LITTLE SISTERS

*A Brief Fable*

Written by

Hans Bauer

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### LITTLE SISTERS

There we were, the four of us chillaxin’ on the curb outside Mr. Peabody’s convenience store; chillin’ because we didn’t have anything better to do, and relaxin’ because, well, exact same thing, we didn’t have anything better to do.

It was just another Friday afternoon. There was nothing whatsoever to set it apart. Four sixth graders, three aged twelve, and me, who had only recently turned thirteen, sat sipping sodas and sharing a bag of Twizzlers. We all wore our Girl Scout uniforms.

We’d been sitting there for at least an hour, ever since school let out at two-thirty, and had long grown bored with making small talk and quizzing each other about our plans for the weekend. We had no real plans to speak of. We weren’t old enough for much of a social life, there weren’t any movies we especially wanted to see, and it was too soon for another sleepover. The week before, we’d gone door-to-door selling boxes of Thin Mints, Peanut Butter Patties, and Tagalongs, but that was over until next year.

Sometimes, I almost, but not quite, wished that school lasted seven days a week. Then at least we’d have something to pass the empty hours. There wasn’t much to do other than what we always did, which pretty much amounted to—well, I already said, not a whole lot. We sighed, idly kicked at some litter, and decided we’d spend the weekend hanging at my place, whatever that meant.

Oh, I forgot to mention—my name is Jessie, Jessie Ventura. If that sounds familiar, which it probably doesn’t, although your parents may have heard of him, it’s because I was named after a bald-headed wrestler, who later became a state governor, something I’ve never been too crazy about, being named after a bald-headed wrestler, I mean. Once, when I was eight, my parents let me change it to anything I wanted, and for some reason I chose Stephanie, but by the end of the first day, after everyone at school started calling me Step On Me, I changed it back.

Anyway, if you haven’t already guessed, I was in a foul mood. I couldn’t wait to grow up. It was just no darn fun being thirteen. I was sick and tired of the snot-nosed boys my own age. I was frustrated by having to behave like the kind of moron everyone expected me to be. I sometimes felt like I was invisible, like maybe I didn’t even exist, and that nobody had bothered to notice.

We’d sunk into a prolonged silence when a fancy car pulled up, and out climbed a cute older guy. He must have been around seventeen or eighteen, probably a high school junior or senior, or maybe a college freshman.

I snapped out of my stupor, straightened my skirt, and beamed a flirtatious smile. The guy smiled back and adjusted the knot of his tie as he entered the store. That seemed kind of weird since he wasn’t wearing a tie, until it dawned on me that he was making fun of my knotted scarf, which was part of my uniform. I was so upset that I whipped it off, along with my sash decorated with at least two-dozen hard-won merit badges, and tossed them in the gutter with the empty soda cans and candy wrappers. My besties, Sasha, Emma, and Leah, had to restrain me from stripping off the rest of my uniform right then and there in the parking lot. They also had to remind me that I’d been appointed the “keeper of the flame” in the annual Girl Scout pageant, combined with a talent show, to be performed in the school auditorium the following Monday.

“No way, no day,” I protested. I was on the verge of tears.

Minutes later, a shiny black Lexus pulled up in front of the store. My brand-new stepmom had arrived to pick us up. The new Mrs. Ventura had recently married my dad, Albert.

On the ride home, the four of us crammed in the back seat, my friends couldn’t help but notice the not-so-subtle ways Mrs. Ventura talked down to me. I guess it was pretty obvious, because they kept nudging me and casting sidelong glances, but at the time I didn’t have a clue. My dad had been single for quite a while, but unlike a lot of kids in my situation, I was thrilled at the idea of having a new stepmom. I missed my real mom dearly, but time had passed and I was ready for a family.

At home up in my bedroom, I hung with my friends. They finally got around to mentioning that the new Mrs. Ventura seemed, well sort of creepy. They hemmed and hawed and said there really wasn’t any other way to put it, which right away made me upset and protective of my new stepmom.

The four of us fell into a sulky silence.

After a while, we heard a car pull into the drive. We gathered at an upstairs window and looked down on a totally sick convertible Beamer and the new arrival behind the wheel—the other recent addition to my family—my new older stepsister, Belinda. Next to her sat her boyfriend, Drew. Marissa, Belinda’s best friend and sorority sister, sat in back.

