrication of her vivid imagination,” he spat venomously as he got up to view the image over Professor Joy’s shoulder. “You don’t have the skill for this sophisticated image analysis,” Edgy Reggie barked with even more venom. “First Missy? Now you are accusing Josh? Did Brad put you up to this?”

I looked up at him and paused for a while just to make him wait for my answer. “Brad wrote the code. I ran it. The code is still on the Pythia server in my student account.” I closed my laptop. “The code and the images are still there for you to verify. Go ahead. Test it for yourself.”

Edgy Reggie's mouth dropped open. I slid out of my chair, loaded up my laptop, and threw my backpack over my shoulder.

I turned to Professor Joy. "You are right about the women of Pythia following their hunch-think."

She smiled and nodded. "Indeed. You were very brave to listen to your hunch-think. I wish I had done the same." I turned and walked toward the door. "Nina," she said, "you've proven you know thyself. As well as thy strength."

I bit my lip to keep from crying and took off out of the room. As soon as I rounded the corner, I stopped and leaned up against the wall. With a total sense of calm, I texted Brad.

It was Josh. I just told Professor Joy and Reggie. Guess the truth was always there. We just had to look for it.

You are my best friend,  
Nina Shiner

Tears filled my eyes. Hearts don't melt, but if they did, mine had.

I stuffed my phone into my backpack, then ran across the parking lot and up the dorm stairs. Jericka was in class. I wrote a note thanking her for being a friend and placed it on her pillow, then I grabbed my Rosie figurine.

For the moment, nothing else was necessary. I brought up the Uber app. Entered the address. And without hesitation pressed Send and Confirm.



Forty-Three



## Yes, I've Been Enriched

I smeared the mist on the inside of the lobby door in a little circle with my palm and pressed my face against the glass. Between the thick fog and the rain, I could barely see the curb. I tracked the Uber arrival to arrive within three minutes. This was not how one of my dad's enrichment experiences was supposed to go.

*Tears*, as my mother would say, *are release valves of the heart*. Which made them flow even more.

Several honks and a text on my phone announced the arrival of the small white car. I pushed open the lobby doors, splashed through the soaking rain, checked the number on the license plate, and opened the car door. Using my sweatshirt sleeve, I wiped off my face and confirmed my home address with the driver. Slowly, he maneuvered around the parking lot, following the construction detour signs which took us directly behind the Pythia building. The window wipers were on high but barely made a dent in sweeping away the rain. It was as if the world was crying right along with me.

As we made our way toward the go-kart track, I cleared the fog from the window and wondered what poor dummy would be out there in the rain. A large black umbrella came into view. Duct taped to the dummy's shoulder was an old multicolored carpet bag. Of course. Who else but Mary Poppins would come out on such a day? So far, the go-karts were avoiding her, but she was soaked in their spray with every lap. I couldn't help but smile.

"Can you slow down a minute," I said to the driver.

Scared to look—but scared not to—I held my breath and turned toward Huckleberry Hollow. The roof was battened down with several old tires, and the satellite dish was teetering off its plywood, but it was still there. I exhaled and let my head fall back onto the seat. For now, Brad was safe.

Texts were going off on my phone like fireworks on the fourth of July. But I had no room at the moment for my thoughts to be hijacked by anyone. I reached into my backpack and turned my phone off. Once through the construction zone, the driver sped up and exited through the gates of the Pythia front entrance. Moments later the sign for Route 101 South came into view.

I could let my parents know I was coming. I could, but I wasn't going to. It was their surprise to send me away to a technology school. It was my surprise to show up on the doorstep.

We pulled up in front of the house. I grabbed the door handle. And froze. What if my parents didn't want me home? The car windows were starting to steam up, and the Uber driver sat motionless, listening to his GPS directions for his next pickup. He glanced over his shoulder, "You good?"

I nodded and opened the car door, but before my feet hit the ground, I turned to the driver. "Can you stay here for just a minute?"

An exasperated sigh followed, which seemed to mean yes. I stepped out into the crunch of leaves and looked up at the window of my bedroom. A warm feeling washed all over me. I had been away for only a couple of weeks, but it felt like years.

I threw the door to my house open. My mom and dad were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Their eyes widened, “Nina! We’ve been so worried. Everyone is looking for you. How you’ve scared us all.”

They flew out of their chairs with their arms wide open, wrapping me in hugs, and covering me in kisses.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I said.

“Ditto for us in spades,” Dad said.

Mom beamed, took my cheeks in her hands, and kissed both of them a few times each. Tears filled her eyes, which got me all teary-eyed too.

