

If I Have a
Wicked Stepmother,
Where's My Prince?

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To Carol Einhorn

Chapter One

Cinderella

dead mother
wicked stepmother
evil stepsisters (2)
friendless

Me

dead mother
wicked stepmother
evil stepsisters (2)
friendless

I tapped my pen against my lips, debating whether or not Cinderella is actually friendless. I mean, she does have all those talking animals helping her out when she gets into a jam. But do they count as friends? It's not as if a blue jay can meet you at Starbucks for an after-school latte. As I tried to categorize the small woodland creatures Cinderella associates with, my eyes accidentally wandered over to Jessica Johnson, this girl who sits across the classroom from me. When we made eye contact, her expression didn't change—it was as though I wasn't there.

I crossed out *friendless* in the Cinderella column and drew in a woodchuck.

Cinderella

father dead

Me

father alive

Once more, I wasn't sure this was an accurate description of our respective situations. I mean, technically, my dad is alive. More than technically—it's not like he's in a coma or anything. But considering that I am currently living with his new wife and stepdaughters on Long Island while he spends Monday to Friday back in San Francisco finishing up this mondo case he was supposed to be done with before we moved to New York in August *seven months ago*, his being alive doesn't do me a whole lot of good.

I went back to my list and put quotation marks around *alive*.

“ . . . that you can't subtract *here* until you divide *here*.” Mr. Palmer slapped the board, raising a small cloud of chalk dust. Then he spun toward the window. “*Mister* Marcus,” he spat. “Can you tell me *why* that is?”

John Marcus's head shot up and he looked around the room in a panic. The skateboarding magazine tucked into his math book slipped to the floor.

I barely listened as Mr. Palmer raged at John, spit flying out of the corners of his mouth. I wasn't the only

one unimpressed by Mr. Palmer's tantrum (his third of the day); even John kept his eyes on his magazine, sliding it under his chair with his toe. And as usual, even before the bell had rung, despite the fact that Mr. Palmer was still talking, kids started throwing stuff into their backpacks. "I *think* you're going to want to hear this since it involves a possible *surprise quiz* on Thursday." No one paid any attention to him. Mr. Palmer is always threatening surprise quizzes and then not giving them. All first semester I spent my nights cramming frantically for a quiz that never came. Now I just ignored his threats like everyone else.

Out in the hallway, Madison Lawler, Jessica Johnson's BFF, embraced Jessica passionately, as if the cruelty of the math-tracking powers that be was almost too much to bear. Maybe I'm paranoid, but as I walked by, it was hard not to feel that the sole purpose of their daily reunion was to remind me of my utterly friendless state.

For the record, let's just acknowledge that relocation has not done wonders for my social life. To say I haven't discovered a soul mate within the Glen Lake population would be an understatement. I have not even discovered a homework mate. And the irony of my current situation is that I *just went through this a year ago*. When I was in eighth grade, my dad got totally obsessed with how the curriculum at my junior high wasn't rich enough or enriched enough or *whatever*, and he decided that if I didn't attend Wellington Academy for high school, mine

would be an empty and meaningless existence (kind of like it is now). So I had to kiss Bayview Middle School good-bye, leave all my friends, and go off to Wellington, where I knew no one. Then, just as I'm finally settling in and can stop skulking around the halls like an assassin, practically at the very moment my cell phone starts ringing with calls from people who don't just want me to switch my long-distance carrier, my dad announces he's getting married to the Wicked Witch of the North Shore, we're moving to New York, and I'll be starting sophomore year at Glen Lake High in the fall.

You know who people don't stay in touch with when she leaves their time zone?

The new girl.

I made my way to my locker and then to the cafeteria. Since January, when I started taking studio art, I've usually been able to eat my lunch in the art room, thereby avoiding the humiliation of being the lone occupant of a cafeteria table that could easily seat twenty. But Ms. Daniels, my art teacher, was holding private conferences in the studio all through lunch today, so I had nowhere to flee. I bought a sandwich and made my way to what seemed to be an isolated, undesirable table in the corner of the crowded lunchroom.

It turned out I was wrong about the table's undesirability, just as I've been wrong about pretty much everything else at Glen Lake High. Within minutes of

my sitting down at one end, a noisy group of seniors swarmed and then sat at the other, twirling car keys around their index fingers and grabbing French fries out of one another's McDonald's bags.

In the center of the crowd sat Connor Pearson, laughing and chatting with his loyal subjects. The star of the basketball team and president of the student council, Connor was also voted "Best Looking" by the senior class. In the fall, to raise money, the cheerleaders raffled off a kiss with Connor Pearson and *two hundred* girls bought tickets. (That would be one hundred and ninety-nine girls plus yours truly.) But sadly for me and all the other members of Glen Lake's female population, rumor was Connor only had eyes for Kathryn Ford: Homecoming Queen, who, like all good queens, was currently seated to the right of her lordship.

