

The Cinderella Swap

A young man in a black tuxedo with a white shirt and black tie stands in the foreground, looking towards the camera. Behind him, a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a strapless blue gown, stands with her hand on her hip. They are in front of a house with a lit doorway and a wreath on the door. Snow-covered trees and a fence are visible in the background.

Linda Palmer

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Chapter One

There was nothing I hated more than a bully and Trey Campbell was the absolute worst. He actually pushed my best friend, Hayley Perry, into a swimming pool at a party once. Naturally, I wanted to punch him out, but she wouldn't let me. So when I spotted him in the main hall at school, circling some poor girl like she was his next meal, I had to take action.

"Don't do it, Ren," Hayley whispered the second I began slowing down.

I ignored her, of course. With a huff of exasperation, she headed to our second period class alone.

"Hey, you guys." I glanced from Trey to his newest victim, who couldn't have been much older than twelve. Her blue eyes brimmed with tears. "Wassup?"

Trey looked over his shoulder at me in surprise. "Nothing to do with you."

"Um, got a minute, Trey? We need to talk." I now stood at his left elbow.

"About what?"

"You being the school's biggest jerk."

He laughed. "Get real."

"Real what? Physical? Because that seems all guys like you understand." I reached out and grabbed a tiny piece of skin on the back of his upper arm, pinching it really hard, a move that always brought my big brother, Will, to his knees.

"Hey!" Trey tried to yank his arm free.

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I pinched even harder. "Apologize."

"For what?"

"For being such an asshole."

"I'm not—ow! Okay. All right. Sorry."

I released him and stepped closer. "Now go, and remember I'll be watching you."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." With a quick glance around to see who'd witnessed his humiliation, Trey rubbed his arm and hurriedly vanished into the crowd of students now watching us. I heard laughter and hoped he did, too.

"Are you okay?" I asked the girl, a slender redhead who trembled from head to toe.

She barely managed a nod.

"Then you'd better get to class. I think the bell's about to ring."

With another nod, she left. I turned to do the same and found myself snared by the gaze of my nemesis, Miss Eliza Rogers, the oldest and strictest teacher at Blue Water High.

"Serena Montgomery, I saw that! Come with me." She pivoted and headed straight to the school office. Sighing, I followed.

In seconds, I sat in the reception area, waiting for yet another face-to-face with the principal. I thought about Trey, whose soul-shade flashed pale red when I pinched him. I didn't feel an ounce of remorse, even though that color meant he wasn't evil to the core, like someone who flashed, say, black. He was just being a butt.

"What are you doing here, Ren?"

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Looking up, I saw Mr. Fields standing on the other side of the counter, frowning.

"Miss Rogers invited me."

"Because...?"

"I taught Trey Campbell how sick it was to bully younger students."

"And you did this by...?"

"Pinching him."

"You know the punishment for physical contact is a week's detention."

"Yes, sir," I said, well acquainted with the rule since I'd broken it about, oh, a dozen times since I started attending Blue Water Public Schools at the age of five.

What could I say? I hated social injustice and sometimes inflicting pain was the only way to stop it.

Mr. Fields sighed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Nothing. I'm making a fresh start after Christmas break." Well, if I lived that long. There was a really good chance my mom, who was the County Judge—juvie court—and my dad, the Sheriff, would kill me when I got home. This was the fourth time I'd gotten D-Hall that year, and it was only mid-December.

Mr. Fields wrote my name on the list he kept and sent me on to English. When I got there, Hayley wouldn't even speak to me. That's because she knew she'd have to walk home by herself after school. I felt sort of bad about that even though she only walked with me because it was her fault my parents banned me from driving my car until the New Year.

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My day went downhill from there, so by the time I got to D-Hall after last period, I wasn't in that good a mood. I perked up almost at once, however, when a senior I'd had my eye on walked in. I didn't really know him since sophomores and seniors didn't interact that much, but I'd admired him while guy-gazing at lunch with Hayley and knew his last name was Donovan.

We sat in alpha order, as usual, which put me in the middle of the room. About ten minutes into the hour, Coach Adams, teacher in charge, left us. Instantly, some guy in the front row started a spit wad war with some guys in back. I wasn't a bit surprised when I got caught in the crossfire. I was surprised, however, when a dry piece of paper, folded into a tiny white triangle, sailed over my shoulder and landed neatly in my lap.

Glancing back, I scanned the rows behind me for the culprit. But nobody paid me the least bit of attention except the Donovan dude, who stared steadily in my direction. I whipped my face to the front so I could examine the paper in my hand. Carefully unfolding it, I found an incredible pen and ink drawing of a single red rose. There was one word on it: Thanks.

That's all. Just 'thanks'.

For what? I wondered, now questioning if the note was even meant for me.

When Coach finally let us go at 4:30, I jumped up and headed straight for the door, my gaze on the floor and my thoughts already on my mom, who would not be happy about

the whole detention thing. I silently began practicing my confession.

"Montgomery."

I stopped, but not quickly enough to keep the heavy books I held from ramming into the taut midriff of none other than Donovan, the new star of my dreams.

"S-sorry," I stammered, automatically smoothing his black T-shirt back in place. His belly felt rock hard beneath my fingers. I jerked my hand away. My face began to burn, which meant it matched my red shirt. I took a hasty step backward, careful to avoid any accidental skin-to-skin contact.

I did not want to know his color.

And that, of course, was the bad thing about flashing, a psychic gift I'd had since birth, but only finely tuned in the past six years. Sometimes I didn't want to see into the souls of people I met. Trust me that it was really disconcerting when, say, your school counselor's soul-shade flashed pale yellow, a color that meant he was a liar and a cheat.

"Did you get my note?"

So it *was* meant for me. "Well, I got it, all right, but I didn't get it," I admitted, a totally lame answer that earned me his short laugh and a half grin.

"I heard you saved my sister this morning. I just wanted to thank you."

"Oh," I murmured, still clueless, then it hit me. "Ohhh! That was your sister?"

"Stepsister, actually. Payton Long. Eighth grader."

My heart now melted. What a big brother. So unlike mine, who'd escaped to college last year, leaving me to deal with

our parents alone. "It was the least I could do. I mean, Trey is such a jerk."

"Friend of yours, then?"

"No," I said, quickly shaking my head. "I just know him is all."

"Good, because I'd hate to hurt one of your friends."

"You're going to hurt him?" He looked like he could ... as in easily and seriously.

"Thinking about it."

"Don't do that," I blurted, adding, "I mean, I already did. Enough, anyway. I'm sure he got the point." Could I have babbled any worse? "I think he'll leave her alone from now on. I told him I'd be watching."

Donovan's half-grin stretched into a full-fledged smile. "And you're such a threat." His gaze swept me, which took a nanosecond.

"I am, actually," I said, squaring my shoulders and standing as straight as possible. I suddenly wished I'd worn my boots with the three-inch heels, which would put me at five-foot-four.

He just smiled a little wider, as if he didn't believe me or something. "Is Payton the reason you're stuck in here?"

"No, Trey is. I mean, he started the whole thing."

He nodded at the truth of that. "What did he say to her, anyway? She wouldn't tell me."

"Actually, I didn't hear. I just saw that she was near tears, and he looked very, very guilty."

Donovan sort of chuckled and didn't say anything else for a couple of seconds. "Can I give you a lift home?"

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Whoa! Was the god of D-hall asking me out?

But of course not. He was, however, offering me a ride ... which could be an excellent first step. My spirits soared to the ceiling.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks," I told him. I mean, what else was I going to say? No thanks?

As if.

"Is that your jacket?"

I realized he looked at the seat I'd just vacated and my denim jacket, which lay right where I'd left it.

"Yeah." I turned, but he beat me there and scooped it up. Then he took my books from me as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

"Do you need to stop by your locker?"

"Do you mind?"

He shook his head.

Trying to act as if senior boys with stonewash-blue eyes and wide shoulders walked me to my locker on a daily basis, I led the way, or tried to. In fact, Donovan beat me there by a few steps, which could only mean he already knew where it was. That rattled me so badly I couldn't remember my combination, much less what other semester tests I needed to study for. I stared blankly at the lock in my hand.

"On second thought," I said, abruptly releasing it. "I've got everything I need."

"Sweet. Let's get out of here."

I followed Donovan down the hall to the exit, my gaze glued to the back pockets of his jeans. I had to glance away

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so I could breathe, which made me run smack into him again when he stopped to let me go out the door first.

He looked at me kind of funny.

"Sorry," I mumbled, slipping past him. At this rate, I'd never get him for a boyfriend, which was now a life goal. "My name's Ren, by the way."

"Wren like the bird?"

"No, R-e-n. Short for Serena."

"Ah. I'm Dugan."

Dugan. I sighed softly as I followed him into the student parking lot. What a perfect name. To go on a perfect boy. Who drove a perfect—

Holy crap. He drove the yellow GMC 4 x 4 truck with the custom airbrushing. The one I saw parked in the student lot a couple of days every week. The one that advertised Jennings' Custom Body Shop.

I let my fingertips skim the fantasy mural airbrushed on the tailgate as I walked around the rear of it. I mean, I'd only lusted after the paint job on this baby since the first time I laid eyes on it. What I wouldn't give to have my '79 Camaro, a hand-me-down from Will, airbrushed.

"Where to?" asked Dugan, opening the passenger door so I could climb in. I did that, careful to keep my denim miniskirt from riding up, then took my books from him and set them in my lap. Giving him my address, which was only three miles away as the crow flew, I pointed in the general direction in case he wasn't that familiar with the streets.

In seconds, he slid his lean body behind the wheel. He started the engine, which positively purred. I sighed and

settled back against the ivory leather seats to relish the moment. Happiness, I realized, was sitting next to a gorgeous guy in a gorgeous truck.

"Is this your ride?" My gaze caressed every millimeter of the immaculate interior, including several unusual feathers dangling from a leather cord tied to the rearview mirror.

"Don't I wish," he murmured, pulling out of the lot and onto the street. "Belongs to my boss, Bo Jennings. He asked me to drive it a couple of days a week to advertise his body shop."

"The airbrushing is incredible."

He flushed. "Why, thanks."

Thanks? "You mean you did it?"

Dugan nodded. "Yeah. I do all his paint work."