“Good grief. A waterworks show,” Dad said, and we grouped hugged just like we did when I was little.

“I need to show you Rosie,” I said, opening my backpack. I carefully unwrapped the tissue and set her on the kitchen table. Mom’s face lit up.

“Aw honey, I feel like Rosie is another daughter!”

“Yeah, I guess because she is like a sister to me,” I said.

I opened my laptop and showed Rosie flowing through a Warrior series, followed by a Tree and then finishing with a Triangle pose that led into a Half Moon. Their oohs and ahhs said it all.

“I still have some work to do on her. I couldn’t wait any longer to introduce you.”

My mom stared into the screen. “She is a beautiful new star. You’ve come so far with her.”

“She is, well,” Dad mumbled from over my shoulder, “doing quite a complex kabuki dance. And I hear you’ve become quite the software sleuth. Willameana Joy called me when you went missing.”

“Professor Joy called you?”

“Yes, she was worried when she couldn’t connect with you after your, well, shall we call it your meeting? Is it true what you did for that young man?”

“She told you?” I said as my eyes turned into saucers.

“Yes, she was proud you trusted in what you thought was right even when no one else stepped up to help.”

“I knew Brad didn’t do anything wrong. Someone had to show them the way to the truth,” I said and swallowed, “but accepting the ugliness about a person I considered, well, a good friend was hard.”

Dad took me by the hand. “In science, it’s said that truths are easy to understand once they are discovered. What you’ve found out today is truths are not so easy when personal feelings are attached.”

“We are so proud of you, Nina,” Mom added. “But the good news is it appears you have found your binary star.”

I shrugged as I always did when I had no idea what was meant in her space speak.

“Oh, right,” she said. “It’s a system of two stars that orbit around each other.”

My mouth dropped open. Brad was my binary star? That was a scary thought.

A long series of honking from the Uber out front sounded. “Oh, that’s my ride.”

Dad squeezed my hand tightly. “Does P. design enrich you?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

“Then you need to return.” He sighed. “But maybe stay through dinner? We miss you so very much.”

“I didn’t know you cared that I was gone,” I mumbled under my breath.

“Oh, baby,” Mom’s voice cracked, “know that constant as the stars above, you are always loved.”

## Epilogue



“How did you get the zodiac signs to shimmer in Rosie’s background?” Jericka exclaims as she looks over my shoulder at the Robot Café counter.

I glance over at Brad. “It’s not so hard when you have a software Houdini to help. He can magically get Rosie out of any fix I put her in.”

“Yeah, and poor Rosie has been put to the test. Nina somehow finds a way to get her on the hairy edge of every software issue possible,” Brad replies.

I grin. When Brad isn’t busy with Project Golden Arm, he’s been helping me with Rosie. She hasn’t morphed into a blimp even once. The old Nina—the one who was afraid of making a mess out of Rosie with every key stroke—learned there was nothing I could do to Rosie that couldn’t be corrected. And I had Brad to thank for that.

And as for Josh—well he hasn’t been around school much since the day he saw no option but to turn himself in as the thief. He will probably never be allowed within a mile of

Project Golden Arm. But rather than expel him, Professor Joy decided to keep him on as lead hacker in charge of detecting any security holes, working alongside Edgy Reggie, which is of course worse than any punishment. I can't say I miss him. He was so deceptive. Just the thought of him gives me a bitter taste on my tongue.

My apology to Missy about laughing at her at the Robot Café when I didn't know she was hearing impaired was heartfelt. After seeing her struggle to order a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows, I started an after-school club to teach Marilyn Monroebot sign language, and I got Brad to lead it. Like always, he said that would be way over his head, couldn't be done, no way, no how, but then he went to the other side of the world on an Internet search and found a group of students that had created a signing robotic hand. Marilyn can now understand a few hand signals, important stuff like *marshmallow* and *hot chocolate*. She's not up for a tropical coconut blend just yet, but at least Missy can now order her favorite drink without feeling uncomfortable.

Turning to Marilyn, I feel my smile widen. Jericka is busily painting Marilyn's fingernails in every color of the unicorn rainbow. Big fake eyelashes have been fitted over her spooky blue eyes that are now programmed to scan the horizon every few seconds. It didn't exactly fix her eerie stare, but it was a start.

"Whoa, those colors would look great woven into your braids," Conner whispers to Jericka. I glance over at him smiling at her, who as usual is ignoring his adoring stare.

A month ago, I was judging all my friends as dweeby techies. Now I'm sitting here among them, feeling a part of a group like I never had before. Finally an enrichment experience I didn't have to move on from because there's no other place on earth that could be more enriching than this.

