

## 1. *Life Isn't Fair — Spread the News!*

*"Oh, Randall! I always knew beneath that hard, crusty exterior you were filled with a passion as rich and forbidden as my momma's finest cream custard!"*

*Excerpt from The Cad Who Loved Me by Ima Dormatt*

"Honey, can I talk to you for a moment?" asked my mother.

"Uh-huh," I said without looking up from the pages of my True Romance novel.

"It's important," she said.

"Okay," I murmured as I imagined my majestic white stallion galloping through the pounding surf alongside the powerful steed of the swarthy, dark-haired lover who would rather *die* than be parted from me. My perfect hair fluttered behind me in the wind; my perfect breasts jiggled enticingly beneath the bodice of my long, flowing gown.

My mother leaned across the table and waved her hand in front of my face. Slowly, crashing waves gave way to the muted clink of coffee mugs and cutlery; sea salt smells faded into the fragrant aromas that hung in the air of our little neighborhood café.

"Are you back?" asked my mother.

"I guess," I said, shoving my book into my overnight bag. "What's up?"

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news. You know my friend Vivian?"

"Of course," I nodded, rolling my eyes as I leaned over to take a bite of my giant fried cinnamon bun. "She runs an organic catering business and owns twelve cats. Also, she says she's a vegetarian but she always smells like pork chops."

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"She does *not* smell like pork chops," chuckled my mother, handing me a paper napkin.

"She does to me," I said through my mouthful of food. "Is she in some kind of trouble?"

"No, but I promised her I'd help cater a party this Friday evening."

I shrugged and wiped a dollop of cinnamon goop off my chin. "So you're going to smell like fried pig until next October. It could be worse."

"It is worse," said my mother uncomfortably. "Somehow, Dad and I got our wires crossed and he took an extra shift at the garage Friday evening by mistake. With both of us gone, the café is going to be short-staffed, so ... I'm afraid we're going to need you to stick around here and lend a hand clearing tables and doing dishes."

For a moment, her words hung between us, like a stink in the air. Then I smiled pleasantly.

"No can do, Mom," I said. "I've got the ninth-grade pool party Friday night. I told you about it weeks ago, remember? I was sitting right here in this very seat and I was so excited I kept forgetting not to talk with my mouth full but you were so awesome and supportive that you only mentioned it to me four times." I reached for her hand. "I'll never forget the way we communicated that day, Mom," I said, my voice quivering with emotion. "It really meant a lot to me."

My mother grimaced and pulled her hand away. "I'm sorry, Francie, but it's too late for Dad to get out of his shift."

"No problem!" I said quickly. "Just tell Vivian you can't help her cater the party after all. Tell her you're allergic to cats. And pork."

My mother shook her head. "She only took the job because I told her I'd help. I can't back out now. She'd have to cancel, and that would make her look unprofessional."

"I DON'T CARE HOW IT WOULD MAKE HER LOOK," I said loudly. Three tables over, a businessman in horn-rimmed glasses glanced up. I bugged my eyes out at

him until he ducked back behind his newspaper. Then I took a deep breath and turned to my mother. "What about how it will make *me* look if I don't show up at my pool party, Mom?" I asked urgently. "I'm one of only two ninth-grade representatives on the Student Social Committee. The Dive into Winter event was my idea. Are you trying to tell me that commitments made by your friend are more important than commitments made by your daughter?"

"No ..."

"Well, then, are you trying to teach me that I don't need to honor my commitments?" I asked, widening my eyes as though in shock.

"Of course not!" spluttered my mother.

I flung my arms in the air. "Well, what are you trying to teach me, then? Huh, Mom? Can you answer me that?"

Even before she opened her mouth to reply, I could tell my approach wasn't working. Quickly, I changed tacks.

"Mom, please, PLEASE don't do this to me!" I groveled. "We're going to have access to the hot tub and the sauna — they're going to let us use the high diving board and *everything*. I've never looked forward to anything so much in my entire life, Mom. I'm not kidding! I even bought myself a new bathing suit especially for the occasion."

"I know ..."

"Do you know, Mom? Do you?" I asked. "Do you have any idea how many muffins and cookies and cakes and pies I had to make and sell in order to earn enough money to pay for that bathing suit?"

"A lot?" she guessed in a sympathetic voice.