No wonder the rose drawing was so amazing. "You're way talented, you know that?"

He shrugged like it was nothing, but I could tell the compliment pleased him. For a split second he looked at me instead of the road. Then he sort of shook his head, like he might be talking himself out of something.

"What?" I asked, curious.

He hesitated. "I have a confession to make."

"You do?"

He nodded.

"I've been trying to get up the nerve to talk to you for ages, so I was pretty psyched when Payton told me what happened and described how you looked. I knew immediately who'd come to her rescue."

"She? You? I?" *Deep breath, Ren.* "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Why?"

Dugan looked surprised by the question. "Because you're so nice."

"Nice?" That wasn't exactly the answer I'd hoped for.

He nodded. "I've watched you since school started, and you're always talking to the, well, underdogs, I guess. You know ... the kids everyone else ignores."

Oh. "There's a reason for that," I told him. "I'm Sophomore Class Ambassador."

"You wouldn't do it anyway?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

He chuckled. His gaze swept me again, leaving no doubt that he liked what he saw.

That turned me into a complete idiot. "Oh. Um. Well." *Gulp.* "What were you in D-hall for, anyway?"

"Tardies. Is this the street?"

"Next one," I answered, pointing ahead.

Dugan drove one more block then turned right. I could tell he was trying to see the house numbers.

"Two more blocks, then second house on the left."

"Okay." Dugan drove us there and braked next to the curb in front of my white frame and brick house. He killed the engine, then put both hands on the top of the steering wheel and just looked at me for several seconds.

"What are these?" I asked, for something to say. I reached out to touch the feathers, which curled up on the end.

"Bo says they're mallard tail feathers. He got them at Tenkiller Lake, which is his favorite place in the world. Um, Ren?"

"Yes."

"Would you give me your number?"

"Got a pen? Or a pencil? And paper? No, wait, I've got what I need." I fumbled frantically in my purse for anything that would write, then tore a piece of paper out of my English notebook. With a hand that shook, I scribbled down my name and cell number, then handed it to him just as Mom's Avalon pulled into the driveway.

Dugan ducked his head so he could see. "The 'rents?"

"My mom," I said. Then I saw the passenger door open and my dad, Sam Montgomery, step out. I sighed my dismay at having to deal with both parents right then. "And dad."

Dugan caught my eye. "What's wrong?"

"If you call that number and don't get anyone, it's because they murdered me."

"Would it help if I explained the situation?" he asked, his steady gaze still on me.

I couldn't believe my ears. "You'd do that?"

"It's only right."

Dugan opened his door. I opened mine. We walked up the sidewalk to the porch, where my parents stood.

"Mom, Dad," I began. "This is—"

"Dugan," said Mom, sticking out her right hand. "How are you doing?"

Now my mom knowing Dugan should've been a nothing. But she was a judge, so her knowing my maybe brand new

boyfriend on a first name basis was definitely not a nothing.... In fact, it totally sucked since it meant he'd probably faced her in juvie court at some point.

My spirits sank to my shoe laces.

"Judge Renfro! Hi." Dugan, who addressed Mom by the name she used before she married Sam, looked as pale as the upholstery in that borrowed ride of his when he got his hand back. "I'm doing great. I just, um—" He tucked his fingertips into the front pockets of his jeans. "—Please don't be mad at Ren. She was, um, only helping my sister. She does that a lot. Help people, I mean. You should be proud ... of ... her..." His voice trailed to silence. He cleared his throat.

Both my parents looked at me for an explanation.

"I got D-hall."

"Again?" they responded in unison.

"What'd you do this time?" asked my stepdad, who was off-duty, so not wearing his uniform. Sam, whose soul-shade was deep red, legally adopted me when he and mom got married, two years ago. Deep reds were patient and passionate, so he was a good match for Mom. They dated for five years before that, so he'd been in my life a while. Will was his nineteen-year-old son.

"I pinched Trey Parker."

Dad rolled his eyes and headed into the house.

"I had no idea that you two knew each other," said my Mom, looking from me to Dugan with obvious disapproval.

I felt my face began to burn.

"We don't," said Dugan. "I mean we didn't before today. We were both in—"

"The hall," I blurted. "After school. He offered me a ride home. As a thank you."

"Oh," Mom said in a tone that told me she didn't believe a word of it. "Well, nice to see you again, Dugan. Ren, we need to talk."

"Right."

Mom trailed Dad to the front door, then noticed I wasn't following. "Coming?"

"In a sec."

"Serena?"

"I'll be right there." Mom, who flashed deep blue, could be very persistent.

"You'd better go in," said Dugan quietly, turning toward his car.

'Call me,' I mouthed when he looked back at me.

He shook his head.

I swear my heart stopped. "Then I'll call you. What's your number?"

He shook his head again.

"But Dugan—"

It was hopeless. He'd already reached the truck and never gave me a second look as he ducked into it. I heard the engine roar to life then purr. A second later he exited my life as abruptly as he'd entered it.

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Chapter Two

"Mom, how could you?" I exclaimed the second I burst into the house.

"How could I what?" She hung her coat in the hall closet.

"Be so rude to Dugan." I slammed my books down on the antique table, jarring a vase of silk flowers.

"I was not rude to Dugan." Mom looked at Dad, now hanging up his jacket and shutting the closet door. "Was I rude to Dugan?"

My dad, big brave sheriff that he was, headed straight to the den without getting involved.

"Now he'll never call," I continued, near tears. "And I've had my eye on him for ages. Simply ages."

"Dugan is totally inappropriate for you, Ren."

"Because...?"

"He's too old, for one thing."

"He's just a senior."

"Exactly. And senior boys have only one thing on their minds."

"Do you honestly think that junior, sophomore and freshman boys don't have the same thing on theirs?"

Although extremely savvy in the area of juvenile law, my mom could be way dense sometimes when it came to the juveniles themselves.

"I ... no, of course not. Boys will be boys, which is why you need to be extra cautious."

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"I can take care of myself, okay? And Dugan said he noticed me because I'm nice to everyone, which is exactly what got me in trouble today. You know how mean Trey Parker can be. Well, he was being really hateful to Dugan's little sister this morning, and I had to act."

Mom sighed. "You couldn't have just chewed him out or something? You had to assault him?"

Only a judge would call pinching 'assault'.

"It's just for a week."

Her stern gaze locked with mine. "No television, no telephone, no internet until you're out of D-Hall. Have you got that?"

"What about the Christmas dance Friday night? I'll be done with detention."

Mom hesitated.

"I've already bought my dress," I said as a reminder. Even though I never had dates, I went to all the dances. I was president of the sophomore class, after all. I had to at least make an appearance.

"I suppose you can go, but not with that boy."

Like a date with Dugan was even a possibility.

"Give me your cell phone." Mom held out her hand.

I dug it out of my purse and slapped it into her palm. "This is so not fair."

"If you do the crime, you do the time." She turned and headed to the kitchen.

I ran after her. "And speaking of which, what was Dugan's?" I referred, of course, to the reason he faced my

mom in court. Because now I was certain that was how she knew him.

"You know I can't talk about that."

"Mo-om. This is Ren, your only daughter. You can tell me."
I opened the refrigerator and snagged a Coke.

"Dugan's file is sealed."

"Great. Then it's all behind him now, and you can have no objection to the two of us going out." I took a big drink.

"Armed robbery."

I choked on my soda. "What?"

"You heard me," Mom said.

"So he's been in ... jail?" I could barely say the word and desperately wished I'd touched the boy to get his soul-shade.

"Character Camp. Between the ninth and tenth grade and then two years probation." She tossed the towel in the trash and turned to me. "You've got to forget him, Ren. What would people think if I let you date a troublemaker?"

Troublemaker? Somehow, I could not apply that word to him.

Turning on my heel, I headed straight to the den, where I perched on the arm of the couch near Dad's recliner. "Do you know Dugan Donovan?"

"I do not," he answered without looking up from his newspaper.

Damn. Or maybe that was a good thing.

"If a juvenile got busted for—" I could barely get the words out "—armed robbery, would he just get Character Camp and probation? Isn't that crime way more serious than that?"

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Dad looked at me over his reading glasses. "It would depend on the circumstances. Every case is different."

So what were Dugan's circumstances? Assuming he was eighteen now, he'd probably been fifteen when the whole thing went down. I jumped up and returned to the kitchen, where mom stood arranging frozen fries on a cookie sheet.

"So why'd he just get Camp?"

"I'm not going there. Now would you please get the chicken casserole from the fridge and put it in the microwave? I think five minutes should do the trick."

How could she talk about food at a time like this? "Mom, listen to me." I grabbed her shoulder, since she ignored me. "Mom!"

"What?" She turned, her expression stone cold.

"When Dugan talked to me today, it was like Christmas came early—" I struggled to find words grand enough to describe the enormity of what had happened "—I can't let him get away."

"That's exactly what you will do," she said, framing my face with her hands. I tried to look someplace else, but couldn't. Mom had the kind of gaze that could nail you to the spot. "Dugan is not good enough for you. You cannot have him."

Twisting free, I stomped to the refrigerator and found the stupid casserole, which I put in the stupid microwave. I set the stupid timer then shot out of the kitchen and straight up the stairs, where I slammed my bedroom door shut behind me ... hard.

So I acted like a spoiled brat. So what?

I'd never been that frustrated in my entire life.

My mom had just told me I couldn't have the hottest senior in the entire school—a senior who'd asked for my phone number. *Me*. Serena Montgomery. The girl no guy asked for anything.

Seriously.

Hayley thought it was because I had a four-point-0 and teachers loved me. The ones who didn't give me D-Hall, anyway. I thought it was because of my parents. What guy wanted to date a girl whose dad and mom could get even by sticking him in county jail or Character Camp, which was a sort of behavior modification enclosure for juveniles that my mom created a decade ago.

I might not be Kristen Stewart, but I was surely cute enough to ask out. I was a natural blond, after all, and my magazines say that was what most teen boys preferred. I ate right, I was physically fit, and I didn't act silly like a lot of girls my age. Plus I was into sports and classic cars. What more could a guy want?

Really.

Sick to my stomach with the way things had gone down that afternoon, I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I finally realized that what bothered me most was how Mom had hurt Dugan's feelings when he'd been nothing but nice to me. I hoped I'd get a chance to make things right with him.