“Anyone have some hunch-think about how far robots will evolve with their abilities to sign?” Missy asks as she reaches out to touch Marilyn’s hand.

Jericka sits down and seals up her bottles of nail glitter. I owe it to her for knowing that if I’d withheld the truth about Josh, I would regret it forever. I sighed heavily.

“Nina?” Brad whispers as the rest of the group talks about how their own hunch-think. “Has something upset you?”

The thought of not trusting my gut and doing right by Brad must have shown on my face. “This may sound really weird, but I almost made a bad decision when I saw Josh was the thief.” My voice starts to quiver, and a lump settles in my throat. “I’m ashamed I even thought about not standing up to him.”

“Pretty boys seem to have that effect on girls,” Brad says with a smile.

I snort-giggle and feel heat climb up my neck. Girls seem to play up to a guy when he has a set of crystal-blue eyes, but the depth and sparkle in Brad’s brown eyes could never be found in the lighter shades. And the way he looks at me makes me think maybe he sees something unique in my eyes as well.

I cover my face with my hands to cool my cheeks, try to swallow what feels like a hair ball in my throat, and rejoin the conversation, which has moved on to the legend of the Pythia women.

“It’s not just their ability to foretell the future,” I say. “It’s paying attention to the clues along the way.”

I stop when they all look at me like I’ve grown a third eye. Just maybe, it wasn’t really the mist in a cave that gave them powers to foretell the future. Could it be that going deep in the earth allowed them to take the time to study the clues the uni-



verse provided? I stare up at the Pythia statue and silently let her know I'm going to keep trusting my hunch-think.

Sometimes, at night when I lie awake, I wonder if the spirits of the Pythia women really haunt this place. I touch the tarot card I keep in my pocket. When I asked around about the gypsy woman who tossed the tarot card to me at the concert, no one could remember seeing her. My mom always said keeping my heart open would allow me to feel the magic of the universe.

Maybe she was right.



**To see Nina's creation of Rosie's yoga website go to:**

<https://scratch.mit.edu/projects/790904565/>



## Discussion Questions



1. During orientation, Nina felt she wasn't as smart as some of her classmates. Do any of you feel that way when learning new things?
2. A quote by Steve Jobs, "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life" is written on a poster in Brad's trailer. What does that saying mean to you?
3. Nina started doing a lot of yoga to control some anxiety she was having. Do you think there are other reasons to practice yoga?
4. The scoreboard of trial and error hung at the driverless go-kart track and Nina says she needs to teach that pose to Rosie. Do you believe new skills you learn or inventions always goes through a process of trial and error?
5. Is Jericka a friend that challenges Nina? Give an example.

6. Brad talks about robots doing repetitive tasks like making French fries and coffee. What other jobs might robots someday take over?
7. Why do you think Josh experienced an ugly mood swing the night the crystal cap was stolen?
8. What does it mean to *know thyself*, *know thy strength*, when facing up to a difficult choice or situation?
9. Nina feels that Rosie is her best friend. Brad is very attached to Marilyn Monroebot. Do any of you feel a special fondness for something you've created?
10. Both Professor Joy and Brad said creating an animation or computer code was like following the steps of a recipe for making cookies. Are following a set of directions easy or difficult for you?
11. Does this book make you want to learn more about creating your own animation? If so, the open source free software Nina used can be found at <https://scratch.mit.edu/>. There are many easy to follow tutorials to help you learn how to create games, animations, and stories. And its fun.

## Author's Note



In 1980, I was a recent college graduate from the University of Maryland, waitressing and living with my parents. I actually liked being a waitress. But moving back into my little girl bedroom with pink floral wallpaper was not part of my plan.

One day, my engineering professor father told me this age of technology was here to stay and I should take a few computer classes. He said I would be able to get a good job and even afford to move out of their house. The being able to move out part of the discussion was intriguing. On the other hand, the computer classes were not part of the vision I had for my future, but I understood the sense in it.

There was a lot for me to learn. The courses were challenging. But it paid off. A couple years later I was working for a Fortune 100 computer company. And still do! It's been an incredibly interesting and well-paying career. And I'm living proof that you don't have to be a one-dimensional human being to thrive. I'm also a mother, certified yoga instructor, master gardener, and teach kids to code in SCRATCH.

Now here is the reason I wrote this book: too many kids don't ever consider engineering, science, or computers part of their career path. There is an incredible shortage of people entering these fields and companies are begging for talent. The side benefit is its pretty darn interesting to be part of an industry that is harnessing the future through technology.

My hope is this book will provide an entertaining experience for kids as well as envision technology possibilities.