Their voices drifted up to the window. It sounded like Drew and Belinda were in the middle of a nasty spat—Drew trying to get her to call off the “exchange” ball that Belinda had planned for that very evening. The exchange was to be between Belinda’s sorority, the ALPHA TAU OMEGAS, and the number one fraternity on the “row,” the ultra-happening DELTA PHI DELTS. I had no idea what they meant by ‘row,’ but obviously it had to do with a row of something, like, things in a row.

If you don’t already know, a sorority is a female social club for college students, and a fraternity is the same thing, except it’s for guys. Their names are always made up of Greek letters, but don’t ask me why.

I listened and learned. Drew’s own fraternity, KAPPA GAMMA, was no longer the top fraternity on the row, and it gave Belinda a lot of satisfaction to tell him so. Drew loathed the arrogant Delts. They had achieved a well-earned reputation for being louts and oafs and generally all-around buffoons. Belinda thought otherwise and dismissed Drew’s rude remarks. She knew that the ball, if it went off without a hitch, would give her sorority a status boost, and would definitely be a feather in her cap as the social committee chairperson who had pulled off this strategic and excellent union.

Up in my bedroom, we gawked as Drew stormed off to mope.

I immediately worshipped my new stepsister. As far as I was concerned, Belinda represented everything I wanted to be—nineteen, drop-dead gorgeous, with an incredible car, and an absolute hunk for a boyfriend, because really, what more could any recently just turned teen girl ask for?

My friends and I crept downstairs and eavesdropped some more as Belinda and Marissa discussed the details for that evening’s ball; they had already made arrangements for a killer band, designer gowns, flowers, food, printed napkins, and special security. Again, I marveled at how absolutely perfectly perfect my new stepsister was. I was utterly, positively enthralled by the event they were discussing, and would have done just about anything to be able to attend.

That evening, after my friends had left, my dad, the new Mrs. Ventura, Belinda, Marissa, and I, sat around the dinner table. It had already been decided that I’d be joining my parents for a weekend getaway, a chance to have some fun while getting to better know each other. But now, it turned out that the new Mrs. Ventura wasn’t all that happy with me tagging along, and didn’t mind saying so. Under pressure, my dad asked if I wouldn’t rather stay at home and get to better know my stepsister. I loved the idea, but Belinda turned twelve shades of gray.

She quickly reminded everyone that this would be the most important night of her life, and there wouldn’t be a second to spare entertaining a “little girl.”

My new stepmom calmed her daughter’s concerns by saying she’d already changed the previous plan, that I would be spending the weekend with a neighbor.

Belinda heaved an enormous sigh of relief.

I felt like I’d been run over by a train.

After dinner, my father hugged me good-bye while my stepmom waited beside the Uber that would take them to the airport. My overnight bag sat beside me in the driveway. As they drove away, I could see a tiny, elderly woman standing on the wide, rickety porch of the house across the street. She gave a little wave and beckoned me over. I picked up my bag and reluctantly made the long walk across the street.

The woman who met me on the porch was about eighty years old. Her name was Lainie Ohlendorf. Beside her stood her pot-bellied, balding, child-like, self-centered, and totally unhip son. Big Bob Ohlendorf, who looked like he was fifty, still lived with his mommy. He wasted no time reminding me that I’d had borrowed his Slinky when I was six, and had yet to return it. Apparently, Big Bob had a long memory. Then he wanted to show me some magic tricks, but I politely declined.

Inside, the house smelled like rose water, old blankets, and medicine. The couches and chairs were covered with plastic slipcovers, there were a bunch of small tables, all covered with lace doilies, and the wallpaper looked like it belonged in another century.

Totally miserable, I retired to the guest bedroom, where the first thing I noticed was a small plate of Girl Scout cookies—Caramel de-Lites to be exact—perched on one of the bed pillows—the very same cookies I’d sold the old lady only the week before. I slumped on the saggy four-poster bed covered in a threadbare quilt. After spending a fair amount of time feeling sorry for myself, I thumbed through the current issue of Vogue, which I had stashed in my bag. I looked at the endless ads showing successful, beautiful young women with handsome men on their arms. I paused to skim the endless fashion, beauty, and dating tips. I so desperately wished that someone would wave a magic wand so that I was suddenly older and living the good life, which was when Big Bob burst into the room and asked if I wanted to play Twister. Sorry, not sorry, but I couldn’t take any more and slammed the door shut in his face.

I put my ear to the door and listened as Big Bob rushed into the kitchen to complain about my rude behavior. His mother must have yanked his ear because I heard him yelp. She told him to behave and stop bothering their guest.