* * * *

Tuesday morning, Mom dropped me and Hayley off at school on her way to work, as usual.

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"Remember what I said," Mom murmured as I got out of the car. I didn't answer her.

Hayley, still miffed about yesterday, headed straight to her locker, which was next to mine, and got the books she'd need for her first two classes. Miraculously remembering the combination to my lock, I did the same. We then parted ways without a word and didn't see each other again until we met in the courtyard at lunch, as usual, to eat under the flag pole.

"Sorry you had to walk home alone yesterday," I ventured, tired of her cold shoulder. I playfully tugged her single French braid. Hayley has long, coal black hair.

She slapped my hand away. "You should be. I told you not to do it. Are you grounded from the dance Friday night?"

"No."

"Good, because you promised we'd go together."

"And we will. As for Trey, I had to stop him from picking on Payton. She was practically in tears."

"Payton? Who's Payton?"

"Trey's victim. Payton Long."

Hayley finally looked at me. "You mean you actually knew her?"

"Not exactly. But I know her brother ... now, anyway ... and so do you." I nodded slightly in the direction of Dugan.

Oh, yeah. He was there. Standing in the courtyard with some other senior guys and looking way better than any boy had a right to. He didn't even glance my way—huge surprise. I was, after all, bad news.

Her gaze landed on that group of guys. "Which one?"

"Dugan Donovan."

"Which?"

"Rust sweater, blue jeans, brown hair."

Hayley sucked in a shocked breath. "You do *not* know him."

"As of yesterday at 4:30—yes, I do. He gave me a ride home." I smiled smugly. "In the yellow GMC 4 x 4 with the custom airbrushing. Apparently it belongs to his boss."

Now she clutched my arm. "Oh my God. Tell me everything."

I told her what I thought she should know, which meant I said Mom and Dugan knew each other from juvie court. I didn't go into why he was there, and Hayley didn't ask. When I got to the part where Mom told me I couldn't have him, tears sprang to my eyes. Host of my own pity party, I picked up my spiral notebook and fanned my flushed face to cool it.

Hayley gave me a look of dismay. "That's just ... wrong."

It was all I could do not to boo-hoo in response to her sympathy. People who flashed green, like Hayley did, were healers, which was probably why she suddenly threw her arms around me in a huge, best-friend hug.

"Don't look now," Hayley whispered right into my ear. "But Dugan's got his eye on you."

"What?" Naturally, I tried to turn my head, but she wouldn't let me.

"Do not look, Ren. Let him wonder what's up, and then maybe he'll call you even though he said he wouldn't."

Recognizing the wisdom of her words, I nodded briefly. "Let's go inside before I do something stupid."

Hayley led the way.

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I didn't see Dugan again until D-Hall. Though I wasn't even sure he'd be there—I'd never been tardy, myself, so didn't know the punishment—he was, sitting in his usual row. I felt his gaze, heavy as a touch, on the back of my head. But I never looked his way. Either he'd miss me and do something or he wouldn't. Either way, I had to play it cool. I mean, I'd practically begged him for his number yesterday, hadn't I? And he'd refused to give it to me. I had my pride.

Besides ... Hayley said she'd kill me if I macked on him.

The first time Coach turned his back on the room, a neat white triangle of folded paper arched over my shoulder and landed on my History notebook. Heart hammering, I opened it. I saw four words.

We need to talk.

What do I do now? I wondered, wishing I had more practice at the games guys and girls played. I thought of writing something back, but knew I'd never be able to throw the note so he'd get it. And what would I write, anyway? Yes? No? Please, please, please?

I didn't think so.

So I simply put it away.

Promptly at 4:30, Coach dismissed us. I wasn't even out of my chair before Dugan stood in the aisle at the end of my row. My knees felt weak as I stood and gathered up my stuff.

"Hey," he said, when I slipped past the last seat and into the aisle.

"Hey." I didn't even look at him.

"I want to explain ... about yesterday, I mean." He tried to take my books.

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I dodged the attempt and kept moving.

"Look, I had no idea Judge Renfroe was your mom. You've got different last names."

I stopped and turned to face him in the aisle. "Actually, we don't. Her name has been Paula Montgomery since she married Sam Montgomery, the county sheriff two years ago. He adopted me."

"Your dad's the sheriff?"

I nodded.

"Shit." His dismay was almost comical, but I'd long since lost my sense of humor.

"I've got to go," I murmured, moving toward the door once again.

He kept up. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"No. As usual, I did that all by myself."

"But your mom was obviously pissed that I was there."

"My mom is way overprotective, okay? She thinks you're too old for me." Oh, God. It almost sounded like I was defending her. "You should've stood your ground."

"That's all she said ... that I'm too old for you?" He sounded surprised.

"That and a couple of other things."

"So she told you how she knew me?"

"Actually, I guessed that."

"And now you know what happened?" He stayed right on my heels as I exited the auditorium and headed down the hall to the locker area.

"If you're asking if I know about her sending you to Character Camp, yes, I do."

"Did she tell you why?"

I hesitated, reluctant for some reason to utter the phrase 'armed robbery' again ... at least in connection with Dugan. It just didn't add up. "Yes."

He waited as if expecting me to repeat our conversation verbatim, which seemed odd. There were only two words to be said.

"Armed robbery."

Dugan sucked in a quick breath.

"Did she lie to me?" I instantly demanded, stopping short and spinning to face him.

I swear he started to nod, but caught himself. "No."

"Now you're lying."

"I'm not."

"Well, you're not being totally honest, then, and I'm thinking Mom wasn't, either. What is it the two of you aren't telling me?"

"Look, Ren," said Dugan, instead of answering the question. "I made a mistake when I asked for your number yesterday. Nice girls like you need to stay clear of guys like me."

"Oh for—" I turned away and started walking.

"No, I mean it," he said.

"That's ridiculous. You paid your debt to society. Your file is sealed. It's all behind you now."

He just stared at me.

"What?" I snapped when the silence between us grew weighty.

"You're even nicer than I thought."

"There's no reason to get nasty."

"I'm paying you a compliment, okay? No one's ever said anything that, well, cool to me before."

"Stop talking like you're some kind of loser. I know you're not."

He gave me a wry grin. "You don't know me at all."

Without hesitation, I reached out and grabbed his wrist. He flashed deep blue.

Deep. Blue.

The exact freaking color as my law-abiding mom.

I released him. "Actually, I do. Better than you know yourself." I took a deep breath and regained my mental balance. "But let's not go there. Instead, why don't you just admit what the real issue is: you don't like me well enough to buck my parents."

Dugan's mouth fell open. "But I do."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem—" He paused to suck in a fortifying breath. "—The problem is that I owe your mom big time."

"For what?"

"For sending me to Character Camp three years ago. If she hadn't, I'd probably be in prison ... or worse ... today. I have a lot of respect for Judge Ren—, um, Montgomery. The least I can do for her is stay away from you."

Wrong answer.

With a sigh, I jogged straight to my locker. Once again, the combination to my lock escaped me. What was it about that boy that fried my brain?

Fuming, I looked up at Dugan, who'd followed and stood inches from me. "Why are you still here?"

"I want to be sure you understand that this is not about you."

"You mean there's another girl involved?"

He looked puzzled. "Of course not."

"Then this is about me, the girl who's not getting the boy she wants."

Dugan blinked. I could tell I'd thrown him by being so candid, but I just didn't care.

"W-what I meant," he stammered, "is this whole thing is more about me and your mom than me and you."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"Well, I thought it might."

"You thought wrong!" I exclaimed, giving up and digging through my purse for my wallet. I kept my locker combination in it, along with my spare car key, my money and some family photos. I opened it and began to look for what I needed.

"Who's that?"

I realized that Dugan stared at Will's senior picture, taken when he wore his hair too long. "That's my boyfriend, and he's going to kick your butt if he sees you talking to me."

I found the combination, read it, and put my wallet away, only then noticing how confused Dugan looked.

I sighed. "That was my big brother, Will, okay?" After stashing my books inside my locker, I turned and strode toward the exit. Dugan silently followed. When I got outside, I

turned to him once more. "Are you going to offer me a ride home?"

"No."

"Then I'm asking you again—why are you still here?"

"I don't want us to split this way."

"Okay. Fine. Whatever." I made myself look deep into those baby blues. "I admire your integrity, Dugan. And I think it's very noble that you're willing to give me up so you can do right by my mother." I forced a smile. "There, feeling better?"

He frowned. "Not exactly."

"Sorry I'm such a lousy actress." Turning, I descended the porch steps and headed down the sidewalk. Though I half expected—maybe even half hoped—Dugan would follow, he didn't. And when I reached the corner and risked a glance back, I saw him walking in the other direction, to the student parking lot.

Pretending to be waiting on traffic, I lingered for a second to see which vehicle he got into. Naturally, it was a classic, specifically a candy-apple red '57 Chevy Bel Air enhanced with minimal, but gorgeous flame airbrushing.

That just figured. Cool guy; cool ride. I wondered if those wheels were borrowed, too, or if the car belonged to Dugan. Then I realized it didn't make a bit of difference.

I'd never be riding in it, anyway.

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Chapter Three

Stuck without television, telephone or internet that night, I went to bed early and thought about soul-shades, which were kind of like astrology signs in that there was always a negative trait to offset a positive one. People whose colors flashed deep in tone had more of the good qualities than bad of their soul-shade.

There were two colors that were non-negotiable. White indicated pure good. That was what babies flashed. Black, on the other hand, meant pure evil. I knew this because of a guy I accidentally bumped into in my stepdad's office a couple of years ago. He flashed black, a color I'd never encountered and couldn't define until my dad later told me that DNA evidence had proved he was a murderer.

Dugan's flashing deep blue explained a lot about his misguided decision to avoid me out of respect for my mom. That color meant he was courageous and honorable and loyal. How ironic, I realized, that Mom thought he had no integrity when he really had too much.

Wednesday morning, as Hayley and I entered the school a little later than usual, Payton Long intercepted us.

"H-hi," she stammered, blushing clear to the roots of her badly styled copper-colored hair. It was obvious that she'd been waiting for me to show up.