"That's right!" I cried.

"Those coconut drop cookies you made last weekend were delicious, by the way," she murmured. "In fact, I overheard Bernice Watson from down at the beauty parlor say she's never tasted their equal."

"Really?" I blinked, pressing the palm of my hand against my chest. "She said that?"

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"She certainly did," nodded my mother.

I took another bite of my cinnamon bun and momentarily lost myself in a vision of old Mrs. Watson staggering through the streets in a coconut-drop-cookie-induced rapture, raving to complete strangers about her life-altering dainty experience.

Then my mother's voice interrupted my reverie.

"Oh, no, Table Seven just knocked over his papaya juice," she said. Jumping to her feet, she hurriedly ripped three pages off her waitress pad and handed them to me. "Would you be a sweetie and run these dinner orders back to Dad for me, Francie?"

Frustrated by how neatly I'd been outmaneuvered, I was about to deliver a heartfelt speech on the subject of adding insult to injury when I got an idea so brilliant I nearly laughed aloud. Snatching the orders out of my mother's hand, I bolted for the kitchen like a house on fire.

"DAD!" I hollered, shouldering open the swinging door with such vigor that Marguerite, our short-order cook, accidentally flipped a Salisbury steak onto the floor. "Dad, oh, Dad, did you know about this horrible plan to leave me stuck here like some pathetic loser while everyone else on the planet goes off to the pool party next Friday night?" I cried, trying to look as pitiful as I possibly could. "Did you approve it?"

My startled father looked up from the half-constructed bacon-and-tomato sandwich on the counter in front of him. He was a man of great moral conviction and strength of character, and sometimes, if I worked him just right, I could get him to fold like a cheap garage sale card table.

Unfortunately, this wasn't one of those times.

"I know it's disappointing, Peanut," he said, his voice as soft as chalk. "But there's nothing we can do about it."

I dropped to my knees.

"Dad," I moaned, raising my clasped hands high in the air. "It's not fair! I promised my Social Committee executive

team and our staff adviser that I'd be there. Everyone is counting on me!"

"I don't know what to tell you, Peanut," my father sighed as he turned back to his sandwich. "I wish Mom and I didn't have to take on extra work, but we do. Making ends meet on what we earn from the café has always been a struggle. You know that."

Since I had no good answer for this, I breathed loudly through my nostrils and scowled up at him with all my might. In response, he asked me to go into the back and fetch him a jar of dill pickles. I grudgingly did as he asked, then stalked back out to the dining room, flopped down in my chair and stared moodily at the remains of my cinnamon bun until my mother walked over.

"Holly is here," she said, using her papaya-juice-soaked rag to point to a car idling at the curb outside the café.

Wordlessly, I threw my bag over my shoulder and tried to sweep past my mother in order to show her how deeply the injustice of the situation had hurt me. She completely ruined the effect by telling me I had every right to be angry.

"You had your heart set on something and got the rug pulled out from under you," she said as she reached forward to push my bangs out of my eyes. "I know it's hard, but if you can, try to remember that part of growing up is learning to accept the fact that things don't always work out the way we want them to."

"That's just another way of saying I have to learn to give up," I said loftily. "Tell me, is that what you want, Mom — a daughter who is a *quitter*?"

After assuring me it wasn't, my mother gave me a kiss and a gentle shove out the front door into the bracing January cold. Covering my bare ears with my bare hands, I ran for the backseat of Holly's car, where she sat blowing fog on the cold windows and writing rude phrases in letters just small enough that her mother couldn't read them in the rear-view mirror. When she grinned up at me, the ache of

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knowing all the fun I was going to miss at the pool party brought a lump the size of a cantaloupe to my throat.

*If growing up is about giving up, I thought suddenly as I yanked open the car door and motioned for Holly to shove over, then it just might have to wait until after next Friday night.*



Holly and I had been best friends since the third grade. It was eerie how much we had in common — our birthdays were exactly three months apart, our left big toes were the exact same shape, we could both wiggle one ear but not the other, and we both agreed that boys who ignored us didn't know what they were missing, although Holly would often add that she couldn't give a fiddler's fart about any guy who was too cool to give her the time of day, whereas for some strange reason I'd always found that sort of behavior the icing on the cake.