Back on the bed, I tossed the magazine aside and stared at the ceiling. Now what was I supposed to do? Twiddle my thumbs for the next forty-eight hours? Count and recount the thousands of miniature white roses on the patterned carpet? I could spend the time on the phone with my friends, but I was still upset with them for what they’d said about my stepmom.

I swung my feet off the bed, stepped towards an antique dresser, and picked through the items arranged there on a porcelain tray. It held a crystal box with some old buttons in it, a silver hand mirror, and an antique hair brush set. I slowly ran the brush through my hair. Normally, I wasn’t too keen on using other people’s brushes, but it was quite lovely and I didn’t see any hair in it.

After I’d made double sure the door was locked, I dared to open one of the dresser drawers and found assorted rings, pins, and clips set with precious stones. I didn’t know if they were real or fake, I didn’t know about that kind of stuff. I had a pretty good idea that I’d never be a geologist or a gemologist or whatever it was called. After that, I turned to an old, fancy-stitched sampler hanging on the wall kind of sideways. It probably hadn’t been straight for a long, long time, so I straightened it, stepped back for a good look, and then straightened it again. Finally, I read the embroidered words:

Count that day lost whose low descending sun

Views from thy hand no worthy action done

It was signed—Lainie Ohlendorf, Pokeepsie, NY, 1972. Holy cow, I thought—1962. Whoa, old lady Ohlendorf stitched that like about a zillion years ago.

I’d been eyeballing my reflection in the mirror of a humongous armoire, feeling sorry for myself again. For some reason, I decided to open it and see what was inside. I knew better than to go around poking in other people’s stuff, but then decided it really wasn’t that big a deal. I opened the armoire’s mirrored door. It was full of old dresses hanging on a wooden pole. Not much of interest there. I was about to close it when something caught my eye; an exquisite old-timey taffeta gown with beaded accents, and large, eye-catching rhinestone buttons. I removed it from its hanger and closed the door. I expected the gown would smell of mildew and mothballs, but instead, I detected just the faintest trace of lilacs. I held it up to myself and posed before the mirror.

My heart gave a little start when someone knocked on the door. I assumed it was probably Big Bob come to see if I’d changed my mind about Twister or showing me a magic trick. Not wanting to hurt his feelings again, I reluctantly said, “Come in.” Before saying it, I quickly stuffed the dress under the quilt and tried to smooth it over.

But it wasn’t Big Bob.

Lainie entered and began to apologize for her son’s behavior. While she was speaking, the old lady’s crinkly eyes strayed to a patch of taffeta peeking from under the quilt. I was embarrassed to be caught red-handed. I tried to explain that I hadn’t meant any harm, that I’d just been curious. To my great relief, instead of giving me a lecture about not rooting around where I had no business, the kindly old lady gave me a pep talk. She told me not to be afraid to go after my dreams, that the world was my oyster. I had tried an oyster once, didn’t much like it, and had no clue what she was going on about.

Lainie explained that oysters produced pearls, which were objects of great value, and that once you had the oyster, it gave up the pearl without much of a fight. However, getting the pearl meant the oyster first had to be opened. But despite the hardness of the oyster shell, they could be opened with ease. I was still confused, but said I got the idea. Lainie went on to offer a gentle warning, that unless I was willing to take some risks in my life, there was a good chance I might wind up just like Big Bob. Yes, she actually said that.

She asked whether I’d like to join her for some late-night Netflix, Hulu, or whatever, promised that I could pick the movie, and that Big Bob would no longer bother me. We could watch something on the Disney channel, if that suited me. On the inside, I groaned, but on the outside, I said “No, thanks,” I was pretty tired, I’d just do some homework and then call it a night.

As soon as Lainie was gone, I got on my cell.

Not long after that, I climbed out of the guest room window where Sasha was hiding in the shrubbery, waiting for me.

As we walked past the streetlamps lining the sidewalk, I swore that from that moment on I would no longer be treated like a little kid.

Sasha asked if I was serious about dropping out of Girl Scouts.

“You better believe it, absolutely,” I answered. “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

She asked what I had in mind for the evening.

I said I planned to visit my stepsister at the “row,” because, after all, Belinda seemed perfectly willing to have me stay with her for the weekend when we’d talked about it around the dinner table.

Sasha just smirked and rolled her eyes.

I called an Uber to pick us up at the corner of so-and-so. After it arrived, we went to pick up Emma and Leah.

The driver asked where we wanted to go next, and I told him to take us to the “row.”

“Which row?” he wanted to know.

“The one over by the college,” I answered, although I wasn’t so sure myself. But the driver seemed to know what I was talking about.