"Hi." I felt way sorry for her, and not just because she was so shy. Today she wore the tackiest sweater I'd ever seen in my life—it was puce, okay?—plus a matching pleated skirt

and knee socks. Fuzzy knee socks! I winced. No wonder the guys picked on her. I was surprised the girls didn't, too.

"How's it going, Payton?"

"Fine." She glanced uncertainly at Hayley, then back at me. "May I ask you something?"

"Catch you later," said Hayley, instantly taking the hint and leaving us.

Curious, I led Payton back out the door, even though it was pretty chilly out. We had maybe five minutes before first bell. Hoping she could ask whatever she needed to ask in that time, I walked to one of the concrete benches bordering the sidewalk in front of the building. I sat and motioned for her to do the same. "What's up?"

"I was just wondering if you're going to the Christmas dance Friday night."

Puzzled by her question, I didn't answer for a second. That dance had nothing to do with anything in the context of our current association.

"Yes," I finally told her. "At least that's the plan."

"Do you have a date?"

I couldn't help but frown. "Not with a guy, if that's what you're asking. My best friend Hayley and I are going together."

"So if a senior boy showed up alone and thought you looked hot, you'd be free to dance with him?"

I nearly choked. "Not going to happen."

"You never know." Payton gave me a sweet smile and stood. "Well, we don't want to be late for class."

"That's it?" I asked, also standing. "That's what you wanted to ask?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

"But why—?" I suddenly got a really wild idea and tensed. "Did Dugan put you up to this? Is he going to the dance?"

"Dugan doesn't do dances."

Shot down by four little words.

"At least he never has before. I'm thinking he might if he thought you'd be there."

Yeah, right. Since Dugan had made himself clear on the subject of us, my high hopes tanked. I heaved a huge sigh of regret and shook my head. "Nice try, Payton, but your brother isn't into me."

"Then why did he cut your picture out of last year's yearbook and tape it to his mirror?"

I winced. Dugan had seen my ninth grade photo, taken on the worst hair day ever? Belatedly the implication of Payton's words sank in, making me forget my wounded vanity. My heart thumped like crazy. I grabbed her hand, barely noticing that she flashed purple.

"When?"

"Last night. He tore the house apart looking for the year book." She smiled to herself. "He wouldn't tell me why, but I figured it out when I saw your picture."

"Do you swear he didn't ask you to ask me about the dance?"

"I swear," she told me just as the first bell rang. She stood up. "I also swear that I'm going to make sure he knows you'll be there ... now that I'm sure you wouldn't mind."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"I wouldn't mind. Not a bit. In fact, I'd love it. I really like your brother." We climbed the stairs together and entered the building. "I have a better picture of me. If I brought it tomorrow, would you take that other one off his mirror?"

Dugan's sister grinned, nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, and Payton?"

She looked back at me.

"Why are you doing this?" It couldn't be easy for her. People who flashed purple were humble visionaries, introverted to a fault.

"Because I owe you both," she answered, words that proved her big brother wasn't the only honorable member of that family.

* * * *

I stayed in a daze until lunch, when Hayley questioned me about Payton. Sitting in my usual spot on the bench under the flag pole and nibbling my PBJ, I relayed our highly unusual conversation.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

Hayley pouted. "I think you're going to dance with the guy of your dreams, while I'm holding up the walls."

"When were you ever a wallflower?" I asked. Hayley, unlike me, never lacked for male attention. Unfortunately she only had eyes for Brian, who looked back every now and then, but never tried to touch.

She ignored my question. "How are we getting to the dance, anyway? The 'rents are going to some kind of legal thing in OKC." Her parents were both lawyers.

"One of my parents will take us."

"Are you sure they're not going to the same meeting?"

I shook my head. "They'd have said something by now." I changed the topic to clothing, specifically the dresses we'd bought for the dance, which was formal. Hayley, I knew, planned to wear red silk with sequins. I'd chosen a strapless gown of midnight blue taffeta with a long, full skirt.

The whole time we talked, I kept my eye out for Dugan, but he didn't hang with his friends today, which made me wonder if he was sick or something. But surely Payton would've mentioned it.

By the time D-Hall rolled around, I was pretty anxious to lay eyes on the boy. Remembering what Payton had told me about his cutting out my picture, I couldn't help but smile when I finally saw him.

He ignored me. Totally. Which naturally made me wonder if Payton had made the whole thing up. But of course she hadn't. I mean, she'd flashed purple. That meant she wasn't a liar. But I was that confused.

Sadly, my day got worse from there.

First of all, Dugan didn't walk me to my locker as he had on Monday and Tuesday. I knew I shouldn't have hoped he would. I guess I secretly thought he'd find me irresistible, or something. At that point, I'd have given anything to have him carry my books for me.

Then the second I got home, Mom informed me that she and Dad were leaving town Friday night and wouldn't be home until Sunday afternoon.

"But you have to take Hayley and me to the dance," I said, following her to the master bedroom.

Mom slipped out of her suit. "Lee or Angela can't do it?" She referred to Hayley's parents, of course.

"They're going to some kind of legal meeting."

"Oh, good. Sam and I will have someone to hang out with."

So my parents were going to the same stupid event. Nice of them to let me know.

Could the day get any worse?

"I guess I'll have to take us, then" I said, testing the waters. It was December sixteenth, after all, only a couple of weeks away from the day I'd be able to drive my poor Camaro, now locked in our musty garage, out back. Surely I could negotiate a one-night-only pardon from my mom, the judge. These were extenuating circumstances.

"Forget it. You and Hayley will just have to bum a ride with some friends."

I didn't even argue, which proved how down in the dumps I was by then. Turning, I left the kitchen to head to my bedroom. Just as I reached the stairs, the doorbell rang. I looked out one of the windows mounted on each side of the front door and found Hayley standing on the porch. Surprised, I stepped outside.

"Wassup?" I knew something had to be for her to walk from her house to mine in the dark. Yeah, thanks to some really ugly storm clouds, it looked like midnight outside instead of a few minutes past 6:00.

"I'd have called, but—"

"I know." The Montgomery household didn't have a land line, just our individual cells. So if my mom took away phone privileges I was pretty much dead to the world.

"Something's happened, Ren. Something amazing."

That the first time I noticed how excited Hayley was. I mean, she actually trembled from head to toe.

"What?" I demanded, pulling her to the porch swing. "Tell me everything."

She grabbed both my hands in hers and looked right into my eyes. "Brian's asked me to the Christmas dance."

I nearly swallowed my bubble gum. "You're kidding!"

Hayley shook her head. "I'm not. It's unbelievable, isn't it? Brian asked me to the dance."

"I'm so happy for you!" I exclaimed, hugging her in an attempt to do what best friends should do, support each other. Inside I died since I now had to go to the dance alone. "You'll have a wonderful time."

"Yeah." She sighed sort of dreamily, which I'd have done, too, in her place. She'd only been hot for Brian since the seventh grade.

I heard the ping of a raindrop hitting the ugly glass orb Mom stuck in the flowerbed last summer as decoration or something. Hayley heard it too and groaned her dismay.

"I'll get Dad to drive you home in a bit," I promised, dutifully adding, "Tell me everything Brian said."

Grinning, Hayley did just that.

And I'd thought my day couldn't get any worse.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

By the time she finished talking, I felt lower than the temperature in Santa's front yard. Luckily, Hayley didn't notice.

Dad drove her home around 7:00. I went with them, of course, so had him to myself on the short trip home.

"I've got a problem," I said, making a last-ditch effort to solve my ride-to-the-dance dilemma. Dad was really soft-hearted. So I thought if I could convince him that my driving just that once was a good idea, he, in turn, might be able to convince Mom.

"No ride to the dance."

"How'd you know?"

"Your mom warned me you'd probably bring it up."

That figured. "I'm really in a jam, here. I have to go. It's my duty as sophomore class president."

"You don't have another friend you can ride with?"

"They've all got dates, including Hayley."

He arched an eyebrow. "That Brian dude she talked about nonstop?"

And I'd thought he was listening to the radio. "Yeah."

He turned his truck into our driveway and killed the engine. "I could have one of my guys swing by and give you a lift."

By 'my guys' he meant one of his deputies.

I couldn't think of anything worse. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"I guess you could always call a cab."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"And get to the dance just as everyone's leaving? I don't think so." The taxis in Blue Water were worse than undependable. They were total crap.

"I'm sorry, Ren. Wish I could be more helpful."

"Right," I murmured, getting out of the car and dashing through the pouring rain to the house.

* * * *

I worried about everything all night, so by Thursday I felt desperate. I wasn't sorry when Payton found me between classes to ask if I'd brought the substitute photo I'd promised to bring. I'd forgotten it, of course.

"Did you tell Dugan I don't have a date for the dance?" I asked, trying not to look at her red blouse, which clashed horribly with her hair, and her plaid—yes, I said plaid—pants.

Payton sighed, not a good sign. "Yeah."

"And...?"

"He says he's still not going."

Great. "Then I won't go, either," I said, coming to a difficult decision. The sophomore class of Blue Water High could do without me this once.

"But you've got to go!" exclaimed Payton, looking truly distressed.

Of course I felt bad. "This isn't because of you or Dugan," I quickly assured her. I explained about Hayley getting a date, my parents going out of town, and me being banned from driving my car for another couple of weeks.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

We talked for maybe three more seconds before splitting up. I hoped I'd convinced her that my decision to skip the dance was not her fault.

D-Hall dragged by that afternoon, probably because Dugan wasn't there. Guessing he'd paid his tardies penalty in full, I slumped in my chair and tried to concentrate on studying for my math test. Then, once Coach set us free, I walked home alone.

I barely said two words at dinner, but my parents didn't seem to notice, or, if they did, chose to ignore it. Once we got the kitchen cleaned up, I went straight to my room, where I took my party dress from the closet and gazed longingly at it.

"I guess it's Spring Fling for you," I murmured when I finally stuck it back on the rack and shut the door.

On Friday, the whole school sort of buzzed with pre-dance excitement. Some of the girls who'd finished their tests even checked out at noon to get their hair and nails done.

I saw Payton only briefly, when I passed her in the hall between classes. She just looked at me and shook her head, annihilating my hopes for a last-minute miracle.

Hayley did her best not to talk about her big date, I'll give her that. But by the time my last D-Hall rolled around I was sick to death of tuxes, limos, and boutonnieres. So it was a relief to slip into my seat and do my homework.