That night, I waited until we were in pajamas and tucked cozily into her frilly pink bedroom to tell her that my parents were making me work the night of the pool party.

"What?" she cried as she put a final dab of sludge green polish on her baby toenail. "Did you point out to them that this isn't Communist China? Did you remind them that child labor has been illegal in this country for quite some time now?"

"No, but I wish I had!" I said fiercely, holding out my hand for the polish.

Holly gave it to me, then leaned over and blew carefully on her perfectly painted toenails. "Well, did you at least explain to them that if you don't go to the party I'll have no one to go with, so they'll be ruining my life, too?"

"If I had, my mother would just have given me her little speech about how nice it can be to have several good friends instead of just one best friend," I snorted.

We looked at each other and then — at the exact same moment! — pretended to barf with such enthusiasm that

Holly's mother anxiously called up to see what was wrong. After a few more noisy fake retches, we sweetly reassured her that everything was fine. Then I reached down to continue painting my toenails and Holly belted me so hard across the back of the head with her pillow that I smeared polish halfway across my foot. With a snarl, I lunged for her right leg and missed. She shrieked with fake terror and leaped onto her bed, where she bounced around, laughing hysterically and pounding on my head with her pillow until I managed to catch the hem of her flannel pajamas and give a sharp tug. At that point, she lost her balance and came down so hard on the bed that we heard a sharp *crack* from below.

In the silence that followed, we held our breath and listened for the sound of Mrs. Carleson's feet pounding up the stairs to see what we'd destroyed this time. When we heard nothing, we had a good, long giggle. Then I began to scrape the sticky, clumpy, utterly ruined polish from my toenails so I could redo them.

I was only half finished when Holly's little sister, Tabitha, burst into the room unannounced, spied Holly's toes and the gummy green ball between my fingers and started hollering down to her mother that we'd stolen her favorite nail polish. Holly immediately leaped up and started hollering that Tabitha hadn't knocked before entering her room. When Mrs. Carleson hollered up for them both to stop hollering, they hollered for a while longer about how she didn't care about their problems and about how she always favored the other daughter. Then Tabitha whispered that she'd found a stack of love letters her dad had written to her mom when they were engaged, so while Mrs. Carleson continued to holler herself hoarse about the fact that she couldn't bear the household hollering a moment longer, we tiptoed down the hall to her bedroom and laughed ourselves sick reading mushy poems that didn't even rhyme.

Later that evening, after we'd finished watching a

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ridiculous old horror movie in which a giant blob of jelly terrorized a major American city, Holly and I made crank phone calls using the neon pink cell phone she'd gotten for her last birthday. We telephoned Pizza Palace, gave them my address and asked them to deliver thirteen extra-large anchovy pizzas to a fellow named Rory. Then we called our science teacher to see if his bedside phone really would be answered by the algebra teacher with the lopsided breasts, and made several dozen giggling hang-up calls to the homes of cute boys we knew.

I don't know what time it was when I finally crawled into my sleeping bag on the floor beside Holly's bed, but I know I felt content. For a while, we drowsily talked about what I could do to convince my parents to let me go to the pool party, and how to get the boy I had deep feelings for to stop treating me like a turd. Then I quietly asked Holly if she thought it was weird that in *exactly* fourteen days I'd be turning *exactly* fourteen years old and she said she did. After that, we lay still in the blue darkness without saying anything for a long while. Eventually, Holly began to snore like a lumberjack, so I rolled over onto my side, pulled my pillow over my head and fell asleep dreaming of a time and a place where my baking business had become so wildly successful that I got to make all my own personal decisions, and where handsome boys without attitude problems rode handsome stallions as they galloped along beside me through the pounding surf.



Monday morning it was so cold that by the time I got to the bus stop I could barely feel my toes pressing up against the ends of my favorite old purple high-top runners.

"Well?" said Holly as soon as I walked up. "Did you talk your parents into letting you go to the pool party?"

"No," I replied. "And this morning my mom said if I didn't get off her case about it she'd make me scrub out

the café toilets with my bare fingers the night of the next school dance."

"No way," said Holly, stuffing three pieces of Juicy Fruit gum into her mouth.

"Way," I assured her as the bus pulled up to the curb and we climbed aboard.