After picking up Emma and Leah, we finally arrived at the ‘row.’ The tree-lined street was aglow with fraternity and sorority houses. We approached the first house on the block, which sat behind an electric gate set in a high brick wall. We would have to wait until the gate opened for someone wanting to drive through. It wasn’t long before a car drove up, and we quickly slipped through the gate before it closed again.

Once inside the house, we didn’t see any sorority sisters. Instead, the corridors were alive with the coming and goings of nearly bare young men draped in towels and robes. Holy smokes, we were in the wrong place. It was crazy! We were in a frat house. The guys were rockin’ out as music blasted from every open door. Some were drinking beer, or playing video games, but most were getting ready for the evening’s “exchange.” The air reeked of cologne. Tuxedos were being delivered.

The four of us had never been so embarrassed. Well, three of us, anyway; everyone but me wanted to get out of there, like pronto, but no one paid us the slightest bit of attention. They probably all assumed we were someone’s little sisters, come to visit an older brother.

We were about to retrace our steps back to the gated lot, when this totally awesome guy wrapped in a towel emerged from a cloud of steam. He was my idea of a Greek god, the ancient Greeks being a subject we’d recently studied in our world history class. He even smelled like my idea of heaven. We flattened ourselves against the wall as he passed, but like everyone else, he paid us no mind.

I overheard him telling his frat bros that tonight would be his night. He intended to scope out the Alpha women, and the “babe” who blew them all away would be his for the taking. It didn’t much matter who she was with, in fact, it didn’t matter whom he was with, he’d nab her for himself.

There was no time to lollygag, one of my mom’s favorite words—it was time to hook up with Belinda. Outside, unable to pass through the gate, we found ourselves temporarily trapped. We’d have to wait until it opened again to allow a car to pass, but we weren’t alone. Across the lot, I saw a boy. He was slightly older, maybe fourteen. It appeared he was trying to steal a locked bicycle. I leaned against a parked car to watch and accidentally set off the alarm, which emptied out the frat house in about fifteen seconds flat.

Two minutes later, the boy found himself surrounded. He protested that the bike belonged to him. He wasn’t trying to steal it, he was only taking back what already belonged to him, and he could prove it, but he never got a chance. The Delts howled with glee as this ginormous lunk heaved him over the wall and into an open dumpster on the other side.

He then turned to us. We were cornered. One by one, he also tossed us over the wall into the dumpster. No one was hurt, but it certainly was a wild experience, sailing topsy-turvy before landing in a pile of stinky garbage.

The boy climbed out of the dumpster and he was red hot mad. He yelled that if it wasn’t for our meddling, he’d already have his bike back. I waited with outstretched arms, expecting he’d help me out of the dumpster, but he did no such thing. Instead, he turned his back and stalked off.

Emma peeled a banana skin off my shoulder. Sasha peeled a candy wrapper off the back of Leah’s neck.

The four of us finally arrived at the Alpha sorority house, which was just down the street, and made our way inside. Here the air was thick with the smell of perfume, there must have been at least a hundred different scents. Long, swishy, packaged gowns were being delivered as the sorority sisters prepared for their big evening.

Soon, we found Belinda’s room. We knew it was hers because it was filled with her photographs; big photos, little photos, framed and unframed. There was even a fridge-sized poster. I could hear my friends snickering behind my back, but I was so excited to be there.

We settled in to wait for Belinda’s return.

After a short time, there was a knock at the door. It was a guy delivering Belinda’s party gown from a dressmaker. I took the liberty of signing for it. I put it on the bed and we all stood back, dying to see what we’d find underneath the wrapping. We finally talked each other into believing that it wouldn’t hurt to take a peek. Well, the peek led to a glimpse, which led to look, and soon the dress was fully revealed. Before us lay an evening gown worthy of a princess, or a queen, an empress.

I admired it so much that the others coaxed me into trying it on.

At first, I wasn’t so sure, but then I finally agreed.

Ten minutes later, I was wearing Belinda’s gown. It was several sizes too large, but my friends had tucked the waist and hemmed the full, flared skirt. The strapless bodice had been stuffed with a pair of socks. We’d gone a lot further than we’d first intended. I had even put on some of Belinda’s makeup. My hair had been styled, swept, and pinned on top of my head. By the way, I’m kind of tall for my age, which helps explain a lot of what happened later that night.

My friends told me to close my eyes and steered me in front of a full-length mirror.