I got home that evening just in time to hear all Mom's last-minute instructions. She then handed me my cell phone and headed out the front door, overnight bag in hand.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"Call Larry if you change your mind about the dance," Dad said, referring to his favorite deputy. "His number's on the fridge." Dad kissed me, grabbed their suitcase, and left.

Alone in the house, I went through the day's junk mail, most of which I tossed, then cooked a frozen pizza in the microwave. After that, I watched some guy selling tools on the home shopping show until 8:30.

Talk about bummed out ... I was.

It wasn't like missing the dance was the end of the world. It honestly wasn't. What upset me was Dugan's apparent ability to resist my charms. I felt like such a loser and hated myself for letting a guy—even this guy—challenge my self-esteem.

Who needed him, anyway? I wondered, vowing right then and there to kick him out of my head and my life.

That's when my cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Ren? It's Payton."

"Oh, hi."

"I'm calling to tell you that Dugan went to the dance."

"What?"

"Dugan's at the dance. I had violin practice, then rode my bike by the library, so I just got home. I thought he was working late or something, but Granny told me he left around 8:00 wearing a tux. I found your number on his dresser and knew I had to let you know."

Arrgh!

"I swear I'd have called sooner if I'd known." She sounded near tears.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"It's okay, Payton. I can still make it." How, I didn't know. I mean, I had to fix my hair, do my make-up, put on the dress, and turn a basketball—the closest thing we had to a pumpkin—into a coach.

The second I got off the phone, I dashed upstairs. Though I'd have loved to shower and take my time putting on foundation, eye shadow and mascara, I couldn't afford that luxury tonight, so did the best I could do in the scant fifteen minutes I allowed myself.

Fortunately, I was queen of getting ready in a rush, due to my habit of hitting the snooze button on the alarm clock. So I actually didn't look half bad when I finished my face.

After pulling my hair into a low ponytail, all I had time for, I ran back to my bedroom and stepped into my dress.

Matching earrings and strappy heels completed the outfit and made me feel like a princess—a very stressed princess. All that was missing was my carriage.

And what was I going to do about that?

I called Larry—something I should have done first thing, of course. I got voice mail. After leaving a frantic message and then pacing the kitchen for fifteen whole minutes waiting for a callback, I grabbed my purse and denim jacket and headed straight to the garage and my Camaro.

A girl had do what a girl had to do, right?

Not right. Not at all. No matter how I looked at it.

But I did it anyway.

I did it because I knew that driving my car to the dance wasn't half as wrong as me missing out on a chance to be with Dugan.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

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Chapter Four

I pulled into the student parking lot at exactly 8:45. Before I got out of the car, I removed my key from the ring and slipped it inside my strapless bra, under my left boob. Then I tucked my cell phone into a fold of material on the bodice of my dress. I looked a little lumpy in that one spot, but it beat carrying the thing around all night. I'd have left it in the car, like my jacket and purse, but I worried that my parents might call.

Walking fast to keep from freezing, I headed into the gym that I had not, for once, helped decorate. My being class president meant I got to delegate jobs, one of the reasons I ran for office in the first place. I had to say the place looked incredible, with a zillion glittery snowflakes suspended from the tall ceiling and silver fabric hiding the bleachers, which had been folded into the wall. White cloths draped long tables loaded with refreshments.

Rock music blared in sharp contrast to the peaceful snow theme. I barely noticed, so intent was I on locating Dugan, who was, according to Payton, somewhere in that writhing, overcrowded room, wearing a tux and looking for me.

Please let him be here, I prayed to my fairy godmother as I slowly circled the dance floor, looking everywhere. I saw Hayley and Brian, who only had eyes for each other, all the cheerleaders, and most of the football team. I saw at least ninety percent of the sophomore, junior and senior classes. I even saw Trey Parker, not to mention every single member of

the Student Council, and all my teachers. The one person I didn't see was Dugan. Anywhere.

Heart sinking, but not fully sunk, I moved toward a central location where I believed I could keep an eye on the entire room. Still no luck. Just as I was about to give up and slip back outside, someone walked up behind me and covered my eyes.

"You're late," said a wonderfully familiar, deliciously deep voice.

"But worth the wait," I retorted, spinning around to face him. It's a good thing I answered Dugan before I saw him, because words escaped me when I got a look at that black tux.

Oh. My. God.

And I'd thought he looked hot in blue jeans.

The tux fit him perfectly, which told me it was no last-minute, grab-what-they've-got rental. No, the boy had clearly been measured for this baby, and right then I really envied the tape they'd used. I imagined stretching myself along those shoulders or down those arms and legs.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely worth the wait." Dugan's gaze slipped down the length of me, lingering where it shouldn't. By the time he got back to my face, my palms had begun to sweat. "Are you all right?"

Was I that obvious? "Just ... relieved, I guess. I was afraid you wouldn't be here, and I really, really wanted to see you."

That got him. "Um, wanna dance or something?"

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

Or something works for me, I thought, wishing I could do what I most wanted to do: throw my arms around that boy's neck and lay a big, juicy kiss right on those sexy lips of his.

Somehow I restrained myself. "Okay."

Dugan led me onto the dance floor. I was not sorry to note that the DJ had just selected a slow song and went eagerly into Dugan's arms. He tried to keep me at a distance, but I was having none of that. I mean, I'd laid everything on the line to get there. I wanted to be as close to him as I could be for as long as possible. So in a nanosecond, we molded to each other and swayed to the music.

It was heaven.

Thanks to my heels, I stood tall enough to get a whiff of his aftershave. Man oh man did he smell good. We danced three whole dances, the other two fast ones, before Hayley spotted us and rushed over with Brian in tow.

"You two look incredible!" she exclaimed, hugging me. Dugan and Brian just nodded warily to each other as guys will. "Did you come to the dance together?"

I shook my head.

"Then how'd you get here?"

I mimicked driving.

Hayley gasped and started to say something. I shook my head ever so slightly to signal she shouldn't.

"Oh, um, well. We're going outside to get some air," she blurted. "It's so hot in here. Want to come?"

I looked at Dugan, noting the trickle of sweat that trailed down his cheekbone into his stiff white collar. He shrugged in answer to my unspoken question.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"Maybe for a minute," I said, taking pity on him.

We walked outside and found that other couples had done the same, as had some teachers, no doubt to chaperone. The cold air now felt wonderful, and I realized the sky had begun to spit snow, which I found very romantic.

I saw a lot of stolen kisses in the shadows and would've loved one of my own, but there wasn't a chance. Dugan made sure of that by staying in the light. So by the time I cooled down enough to shiver, I found myself back inside the gym, still wishing for my first kiss.

Damn it.

We danced every slow dance during the next couple of hours, but sat out most of the fast ones, sipping watery fruit punch or talking. I met some of Dugan's friends; he met more of mine. I spoke to a lot of my teachers, most of whom seemed cool with my date for the evening, which said a lot about Dugan, I thought, and proved my mom had him all wrong. I hoped that no one said anything about him later to my parents, who knew all the teachers on a first-name basis. But that was a risk I was willing to take. Being with Dugan meant that much to me.

The crowd had really thinned by 11:30, which was when Dugan and I decided to call it a night.

"What are you driving?" he asked once we left the gym.

"That red Camaro." I pointed to the farthest end of the lot.

His eyes widened slightly. "You drive that?"

I nodded proudly. I did love my car, even if it was a hand-me-down.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

The light dusting of snow on everything really surprised me since I hadn't realized it was sticking. Dugan didn't say a word or hold my hand the whole way even though the parking lot seemed oddly slippery. In fact, he actually stayed a step ahead of me, thanks to his long legs. So by the time we reached my car, I was as certain I wouldn't get a goodnight kiss as I was desperate for one.

But short of throwing myself at the boy, I didn't know how to get it. I felt really cheated, which wasn't the ending I'd hoped for. But there'd be other dates, right? Other chances to kiss and maybe even hold him.

"Mom let me have my cell back, so you can use that number I gave you," I said, turning to face Dugan.

"Not going to happen."

"What?"

"I meant what I said on Tuesday, Ren. I'm not going to mack on you, knowing that your mom hates my guts. I just can't do it."

I couldn't believe my ears. "So why'd you come tonight?"

"Because Payton said you didn't have a date, and the thought of you dancing with a bunch of other guys just, I don't know, set me off or something."

I got very still. "You mean you're here to keep me from having fun with someone else, and not because you want to be with me?"

He winced at my choice of words, but didn't deny them. "Something like that."

I'd risked the wrath of Judge Paula Montgomery for this?

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"Could you be more of a jerk?" I gave Dugan a hard shove, then turned my back on him to dig into my bra for my car key. With shaking hands, I opened the door so I could slide behind the wheel and buckle up. "Thanks for nothing," I told him, slamming the door really hard. Dugan jumped back to keep from losing a very important body part.

When I started the engine and tried to clear the windshield with the wipers, they stuck to the glass for a split second. That should've clued me to the fact that there might've been some ice mixed in with that beautiful snow, right? Wrong. I never even noticed. By then tears streamed down my face, frustrating the heck out of me since Dugan so wasn't worth them.

But he flashed deep blue.

I put the car in reverse and barreled out of my spot, then put her in drive. The Camaro's tires spun, yet another clue that the asphalt might be slick. Without a backward glance, I stomped the accelerator and fishtailed my way toward the street.

Why 'd he flash deep blue?

Right before I exited the lot, my car suddenly skidded into a slo-mo three-sixty that ended with it slamming into a metal light pole.

Crash!

Just like that.

I killed the engine, unbuckled, and reached for the handle even as the door flew open all by itself. Or not. Dugan yanked me right out of the car and into a crushing embrace. Somehow my lips found his, initiating a kiss that would surely

go down as the best ever, beating the first one between Edward Cullen and Bella Swan in 'Twilight', previous record holder. Dugan tensed, but only for a second before he got into it ... as in *really* got into it. I loved every second.

My legs gave way, but he caught me, demanding, "Are you okay?" He brushed a tear off my cheek with his thumb.

"Hmm...?"

"Ren! Are you okay?"

"Oh, um, yeah. Sure. I think so." Still dazed by that kiss, I honestly felt no pain, so couldn't tell for sure.

"Ren! Oh my God! Are you hurt?"