Flashing our passes at the driver, we tromped to the back, grabbed for handholds and kept talking. The bus slowed to pick up more passengers; I swayed on my feet. Then I happened to glance outside and notice my mother's friend Vivian standing at the bus stop. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled broadly and began to wave.

"Ignore her," I told Holly. "She's the reason I can't go to the pool party. She also smells like fried meat and has an unnatural attraction to things with fur. Waving to a person like that can only lead to trouble."

"Uh, Francie?" came a deep voice from directly behind me.

Holly let out a little shriek. I jumped like a startled cat. Both of us spun around.

To my horror, it was Vivian's son, Ricky Skametka.

"I think she was probably waving to *me*," he whispered, looking acutely embarrassed.

Holly smiled. I nodded awkwardly.

Ricky, who was a grade ahead of me in school, had been a good friend of mine until three years ago when he'd moved to Vancouver to live with his father. It hadn't worked out, I guess, and when Ricky moved back earlier this year, he'd turned into a tall, skinny stranger with an embarrassingly deep voice and a tendency to bump into things. I'd been uncomfortable around him ever since.

"Listen, Ricky —" I began.

"Remember what I told you before?" he interrupted in that horribly manly voice of his. "My friends call me Rick now."

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

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"So call me Rick, okay?" he added softly, reaching over to untwist the strap of my knapsack.

"Uh ... okay," I stammered. "Well, anyway, uh, I'm sorry I said that your mother ... you know ..."

"Smells like fried meat?"

"Yes, and also — "

"Has an unnatural attraction to things with fur?"

"That's right," I said.

Then I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything, and after a while it dawned on me that I was just standing there gawking at him with my mouth hanging open. I thought I felt as completely mortified as it was possible for a person to feel until the very next second, when the bus driver suddenly slammed on the brakes and I went flying into Ricky. Not only did we make *full frontal body contact*, but my left cheek got planted so firmly against his chest that I swear I felt the crinkle of crispy chest hair through the thin cotton T-shirt he was wearing under his open black leather jacket. Leaping backward in shock and revulsion, I knocked into a dude wearing wraparound shades, who banged into a blond girl about my age, who tripped over someone's portable kennel and set loose a pair of high-strung Chihuahuas who were so excited to be free that they started peeing all over everybody's shoes.

My only conscious thought at that terrible moment was to flee the scene as quickly as possible. Frantically yanking up and down on the bell cord, I hissed at Holly that we were getting off at the next stop. She started to complain that we were still six blocks from school, but I cut her off with an elbow jab to the ribs, seized her by one arm, galloped us to the back exit and leaped for freedom the instant the doors opened. Unfortunately, neither Holly nor I realized that she was standing on my untied left shoelace, so I only got partially airborne before my body snapped to a sudden halt and I fell to the curb in a heap. As I lay face-first in the dirty snow gasping for breath, it occurred to me

that I hadn't even bothered to say good-bye to Ricky, and that in addition to possibly hurting his feelings, this had almost certainly made me look like an immature freak. Scrambling to my feet, I pushed my overgrown bangs out of my face and peered desperately through the grimy windows of the bus, straining to make eye contact with Ricky in order to confirm that he saw me giving him a nonchalant wave good-bye.

But the only person who acknowledged me was the blond girl who'd tripped over the portable kennel, and she was smirking and making circles at her temple with her index finger. Outraged, I gave her what I hoped was a withering stare, tried not to cough as the bus pulled away belching toxic blue diesel fumes all over me, then turned and joined Holly for the long, cold walk to school.



Frozen nearly solid, we arrived eight minutes after the first bell and were promptly handed late slips by Mr. Simmons, who was prowling the hallway by our locker. I found this pretty rich considering the fact that Mr. Simmons, who was the staff adviser on the Student Social Committee, had shown up late for every single meeting we'd had since the beginning of the year. The other kids on the committee insisted that it didn't bother them, but Holly and I agreed this was because they were afraid of Mr. Simmons and the way the veins in his red, sweaty forehead stood out whenever he lost it on us, which was all the time. We also agreed that his tardiness was a slap in the face to young people everywhere, and that until he started treating us with a little more respect, we were only going to give him the minimum amount of respect required to avoid getting pulverized by him.

"Mr. Simmons, couldn't you let it go just this one time?" I asked now as I tried not to gag on the stale cigarette smell that enveloped him like a reeking force field. "I mean, can

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you honestly say *you've* never been late for something on account of extenuating circumstances?"