When I opened them again, I couldn’t believe my reflection. I was a total knockout and could easily pass for at least seventeen or eighteen. It was like looking into the future, a miraculous transformation if ever there was one.

Suddenly, the door flew open with a loud bang. A hulking figure wearing a ski mask burst into the room. We all froze. The invader quickly looked from Sasha, to Emma, to Leah, then settled on the young woman wearing the gown. Without further ado, he tossed a sheet over my head, hoisted me over his shoulder, and disappeared back through the door.

Sasha, Emma, and Leah stood speechless.

I kicked and screamed, but it was no use. The sheet slipped a little and I could see with one eye. Up and down the corridor other doors flew open as masked barbarians emerged with sheet and blanket-shrouded ladies draped over their shoulders.

Outside on the ‘row,’ the kidnappers quickly loaded us into a grungy school bus. A bunch of fancy cars followed the bus as it drove into the night. When we stopped at a traffic light, some of us tried to escape, but it was no use, because we each had a guy guarding us.

The bus wove through a maze of dark streets deep into the inner city. I sat on a bench trembling like a leaf. Up and down the aisle, the bus was packed with moaning, wailing, brown and white ghosts.

Along the way, the driver pulled off his mask and tossed it out the window. It was Drew—Belinda’s ex beau—laughing like a loon.

Drew parked the bus in the worst and most dangerous part of town. After securing a padlock across the door, he climbed into one of the waiting cars and high-fived his frat brothers. Their smug banter faded as they vanished back into the tangle of city streets.

Finally, all was still and silent and I yanked off the sheet. There was no sign of our abductors. I peered out my filthy window. I had no idea where I was, but like I already said, it didn’t look good.

Assorted creeps strolled past and tried to look inside the bus. Someone rattled the door. Someone else tapped on the windows and taunted the terrified captives.

There was only one thing on my mind—I needed to get back to the ‘row’ before Belinda discovered that her gown was missing. While the rest of the ladies moaned and wailed and wrung their hands, I decided I couldn’t count on anyone else and would have to rescue myself. The front door was locked, so that wasn’t going to work. It was the same with the back door. I finally had an idea and wondered why I hadn’t thought of it earlier. Lying on my back, I kicked out a window.

Careful not to damage the gown, I climbed through to freedom.

The rest of the debutantes soon got the hint and followed my lead.

I ran down the street hoping to find a policeman, but there were none to be found. Rounding a dark corner, I bumped smack-dab into a kid on a skateboard. Actually, the impact knocked him right on his skinny butt. A closer look revealed it was the wannabe bicycle thief with whom I’d briefly shared a dumpster. There was no time to explain. I quickly hopped on his skateboard and streaked away into the dark.

When I looked back, I saw him chasing me down the sidewalk. Sure, someone had just stolen his skateboard, so it was only natural that he’d want it back, but when I put myself in his shoes, I guessed it was something more: the kid was dumbstruck, even if I’m the one saying so. A mirage, a beautiful, sophisticated babe had suddenly come out of the night. Not only was she a wonder to behold, she wasn’t embarrassed to ride off on a kid’s skateboard. It was like an MTV video, when they still showed videos, and he was instantly head-over-heels. He had no choice but to take off after the mystery woman.

After a couple of blocks, when I looked again, he was gone.

I was the first to arrive back at the Alpha house. The Delts were waiting beside their rented limousines that would take them to the gala ball. There was no sign of the Alpha women, and everyone was wondering what had happened to their dates.

I spotted the Greek god, the yummy guy from the frat house, and found the courage to approach him, when someone took hold of my arm. It was Earl, the lunk who’d earlier tossed me in the dumpster. I shrank back and begged him not to do it again. Earl gave me a lunkish stare. He had no clue what I was talking about. He only wanted to ask what had happened to my sorority sisters.

And in that moment, a light bulb suddenly went off in my brain. It was an amazing realization! It occurred to me that so far no one had challenged me, and that I could easily pass for one of the Alpha women.

I climbed into a limo and led the Delts into the inner city to round up my ‘sisters.’

Across town, frightened and disoriented on the maze of dark streets, the Alpha’s were wandering in all directions. The Delts in their caravan gradually collected their dates. It took some time, but eventually all were present and accounted for.

I shared my limo with Earl and Belinda’s friend, Marissa. When I first climbed inside, I was instantly convinced that I’d been busted. But Marissa, again to my great surprise, also failed to recognize me. She asked who my date might be. I hemmed, hawed, and stammered. Thinking I was somehow dateless, Marissa insisted I accompany them to the ball.