At the sound of that shout, I turned out of Dugan's embrace to find Hayley, Brian and a few other people hurrying toward us. I noticed that they all slipped and slid on the asphalt.

"Fine." I smoothed my skirt, pulled up my top, and patted my hair.

Belatedly, I registered Hayley's look of horror. My gaze followed hers to my car. I saw crumpled metal and a smashed headlight where the right front fender used to be.

No way.

No *freaking* way.

As the full implication of my situation slowly sank in, an intense wave of nausea washed over me. I stumbled to the snow-covered grass and immediately barfed up all the fruit punch I'd just consumed.

"Nice," murmured Brian, further humiliating me.

Dugan walked over and grabbed my arm. "I'm taking you to the hospital now."

"No," I said, shaking him off and swiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I was so embarrassed I couldn't even look at him. "I'm okay. Really. I'm just—"

"Busted," said Hayley, shaking her head. "You are so busted."

"Exactly." The two of us exchanged a long, telling glance. I gulped audibly.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Dugan, grabbing my arm again so I'd look at him.

I still couldn't do it. "I'm not supposed to be driving."

Dugan frowned. "What do you mean? Why not?"

"She got a speeding ticket a few weeks ago," said Hayley, adding, "It was all my fault. I wanted to watch Brian get on the football bus—"

"You did?" interjected her beau, clearly surprised, but obviously pleased.

Hayley nodded. "Ren can't drive her car until January first. That's why we walk home every day."

Dugan tucked his finger under my chin and directed my gaze to his face. "You weren't supposed to drive, but you did it anyway?"

Clearly he believed that a 'nice' girl like me would never do such a thing.

Wrong.

"I-I d-did," I told him through chattering teeth, my cold sweat getting colder by the second.

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that spending time with the guy I adore was worth the risk of getting caught," I told him. "I never dreamed that guy didn't really want to be with me."

Dugan flushed scarlet and started to say something, but decided not to when he noticed the small crowd that had gathered to watch.

"Show's over," he snapped at them before reaching inside the Camaro for my jacket.

No one moved.

"Get the hell out of here!"

Everyone but Hayley and Brian scattered.

"What are you going to do?" she quietly asked as Dugan thrust the jacket at me.

I put it on. "I don't know. Mom and Dad won't be back until Sunday afternoon and won't go into the garage then. So they'll never notice if the car's not there for a few days. Maybe I can get it fixed somewhere and then sneak it back home."

"I can't believe you'd even consider not telling your parents what happened," muttered Dugan as if he were truly shocked. "That's so ... dishonest."

"I don't want to die young, okay? And you're one to talk to talk about honesty, Mr. Character Camp."

Hayley's eyes widened. She turned to Brian. "Maybe we should go."

"Right," he murmured with a hasty nod. He took her hand and they walked carefully toward his car. That left Dugan and me alone with my poor wrecked Camaro.

"I'm so sorry I said that," I immediately blurted.

"I deserved it."

"I know, but it was still rude."

Dugan cracked up, which made me smile. Shaking his head, he stepped closer to the car to assess the damage. "I believe it's drivable. Why don't you park it at Bo's shop tonight? Then tomorrow you can drop by and get an estimate for repairs. I'll make him cut you a deal."

"It'll have to be a really good one. I don't have very much money left in my savings account, thanks to buying this." I looked down at my shiny blue party dress, which looked awful with my faded denim jacket. "And I sure can't call the insurance company."

"We'll work something out. Do you know the way over there?"

I nodded.

"Great, wait here until I get my car. Then I'll follow you."

"Okay."

Dugan opened the driver's door, and I got inside again and started the engine. Shivering from the cold, I watched in the rearview mirror as he jogged to his own vehicle, noting that he slipped on the icy asphalt more than once, but never fell, thank goodness. In seconds, his Bel Air pulled up behind me. I eased my car forward, driving at a snail's pace all the way to the shop. Once there, Dugan leapt out of his car and opened the garage door. He motioned for me to drive my Camaro on inside. Then he shut it behind us.

Aided very little by the dim light spilling from what looked like an office, I gathered up my purse and got out of the car just as Dugan walked over. I realized his collar was

unbuttoned; his shirt was untucked; and his bowtie, cummerbund, and jacket were all now MIA.

Suddenly shaky, I didn't know whether to blame that amazing kiss, how good he looked, or my run-in with the light pole. As for my ongoing queasiness, I would've blamed the overpowering smell of motor oil and paint if I hadn't known the real culprit: my guilty conscience. Once again I'd screwed up big time. And contrary to my reaction when Dugan accused me of being dishonest, I really felt bad about hiding this latest disaster from my parents, not to mention involving him in it.

But what else could I do? Tell them the truth?

I didn't think so.

Not only would they ground me for all eternity, they'd think the very worst of Dugan, who was not to blame for my bad judgment. So whatever happened, I had to keep his name out of it.

"We can leave this way," he said, taking my hand in his and leading me through the dark to an exit. In seconds we stood beside his car in the unlit lot. He opened the passenger door. I got in and scooted across the bench seat until I sat square in the middle, right in front of the radio.

Dugan looked at me kind of funny when he slid behind the wheel and realized how close I sat to him, but he didn't comment. Instead, he drove me straight home, where he didn't pull into the driveway or offer to walk me to the front porch.

"Well, goodnight," I said, finally taking his dead silent hint and slipping across the leather seat so I could get out. Just as

I opened the door, Dugan grabbed me by my waist and slid me back. In a heartbeat his mouth covered mine in a kiss I felt clear to my toes.

Whoa, baby!

"Want to come inside for a while?" I gasped when we came up for air.

Dugan just laughed.

"Does this mean you really do like me?"

"Are you crazy? Of course I like you. I more than like you."

"But you said—"

"I lied, okay?" Dugan dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. "God, Ren. What am I going to do with you?"

"Come inside, and I bet we'll think of something."

He popped his head back up and glared at me with ice blue eyes. "Will you just stop it? I'm serious."

So was I, but I didn't tell him that. Clearly he didn't want to hear it.

"Chill out, Dugan. I screwed up. I'll pay the price."

"But this whole thing—"

"—is my fault ... totally. So even if the worst happens and my parents find out, you're home free."

"Obviously you've never heard of 'guilty by association'," he murmured, so low I barely heard him.

"Sure I have, and I can tell you with one-hundred percent certainty that my parents would never go there. They're both too obsessed with equality and justice." I slid over to the door once again, and this time Dugan didn't stop me. "What time do you open on Saturdays, anyway?"

"Seven-thirty."

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I got out of the car and peeked back in. Man, did he look hot in that crisp white shirt, as he clutched the steering wheel, his biceps strained against the fabric of the sleeve.

I could barely speak. "I'll see you then, okay?"

He never looked my way. "Yeah, sure."

"Goodnight, Dugan. I had a really nice time."

That got his attention. "You have got to be kidding me."

"No really. I did. This was the best night of my life, in fact, and I have you to thank for it."

"Whatever," he muttered with a rueful shake of his head.

Stepping back, I shut the door.

Dugan drove away.

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Chapter Five

I slept surprisingly well that night, all things considered. Saturday morning, I got up around 7:00, ate a breakfast bar and drank a glass of milk, then hurriedly dressed in jeans, boots, and a sweater. Only when I stood in front of my mirror, brushing my hair, did I catch a glimpse of the dreary sky outside and realize that it snowed hard.

Great, I thought without enthusiasm. Though I normally loved precipitation of the frozen variety, especially during the Christmas countdown, today it meant I had a very cold twelve-block walk ahead of me. So I dug around in the hall closet for my suede coat with the Sherpa lining, which was the warmest thing I owned. I stuck my cell and keys in my shoulder purse and, because I didn't have any gloves, stuck my hands in my pockets.

The walk to Jennings' shop wasn't nearly as bad as I expected it to be. For one thing, several inches of snow covered everything, turning ordinary streets and gardens into a winter wonderland and making walking relatively easy. Though a bitter wind stung my cheeks and nipped my nose, it felt incredibly refreshing, and I loved the dense gray clouds overhead, since they promised even more of the same.

As I walked, I thought about Hayley and Brian, who looked really cute together. In fact, they were a perfect match since he had hair and eyes as dark as hers. I wished I'd found a way to casually touch him. I'd really hate for her to get involved with a guy who flashed anything but one of the

deepest soul-shades. The paler hues simply wouldn't do for my best friend's heartthrob.

I made it to the body shop by 7:45 and stepped into the office, which felt deliciously warm. A young woman greeted me, listened to what I had to say, and pointed to the door leading into the garage proper. I stepped through it and looked around for Dugan.

"May I help you?" asked a guy who appeared to be in his late thirties, early forties. He slipped between two of the three cars currently parked inside the garage, my red Camaro was one of them, and approached me. He had longish brown hair and a matching mustache, brown eyes, and a really nice smile. I noticed he wore a gray jumpsuit to protect his clothing when he worked.

"Is Dugan here?"

"You must be Ren."

I nodded.

"Bo Jennings. Dugan's airbrushing a van at the moment in the paint room. He should be taking a break soon. I have an estimate for your repairs, if you're interested. Follow me."

Since I most definitely was, I did as requested. Bo led me through the reception area into a smaller office behind it. While he rummaged through the papers on his cluttered desk, I took in my surroundings. I saw some dusty bowling trophies, a tasteful wall calendar, and a file cabinet. On it, sat a couple of photos of Payton Long, which seemed a little odd to me until I saw one of Dugan and an elderly lady. I realized Bo must be close to Dugan's family.

"Here it is." He handed me what looked like a computer print out.

I glanced at it and nearly fainted. Fifteen-hundred dollars? For one little fender bender?

Gulp.

"This is the best you can do?"

"Parts for that beauty of yours aren't that easy to come by these days. In fact, I had to resort to the internet, so yeah, I'm afraid it is."

I looked closer and noted that the parts came to around a thousand; labor, to five hundred and change. Sales tax was added on top of that, of course.

Since I only had one thousand dollars left in my pitiful savings account, I suddenly felt like hurling again, my usual reaction to impossible situations.

"Hey."

I turned to see Dugan had joined us and now stood in the office doorway, wiping his hands on a shop towel. He wore jeans that appeared to have witnessed more than one airbrushing session. I saw oversprays of yellow, orange, and red paint on them and on his long-sleeved tee, plus a streak of blue on his cheek.