Some people make me feel freakishly taller and redder-headed than I actually am, and Kathryn Ford is one of those people. Everything about her is tiny and pale and perfect. I think she might have been created from a kit. Also, she acts as though ignoring underclassmen is a varsity sport.

Basically, you can't not hate her.

Still, I'm not crazy enough to think it's Kathryn Ford's fault that Connor Pearson doesn't know I exist. Or that she's blacklisted me, and that's why I have yet to make one friend within the Glen Lake community. I know I have only myself to blame. I watch the kids in my

classes talking before the bell rings, and I know all I need to do if I want to talk to them is *talk*. Just say something. *Anything*. And it's not like I don't want to talk to some of them. It's not as if it's *their* fault I was dragged kicking and screaming across the continental United States.

If three's supposed to be the charm, it hasn't made me especially charming. Moving to New York to attend my third school in three years appears to have mutated some friend-making gene I didn't even know I had. Now, instead of talking to people like I normally would, I just sit silently, as if I'm watching them swing a jump rope higher and higher while waiting for just the right moment to step in and start jumping.

And it never comes.

That night at dinner, while I was just sitting there minding my own business and trying to decide if I should take my dad up on his wager that the Rockets were going to lose by ten, one of my twelve-year-old twin stepsisters looked over at me and pursed her lips, as if I were something she'd eaten and didn't like the taste of. I should have taken her look as a warning, but I was too busy calculating the game's odds. Which is why a minute later, when she addressed me, I was caught totally off guard.

"You should wear a padded bra, Lucy," said Princess One, still eyeing me. "Your boobs are *really* small."

Unfortunately she hadn't cleared this tip with her sister, who was so eager to offer counter advice, she

nearly choked on her veggie burger. “It’s too late for that *now*,” said Princess Two. “She should have started back in September.”

“That’s a good point,” acknowledged Princess One.

Neither one of my stepsisters seemed at all bothered by the fact that compared to them, I’m Pamela Anderson.

“Actually,” I said, “you know how last week you said I should get blond highlights because of how my hair’s too red?”

The Princesses nodded eagerly.

“Well, I was thinking I’d dye my boobs blond and get a padded skull.”

“Ha ha, Lucy,” said Princess One. “News flash: Maybe if you took this kind of thing a little more seriously, you would have been invited to the homecoming dance.”

“News flash,” I echoed. “Not everyone’s life goal is to get the word JUICY tattooed on her ass.”

“Lucy,” Mara said, emerging from the coma she enters whenever her daughters start criticizing me, “please don’t use that kind of language at the table.”

After dinner I headed down to my “room,” known in most houses as “the basement.”

For the first few months after my dad and I moved into my stepmother’s house, I was actually a little worked up about the fact that I live in a furnitureless

dungeon where my “bed” is an air mattress; and my clothing—which was initially in cardboard “dressers”—has slowly ended up in piles all over the floor, as first one and then another and then yet another of the “drawers” fell apart. Each time I had the temerity to complain, to point out that the only reason I didn’t bring my old furniture from San Francisco to New York was because of all the beautiful new stuff Mara was “so excited” to buy, I was reminded by my stepmother, the amateur interior decorator, that finding the “perfect piece” takes time. Nations have fallen and risen, revolutions have come and gone, celebrity couples have wed and divorced, and still the right headboard eludes my stepmother.

The one cool thing about being down here is I put up posters of my two favorite paintings; except for them the walls are completely bare, so it’s kind of like being in a museum—you know, vast empty space punctuated by spectacular works of art. Lying on my “bed” I can either look at the wall across from me, where Matisse’s *The Dancer* hangs, or up at the ceiling, where I’ve tacked a ginormous poster of *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*.

My mom was a really great artist. Her paintings hang in museums all over Europe, and MOMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art each own one. The walls of our house in San Francisco were covered with her work, but when we moved we put it all in storage. My dad said Mara’s feelings might be hurt if we asked to hang Mom’s paintings here. That’s pretty much the

major theme in my life now—Mara’s feelings. Basically, they’re always being hurt or in danger of being hurt.

Which means I’m always in trouble or in danger of being in trouble.

Before I went to sleep, I flipped through a book of Cezanne reproductions I’d gotten out of the library. But even staring at his perfect pears, each one so sculpted and weighty, I couldn’t get my mind off the list I’d been making in math, the proof that something had gone very, very wrong with my life.

Because if I have a wicked stepmother and two evil stepsisters, aren’t I supposed to get a prince?