Finally, arriving at a high-class hotel, I climbed from the limousine. Floodlights shone on the hotel’s ornate facade. Flashbulbs popped all around. My heart lodged in my throat as I joined the Delts and Alphas on the crimson carpet leading from the sidewalk to the hotel entrance. Not that I would know, but it must have been like attending a movie premier.

I was swept into the vast hotel lobby ablaze with warm, golden light. A wide, winding staircase led to a huge ballroom where I paused to catch my breath and soak up my surroundings. An enormous chandelier hung suspended from the domed ceiling. Dozens of round tables draped in eggshell-colored tablecloths encircled a parquet dance floor. Each table featured a glorious arrangement of fresh cut flowers in cut glass vases. On one side was a bandstand. A balcony overlooked a courtyard fountain surrounded by decorative shrubs and trees strung with tiny twinkling lights.

It was magical, like something from a fairytale.

I quickly became the Belle of the Ball.

When the band launched into a slow ballad, Marissa insisted that Earl dance with me. He was a clumsy dancer, and I wasn’t much better, but I didn’t mind. I was completely transported by this enchanted evening, in a world of my own. Around and around I slowly spun and spun, and no one there could take their eyes off me. If it had been a movie, the camera would have caressed me as I slowly twirled, finally arriving at the floor to reveal my filthy high-topped sneakers, but you’d have to look real close to see them. But this wasn’t a movie and my sneakers were the only things that everyone failed to notice.

But that wasn’t the end of it, because then all the guys wanted a turn with me. When I finally needed a break and had to politely turn them down, Marissa coaxed me into singing with the band. I mounted the bandstand like a sleepwalker and stepped to the microphone. I peered dreamily across the sea of expectant faces, closed my eyes, and began to sing. The song was “Sarah,” by Fleetwood Mac, a popular group from long before my time. It had been one of my mother’s favorites, one that we often sang together before the divorce.

While I was singing, I saw the Greek god, the guy from the frat house, pushing through the crowd. Finally, he stood right below the bandstand, fixed his orbs on me, and beamed a radiant smile.

I could feel myself melt.

After I finished my song to wild applause, the ‘god guy’ made his move. He joined me on the bandstand and stood extra close. He whispered that his name was Troy. I could smell that he’d been drinking, and I don’t mean ginger ale.

But I didn’t care. By this time, I was in seventh heaven.

When the band began to play again, Troy suggested we head for the balcony, where we could hear each other better.

All around, as we wove through the ballroom, people whispered and nodded in our direction. I heard several of the Alpha women taking credit for pledging the “mystery” girl, or had a story about how she’d scored a perfect 1600 her SAT’s, or how it was a *fait accompli* (at the time, I didn’t know what that meant, but afterward I Googled it. Apparently, it’s French), that the “mystery” Alpha would be the sorority president after their next election.

Once we were alone on the balcony, Troy played the poor, lost puppy, claiming that his date Belinda had stood him up. The evening was over for him and the only reason he hadn’t left was because Marissa had suggested that he and I should get to know each other better.

I was trying to think of something flirty or clever to say, when we were interrupted by loud voices coming from the courtyard. Below, I witnessed Belinda and her ex, Drew, in a heated argument. She was throwing a hissy fit because she’d just come from the Alpha house where she’d discovered her gown was missing. She’d also heard about the kidnapping prank and accused Drew of being the mastermind. He didn’t deny it, so she dumped a pitcher of strawberry punch on his head. He got back at her by bumping her into the fountain. Clearly, their romance was over.

Just outside, through the glass entrance doors, I saw the wannabe bicycle thief arguing with a hotel security guard. Obviously, the kid didn’t have a ticket, so he wasn’t allowed inside. I shrank back, hoping he wouldn’t see me, but it was too late. Looking up, he caught a glimpse, which really wound him up. He tried to bolt into the hotel, but a security guy yanked him back, shut the door in his face, and stood guard.

My faithful friends Sasha, Emma, and Leah had also arrived. They managed to poke their heads in the ballroom and tried to tell me to clear out, but I pretended not to see or hear them. Things were spinning out of control, but I was still having too much fun to call it a night.

When I excused myself to visit the powder room, I heard a familiar voice outside my stall. It was Marissa. I peeked out to see whom she was talking to. OMG! It was Belinda! It took me a moment to recognize her because she was soaked to the bone, a disheveled wreck. Her eyes blazed when Marissa commented on the “mystery” girl who was wearing a gown identical to the one Belinda had ordered from the dressmaker. After I heard them leave, I waited a while to make sure they were really gone. Then I returned to the ballroom.