"What's wrong?" he asked, apparently picking up on my dismay.

"Nothing," I lied. "It's all good."

Not fooled for a minute, Dugan stepped closer and took the paper from my hand. He glanced at it. "I need some air. Come with me?"

"Sure." I folded up the paper and stuffed it in my coat pocket.

He led the way back into the garage, where he grabbed a beat-up leather jacket from a coat rack mounted on the wall. A second later, we stepped out into the snow.

Dugan looked around the parking area in front of the shop, where his Bel Air, Bo's GMC, and a red Saturn were parked. I knew there was a fenced lot out back and assumed that's where they kept the cars currently in progress.

"Did you walk here?"

"Well, yeah. My parents are out of town, my car's in there—"

He looked like he could kick himself or something. "Then you probably don't need any more fresh air."

"It's okay," I told him. "I like snow."

Dugan just shook his head. "Come on," he said, laying an arm across my shoulders to put me in motion. He guided me across the street and straight into a donut shop. "Do you drink coffee?"

"No," I said, slipping the strap from my purse off my shoulder.

He ordered a coffee and a hot chocolate. Once he had them in hand, he led me to an empty booth. I sat across from him and gratefully drank the chocolate, which had a swirl of whipped cream on top and tasted heavenly.

"Do you want a donut?" he asked as if just realizing I might.

"No thanks. I already ate."

He nodded. "So talk to me. Was the quote too high?"

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by Linda Palmer

"Yeah." Reluctantly, I admitted how little money I had to work with. "But I was thinking I could call some other body shops and see if I can get it done any cheaper. If I can leave the car at Bo's today, that is. Do you think he'd mind?"

"Bo's a good guy. He wouldn't mind. But I have another idea." Dugan sipped his coffee, which appeared to be very, very hot, then carefully set it down on the table. Clearly distracted, he began to turn the mug absently with his fingers. "Have you ever heard of the barter system?"

"Isn't that where people offer goods instead of money for stuff?"

He looked at me. "Exactly. I was thinking that you and I could work out some kind of deal where I'd fix your car in exchange for—"

"Sex?" I asked. A girl could always hope.

Dugan sort of jumped, sloshing hot coffee all over his hands. I hastily thrust a wad of napkins at him.

"Damn it, Ren—" he muttered, mopping up the spill and drying his scalded fingers.

"Sorry. You were saying?"

Dugan cleared his throat and tried again. "I was saying that I could fix your car, and you could give my sister a makeover."

I didn't know how to respond. No way was a makeover worth five-hundred dollars labor.

"The thing is," he continued, resting his elbows on the table and leaning slightly forward, so he could look me dead in the eye. "Payton and I live with my mom's mother, whose idea of stylish is one of those faded cotton house dresses you

buy at Goodwill. And God knows I'm clueless when it comes to fashion, not to mention girly stuff like hair and shoes. She doesn't have anyone besides the two of us to advise her."

"But, Dugan," I answered. "Payton could get a makeover at New You for fifty bucks." I referred to the place in our one and only mall that did glamour shots.

He sat back. "Yeah, and she'd look like a ho when she came out. I want her to look like you."

What a compliment ... I guess. "Will your boss go for this?"

"I told you, Bo's a good guy. He was really there for us when my dad—" Dugan as good as screeched to a halt. "I mean he's been a close family friend since I started working for him. I'd do anything he asked, and he feels the same way about me. Besides, I'll be the one working on the car. All he'll have to do is loan me whatever tools I don't already have and a little electricity." Dugan's gaze locked with mine. "You trust me to do a good job, don't you?"

"Sure. But I think you're getting the bad end of the bargain. Unless you expect me to pay for Payton's new clothes and stuff." That she'd need new everything was a given. That I couldn't buy them for her was another.

Dugan shook his head. "I have money for that and for anything else she needs."

I considered his idea. "You're really serious about this Cinderella swap?"

He grinned at my choice of words. "Yeah."

"And you're sure your boss won't mind your working on my car instead of the ones belonging to paying customers?"

"I'll work on yours after hours."

"But—"

"No 'but's. Payton needs a new look and you're the girl for the job. So what do you say? Have we got a deal?"

How could I say no? I stuck out my right hand across the table. "Deal."

He took, shook, and released it. "Thanks, Ren. I appreciate this."

"Not as much as I do. How long will it take to get the parts and do the repairs?"

"I should have everything finished in plenty of time for you to drive it New Year's Day. It's the least I can do."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you think this is all your fault, but the truth is, you'd never have gone to the gym last night if I hadn't been there, so this whole thing is really mine."

"Don't flatter yourself," I retorted, oddly bothered by his words. Maybe because it sounded like I was chasing him. "As sophomore class president, I was supposed to be there."

I suddenly wondered just what Payton had told Dugan. Not that I hadn't dropped enough hints of my own about how much I liked him. But in spite of them, he'd yet to give me any indication that he returned my feelings. Well, except for those two kisses. And the way he held me when we slow danced. Oh, and his asking for my phone number. My stomach suddenly turned a somersault.

"Now could we talk about something besides last night, please?"

"Yeah, sure. Anything." Dugan probably thought I was going to hurl hot chocolate all over him.

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by Linda Palmer

"Payton's your step-sister, right?"

"That's right. My dad married her mom. Payton was about two, I think."

"Why do you live with your grandmother?"

"Because both our moms are dead, and Dad hasn't been around for over three years now."

"I'm sorry," I murmured, a little shocked by his home situation. Naturally I wondered where his dad was. "Bo had a picture of you and an older woman on his file cabinet. Is that your grandmother?"

"Yeah. We were at his old cabin on Tenkiller Lake. He's since sold it, which is a shame. Granny Opal loved that old place of his almost as much as he did." He sipped his coffee and softly added, "Bo's really good with her."

Good with her? That seemed like an awfully odd choice of words, unless...

"My grandmother's had Alzheimer's for a while now. She's been getting steadily worse, so for the past year, I've been taking her to the Senior Years Care Center on Ash Street every morning on my way to school. They open at 8:30. The staff keeps an eye on her all day, which is way better than her being home by herself. I pick her up around 6:00."

That explained his tardies. I'd wondered, since Payton somehow managed to get to school on time every day. Undoubtedly Dugan dropped his sister off first, then took his grandmother on to the day care. I looked at him with new respect. The boy had a lot to deal with.

"The social worker at Senior Years says she really needs to be in a private nursing home that specializes in Alzheimer's

patients. They suggested St. Anthony's on Birch Street. It's supposed to be really nice."

Tears filled his eyes. Naturally mine filled, too.

He noticed. "Sorry. Didn't mean to bring you down."

"I'm glad you told me," I said, and meant it. "So what are you going to do?"

Dugan started playing with the salt shaker. "Bo thinks St. Anthony's is a good idea, so I'm going to take a look at everything tonight. Thank goodness we've got the money to send her there instead of one of those charity places."

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure this whole Cinderella swap was such a good idea. I mean, my problems seemed pretty trivial at the moment. "Are you sure you have time to fix my car? Maybe I should just—"

"No." Dugan swept the salt shaker aside and grabbed my hands in his, an action that made me look deep into those brimming blue eyes. "Payton needs help, Ren. She's lost, just the way I was—no self-confidence, no friends, no one to look up to."

"She's got you."

He released me. "Oh yeah, right. Dugan Michael Donovan, Character Camp alumnus and big brother extraordinaire. Some role model I make."

"But look how you've turned things around."

"Thanks to Judge Renfroe and Bo Jennings. Your mom's camp made me take a long hard look at my life and set some goals. As for Bo, eighteen months ago, he took a chance and hired me, even though I was on probation with a little raw talent and no real experience. He's been a great role model."

Wow. I'd never met a graduate of Character Camp who felt that way about Mom. As for Bo, no wonder Dugan thought so much of the guy. He had to be ninety-nine percent angel.

"Don't worry, Dugan. I'll do what I can for Payton. But you have to remember I'm no pro, okay? I'm just a girl who never misses 'What Not to Wear'."

He actually chuckled at that. "I'd better get back. I need to talk to Bo, and I've got to finish up that paint job before lunch."

"Okay."

We left the donut shop and started back to the body shop together. The freezing wind, which had kicked up a notch, whipped my hair into my face and tugged at the hem of my coat.

"Will tomorrow afternoon be soon enough for Payton and me to get started?" I asked Dugan as we waited for a couple of cars to pass so we could cross the street. "Mom will be home by then and can drive us to the mall. I'll tell her that I've taken Payton under my wing or something. She loves it when I do stuff like that."

My mom constantly nagged me about being a role model. And while I honestly believed this resulted from fear that her 'wild child' would misbehave instead of a real desire for me to actually mentor someone, I fully intended to take her at her word.

Reaching out, Dugan gently released some of my hair from my lip gloss, where it had stuck. His gaze lingered on my mouth a second longer than necessary, which made my stomach drop kind of like when I rode a roller coaster. I

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swayed forward just a little as encouragement. With a quick shake of his head, he put his hand on the back of my neck and nudged me firmly into the street.

"Will she put two and two together, do you think?" he asked, an unfortunate choice of words that only increased my desire to kiss him.

I could barely answer. "Nah. Payton's got a different last name, and the two of you don't look a bit alike."

"Tomorrow afternoon will be fine, then."

We kicked up snow as we crossed the parking lot to the door of Jennings' reception area. We didn't go inside immediately.

"Is your real dad dead?" asked Dugan.

"Yeah. Aneurysm when I was eighteen months old. He was a cop."

"Tough break."

I shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I don't even remember him." I pulled my coat together.

Dugan took one of my chilly pink hands in his. "Your fingers are freezing." He rubbed them with his own, warmer ones. "No gloves?"

I shook my head.

"Come inside and thaw out." Just as he reached for the door, it opened. Bo stepped outside.

"Cold enough for you two?" he asked, turning up the collar of his pea coat and glancing at the sky.

"More than," said Dugan, adding, "Where are you headed?"

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"John Welch called and asked me to drop by and look at his new Mini Cooper. Why? Need something?"

"I want to talk to you for a second about the Camaro."

"I'm listening."