He stared so hard at me that for one breathless moment I thought he might actually be about to take back our late slips. Then he bellowed that if we were still in the hall when he finished counting to ten he was going to give us both a week of detentions. Holly let out a little shriek and flew to our locker. Thoroughly affronted by the hypocrisy of the situation, I followed her just quickly enough to ensure that Mr. Simmons couldn't accuse me of deliberately trying to provoke him. I think he felt provoked anyway, however, because just when it looked like we were going to make it before the count of ten, he skipped directly from "seven" to "nine," sending Holly into such a panic that she nearly wrenched our homeroom door off the hinges in her effort to beat the countdown.

"Wait up!" I whispered, but she had already darted through the maze of music stands and beat-up trombone cases and was sliding into her seat.

Our homeroom teacher, Mrs. Cavanaugh — who'd stopped talking when we burst into the room — now said, "Hello, girls. Nice of you to join us."

Holly blushed and sank lower in her seat. I blushed, too, but I also waved and said, "Don't mention it, Mrs. C."

Mrs. C arched her eyebrow at me but didn't say anything as I tromped to my seat and dumped my knapsack at my feet. In addition to being our homeroom teacher, Mrs. C was the school band instructor and, more important, the coolest teacher I'd ever known. She didn't sweat the small stuff, and she always went out of her way to treat me the way a ninth-grade student deserved to be treated. Plus, her hair looked *exactly* the way I was hoping mine would look when I finished growing it out, so whenever a bad hair day was making me tempted to chop it all off, one look at Mrs. C's long, lustrous mane gave me the inspiration I needed to persevere. You couldn't ask for

more than that in a homeroom teacher.

"As I was saying," said Mrs. C, picking up from where she'd evidently left off, "I have two more announcements to make before you head to your first class. One is that Performance Band auditions will be held in the next couple of weeks, so if you're hoping to make it, I suggest you practice hard between now and then. Not only is being a member of the Performance Band a great way to get involved in school life, but the band will be performing in an out-of-town festival in early spring and, believe me, you don't want to miss that."

Holly and I looked at each other and grinned as Mrs. C handed out an information sheet about the festival.

"The final announcement is that we have a new student in our midst," said Mrs. C, looking over at someone I hadn't noticed on my way in. Leaning forward in my seat, I couldn't help but give a loud grunt of dismay when I saw that it was the blond girl from the bus who'd set the Chihuahuas free and then had the nerve to make the cuckoo sign at *me*.

"Hello, everybody!" She grinned, bouncing to her feet and giving us all a peppy little wave. "My name is Darlene Donovan!"

Holly looked over at me and raised her eyebrows. I tucked my clasped hands under my chin and batted my eyelashes like a demonically possessed kewpie doll.

"Francie?" called Mrs. C.

Without warning, everyone in the classroom turned to stare at me.

Flustered, I dropped my hands to my sides and bugged my eyeballs out at one person after another in order to get them all to turn back around and mind their own beeswax. Then I cleared my throat and said, "Is there a problem, Mrs. C?"

"Of course not," she smiled, tucking a thick lock of glossy hair behind one ear. "I was just wondering if you'd mind giving Darlene a helping hand until she gets settled."

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The truth was that I'd rather have had my eyelids ripped off with a pair of rusty pliers than give a helping hand to someone who'd given me the cuckoo sign for no good reason, but since I didn't want to look spiteful and uncooperative in front of my favorite teacher, I nodded and threw a vaguely welcoming smile at the new girl. She grinned back at me, then immediately turned and whispered something to the girl behind her. Whatever she said sent them both into such fits of giggles that my smile froze on my face and my stomach did a funny sort of flip-flop. Then the bell rang and the moment was lost in the noisy bustle of people getting ready to head to first class.

"This isn't fair," I whispered to Holly as we leaned down to grab our knapsacks off the floor.

"Life isn't fair," she grinned, pretending not to notice that the sight of her bending over in a scoop-necked T-shirt had just caused Randy Newton to walk into a wall.

I glanced across the room to where two more girls were giggling with the new girl, and then over at Randy, who was being sent to the office to get an icepack for his nose.

No, I thought, slinging my knapsack over my shoulder. *I guess it isn't.*