The evening was winding down and midnight was fast approaching. By this time, most of the party people had already departed to their rented suites on the upper floors. After Troy and I finished a romantic dance and shared a glass of punch, he coyly suggested we attend a party in his suite.

Against my better judgment, I allowed him to escort me to the elevators. The last thing I saw before the door closed was a busboy who looked a lot like the bicycle thief, which, if true, I had to admit was a clever way of getting into the hotel.

On the ride up, my heart was pounding a million beats a minute. Everything was happening superfast, and I was swept along, like a barrel about to go over Niagara Falls.

High above the city, the upper-floor parties had already turned to booze and unruly shenanigans (another one of my mom’s favorite words). Troy’s frat brothers hooted and hollered as he steered me through a crowded suite to an unoccupied bedroom.

By then, I had finally come to my senses. I knew I’d allowed things to go too far. I was in way over my head, but didn’t know what to do.

What if Troy tried to kiss me?

Or worse?

Should I slap him?

Should I punch him in the stomach?

Should I knee him in the groin?

Should I scream bloody murder?

Or maybe all of the above?

I was sure that if I tried to make a run for it, he’d catch me before I got to the door, and there was no telling what would happen then.

So instead, I inched along the wall trying to avoid his reach. I think I may have knocked over a lamp. But finally, he had me cornered. Troy the Greek God was about to turn into Troy the Wolf. He was starting to lean close, probably expecting a kiss, when there came a loud knock at the door. He yelled at whomever it was to “take a hike” and leave us the heck alone, although I don’t think he said “heck.” The knock came again, louder and more insistent this time. Troy hissed and stepped to the door. He was about to lock it when it suddenly flew open, and that busboy burst in. It was the wannabe bike thief. He immediately picked a fight, even though Troy was almost a foot taller. During their shoving match, I slowly backed away to the door. I escaped into the corridor and was met by my friends who’d also somehow slipped into the hotel, and wasted no time telling me that my fantasy was about to go up in smoke.

Belinda was on her way up!

The four of us quickly bounded down a rear stairwell and slipped out of the hotel in the nick of time.

And then I was running, faster than I’d ever run before. I led the way, my gown bunched around my waist. We made our way back to the ‘row’ and the Alpha house where the walls were covered with fresh graffiti. It didn’t take a genius to know this had everything to do with Drew and his Kappa frat brothers.

Inside, the house was dark and empty. We bolted upstairs to Belinda’s room, where I quickly began to strip off my gown. I had just removed the socks from the bodice when the lights suddenly came on. I froze and blinked as my eyes adjusted.

OMG, there stood Belinda!

And beside her stood Troy!

And between them stood the wannabe bicycle thief!

Oh, brother, what a mess!

I peeled off one of my sneakers and threw it at Troy. It bounced off his head and hit the wall. Everyone jumped a little when Belinda’s poster came loose and flapped to the floor.

Before anyone could speak, my furious stepsister grabbed my hair and dragged me into the bathroom. She shoved my head under the faucet and began scrubbing off my makeup. When she’d finished, she dragged me back into the bedroom and presented the impostor for all to see. My hair had come undone and stuck to my face in long, wet strands. I had raccoon eyes. Some of the makeup hadn’t washed away and drip, drip, dripped onto the gown. I must have looked like a ghoul.

Even if I lived to be two hundred, I couldn’t imagine ever being so embarrassed and humiliated again.

Troy’s jaw unhinged. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Was it possible that the recent Bell of the Ball was just a scrawny little kid, was just—well, me?

The bike thief’s eyes bugged. Could I possibly be the same babe he’d been chasing all night, the one who’d jumped on his skateboard and sped away into the dark?

I tried to make a brave face, but then the tears began and I couldn’t stop sobbing.

I dashed back into the bathroom where my friends helped me out of the gown and into my own clothes, and then steered me out the door.

Glancing back, I saw the bike kid shaking his head, mumbling something about how life could be so unfair.

Then Sasha, Emma, Leah, and I began the long walk home. When we got there, at around three in the morning, after we’d all hugged and said goodnight, I made the even longer walk across the street to old lady Ohlendorff’s, whose house would still smell of rose water and old blankets and some kind of medicine, but this time I wouldn’t mind so much. There was no way I was going to ring the doorbell, so I climbed back in through the window. Fortunately, Big Bob wasn’t still awake practicing his magic act.

Two days later, Monday afternoon after school, the auditorium was packed for the annual Easter talent show, something I’d been dreading, for like, forever; but that was before the weekend that pretty much destroyed my life. You can imagine how I must have felt after it was all over and done and there was no way to turn back the clock or climb in a time machine and start all over. I was mortified, which is a pretty good word and one I highly recommend because it’s a whole bunch of words all rolled into one, meaning you’ve been embarrassed or shamed or whatever. You could also use crushed, irked, or chagrined, but I prefer mortified because the ‘mort’ part has a special dark flavor.

But OMG, thank goodness my dad and the new Mrs. Ventura weren’t there, the reason being, they’d decided to extend their getaway another day or two. Neither was Belinda, maybe because she’d already had her fill embarrassing (okay, humiliating) me. But I guess I can’t really blame here. I mean, what would you have done?

Anyway, the auditorium was humming, standing room only, overflowing with students, teachers, parents, and assorted looky-loos. Everyone had heard about my glorious misadventure. I can’t prove it, but I think even some kids and parents and teachers who didn’t go our school, were also there.

I’d obviously eaten my words, because there I was, once again dressed in my Girl Scout uniform.

When it came time for our troop to perform our on-stage skit, I faltered. I did my very best to recite my childish lines, but it was hopeless. I was convinced my life was over, and who could blame me? I’d so much wanted to grow up as fast as I could and leave all the kiddie stuff behind—and now I was wallowing in it. Making it worse, I got stuck playing a bunny. From the neck down, I was a Girl Scout, but from the neck up, I was Nibbles the Rabbit. I suddenly rushed off the stage and out of the auditorium. Sasha, Emma, and Leah, dressed as Easter eggs, followed me outside.

I tore off my bunny head and stomped it with my foot.

My friends tried their best to make me feel better. They reminded me that it was almost summer, that the school year was almost over, and in September we’d all be in junior high, which would be a whole different experience.

But it was no use. I wasn’t in the mood to look on the bright side. I tried to explain that I wasn’t looking for new surroundings. I wanted something else, something more, something I couldn’t fit into words or put my finger on.

My friends shook their heads and went back inside, leaving me to my misery.

I stood there a long time staring at the ground, and if I wasn’t crying, then I was probably pretty close, but now it’s hard to remember.

When I finally looked up again, I saw this boy standing over by the flagpole, a skateboard tucked under his arm. Imagine my surprise when I realized it was the bicycle thief. I’d never seen him anywhere near Bighorn Canyon Elementary, so I knew he went to a different school, unless he was home schooled, but either way, I couldn’t help wondering whether he’d come looking for me, or whether we just happened to be at the same place at the same time. So, I went over and asked him about it. It was a risky thing to do, because I figured he probably hated me for being such a disappointment, but I swallowed my pride and did it anyway.

He said his name was Walt and that he didn’t just happen to be there. He’d been waiting around hoping to run into me.

I asked how he’d found me in the first place.

Which was when he dug in his backpack and handed me a high-top sneaker. It looked a lot like one of mine, all scuffed and sweaty, but all sneakers eventually look that way, unless you’re a professional basketball player and get to wear a new pair every night.

He turned it in my hand so I could see the magic marker writing on the inside:

PROPERTY OF JESSIE VENTURA

BIGHORN CANYON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

I’d completely forgotten that I’d left one of my sneakers, the one I threw at Troy, in Belinda’s room at the Alpha House, and none of my friends had bothered to tell me as they escorted me home. There was too much going on for any of us to notice.

I also asked how he’d traced me to the hotel.

Walt said that after losing me, he’d finally made it back to the ‘row.’ He’d found his skateboard in front of the Alpha house, but the place was deserted. Well, not entirely. A panicked Sasha, Emma, and Leah were still there. He remembered them from the dumpster. After describing the mystery woman, he’d demanded to know where she’d disappeared to.

He said he was sorry for not helping me out of the dumpster. He sounded like he meant it, and was real sweet about it.

I forgave him and said I was sorry for stealing his skateboard.

We both agreed that it had been an extremely weird night and there wasn’t likely to be another one like it anytime soon.

I’m pretty sure that the next Friday afternoon, if you happened to be looking for Sasha, Emma, and Leah, you’d have found them on the curb outside Mr. Peabody’s, dressed in their Girl Scout uniforms. The only thing different is that I wasn’t there.

I imagine them bored and gabbing about their weekend plans. And since there probably wasn’t a whole lot going on, I’m guessing they’d probably decide to hang.

But not with me.

I had way better things to do.