"How do you feel about Ren buying the parts and me doing the work for free after hours, here in the garage?"

Bo grinned. "I knew you were lying when you said she wasn't your girl."

Dugan flushed. "Actually, I wasn't. We're just friends."

"Yeah, right." Bo glanced from Dugan to me to Dugan, again. His grin got wider. "I don't have a problem with your plan."

"Thanks, man. I owe you."

"Me, too," I said.

An awkward silence followed before Bo spoke. "Not to rush you, Donovan, but Scooter's planning on picking up his van first thing Monday morning."

"Right. I was just about to get back to work." Dugan looked at me thoughtfully, then dug into his pocket and pulled out a key ring, which he tried to hand to me. "Why don't you take the Bel Air? You'll freeze for sure if you walk home."

"No way," I said pushing the keys back. "With my luck and these roads, you'll find yourself repairing two classic cars instead of one."

"Need a ride?" asked Bo. "I can drop you off anywhere."

"Oh, no. I'll be fi—"

"Would you?" said Dugan, cutting off my protest. "That'd be great."

So a couple of minutes later, I found myself sitting in Bo's beautiful GMC again. Though I felt a little awkward at first, he soon put me at my ease and even had me laughing. And by the time he pulled his truck into my driveway not ten minutes later, I felt like I'd known him for years.

"I appreciate the ride and you letting Dugan work on my car for free," I murmured, rubbing my chilled hands together in an attempt to unthaw them. The short drive hadn't warmed the truck engine enough to turn on the heater.

"No problem," he said, adding, "Your boyfriend's a good kid."

"He really isn't my boyfriend ... well, not yet."

Bo chuckled. "You'd better get inside, now. Your fingers are blue." With a grin, he handed me my purse. Our hands brushed as I took it. "Feel free to drop by the shop anytime, honey. A friend of Donovan's is a friend of mine."

"T-thanks," I somehow stammered before leaping out of the truck and dashing to my front door. I unlocked it, ducked inside, then shut it behind me. Sagging back against it, I put a trembling hand to my wildly beating heart. I literally gasped for my next breath ... and not because I'd been running.

Oh no.

Something else had upset me. Something very confusing. Something really, really bad.

Bo Jennings flashed black.

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Chapter Six

Suddenly my hot chocolate came up into my throat. I tossed off my coat and dashed to the guest bathroom to puke, then rinsed out my mouth. Sitting on the side of the bathtub, I gave my shaky knees a break.

"What do I do?" I wondered aloud. Obviously the right thing would be to tell Dugan about Bo. But for that to make sense, I'd also have to tell him about how I could see soul-shades, which I had no intention of doing. I mean, I hadn't told my parents, my brother, or even my best friend about that. No way was I going to tell Dugan, who didn't need another reason to avoid me.

Besides ... what if I'd made a mistake or something? What if my tried-and-true talent had failed me this time, and Bo was really as nice a guy as Dugan believed? Not only would I look like a total idiot for saying bad things, but Dugan might never forgive me.

I got up and walked to the kitchen for a glass of ice water. Leaning against the bar, I sipped it and wondered what happened to a bad man's soul-shade if he reformed. Would he still flash black, even though he'd changed? Or could a black flash simply mean that person had the potential for evil, but was currently good?

Try as I might to change the truth, it remained the same: Bo Jennings had an evil soul. Period. I knew that as surely as I knew my name. What I didn't know was the ramifications or what to do about it.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

My cell phone suddenly rang, scaring me half to death. I ran to the hall, where I'd dropped my coat, dug my cell from the pocket and answered it.

"Hey," said Hayley.

"Hey back." I walked to the living area and plopped down on our brown leather couch.

"Are you okay? You sound out of breath."

"I just hurled."

"Why?" she demanded. "What's wrong?" Hayley was well acquainted with the quirks of my stupid stomach, having been my best friend since first grade, where I barfed in the nurse's office every single morning for the first month.

"The estimate for fixing my car is fifteen hundred dollars."

Hayley gasped. "Do you have enough money?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're in big trouble."

"Maybe ... maybe not." I told her about the Cinderella swap Dugan had proposed.

"He bought you a hot chocolate?"

Trust Hayley to zone in on that piece of trivia. "Yes."

"Did you drink it there?"

"Yes."

"In a booth?"

"Yes."

"Did he sit next to you or across the table?"

"Across the table."

"Bummer. Well, you can't have everything, I guess."

"I'd settle for anything at this point," I told her with a sigh. "Dugan has made it very clear that he wants me to hang with his sister, but not with him."

"Oh, he'll get over that."

"I'm not so sure," I said, and meant it. If Dugan had half of my mom's stubbornness—deep blues were famous for that trait—I was in for a short, platonic ride. "He seems immune to my many charms."

Hayley laughed. "I don't know ... I seem to recall seeing the two of you engaged in some serious tonsil hockey after you ran into that light pole."

"Yeah, well, that kiss and one more are it."

"So far."

I smiled in spite of myself. I had to give Hayley credit for positive thinking.

"Now are you going to do something with Payton's hair? Because if you are, you need to take her to Tresses, and you'll never get in there without an appointment."

"You're right." I got up and headed to Mom's office to get the phone book. I sat in her executive chair at her mahogany desk, swiveling back and forth. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Ren?"

"Hmm?" I flipped through the yellow pages.

"What do you think will happen if your parents find out what's going on with Dugan, Payton and the car?"

"I think I'll die young."

She cracked up. "No, really."

"They'll take my car, my phone, my computer and everything else I love, and lock them away forever."

"And Dugan? What'll they do to him?"

"What can they do? His only crime is trying to help me."

"Maybe, but he'll still be guilty by association, especially since he and your mom have a history. You know she'll blame him because you went to the dance, even if the two of you didn't go there together."

I suddenly felt like hurling again. "I don't think I can talk about this anymore. I have to call Tresses."

"Okay," she said, adding, "Chin up, sister."

Easier said than done, I thought, clicking off that call and punching in the number of the beauty shop. I got an appointment with Renee for Tuesday at 10:00.

Putting the Bo Jennings dilemma out of my head for the moment, I returned to the living area and dug out some hairstyle magazines I'd recently purchased. I began to flip through them, marking every look I thought Payton might go for. Ultimately, it would be her decision, of course, and if she wanted to leave her hair the way it was, that suited me. I had no intentions of telling Dugan's sister what to wear or how to comb her hair. I just wanted to give her options.

Around noon, Mom called to ask about road conditions. I walked out on the front porch to double check, then told her we had snow, but the streets weren't slick. I didn't mention that wasn't the case last night. Mom asked how I was doing, then before I could answer, began to talk about their meeting and the nice dinner they'd had with Hayley's parents.

Someone clicked in. A number I didn't recognize.

"Mom, can you hold that thought for a sec?" I asked, now en route to the kitchen for a soda. I switched to the other call.

"Hello?"

"Hi."

Dugan! "Hi. Would you hold on long enough for me to get rid of my mom?"

"Uh ... sure."

Click. "Mom, I've got to go."

"Why? Who was that?" She sounded very suspicious, which suddenly made me wonder if I'd inherited my psychic powers from her.

"A new friend who's asking a favor of me."

"Oh, okay then. We'll see you Sunday, honey. Love you."

"Love you, too." I clicked her off. "Dugan? Still there?"

Dead silence.

My heart leapt into my throat. Oh God. Had I pushed the wrong button? Was Mom still on the line?

"Ren?"

Whew. "I'm here."

"Sorry about that. Bo needed me."

"No problem." God, I hated deception. I mean, there was nothing more stressful in my opinion. You not only had to remember what lie you'd told, but who you told it to. It could get so confusing, which was why I was all for honesty if it would possibly work.

Unfortunately, in this case it wouldn't.

"I've been thinking about tomorrow," Dugan said. "And I believe it might be best if you just met Payton and me at the

mall, maybe by that fountain at the south entrance. That way I can pay for everything with my debit card."

He was going to shop with us?

Now that was a turn of events I had not anticipated.

My heart kicked into high gear, pounding joyfully in my chest. I immediately began to think up ways I could stretch out the afternoon. Why, we could—

"Ren? Are you still there?"

Oops. "I'm here."

"So does that work for you or not?"

"It totally works."

"Good."

In the silence that followed that single syllable, I tried to think of something to say—something that might keep him on the phone a little longer.

"About the dance Friday..."

"What about it?" I asked, hoping he was going to tell me he'd had a good time, too.

"I'm sorry I kissed you goodnight."

"What? Why? Was I bad at it?"

He inhaled sharply. "Don't talk crazy. You're a fantastic kisser."

That was better. "Then why are you sorry you kissed me?"

"Because I think I gave you the wrong impression about us."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning there is no us, at least as far as kissing goes."

"So why'd you do it, then?"

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"I did it because I'm a guy and you're a girl, and it was late, and we were in a car in the snow, wearing dress-up clothes, and you smelled so damn good—"

My knees turned to Jell-o.

"And your eyes are so blue, and you'd been crying, and I wanted to make it all okay—"

"You kissed me out of pity?"

"No. Hell no. Haven't you been listening? I got caught up in the moment and lost it."

"Your point?"

"My point is that it won't happen again. Ever. I swear. I just want you to know that so you'll feel comfortable around me while we do the whole Cinderella thing."

"Great. Wonderful. Big whoopee. Bye-bye."

"Wait! Are you ... mad at me?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. I want us to be friends."

"You can't have everything."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means—" I took a deep breath, trying to put my complete and utter frustration with him into small words he could easily understand "—It means ... oh, I don't know what it means."

"Then we can still be friends?" he asked.

"Yeah. Sure. I guess." I made no attempt to hide my disappointment.

I swear I heard him swallow.

"Good. I'm glad we got that straight. Gotta go. See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," I echoed dully.

He hung up. I went into my cell contacts and added his phone number, bitterly tagging it 'Unboyfriend'.

* * * *

I did a little house work for my mom—it never hurt, especially if you'd wrecked your car that you weren't supposed to be driving. I then spent the rest of Saturday looking in all my magazines for advice on clothing for specific body types. I wanted to be knowledgeable, just in case Payton asked what I thought or something. I really didn't want to disappoint Dugan, who valued my opinion, if not my kisses.

By nightfall, I felt restless and bored, so I channel surfed for a solid hour, watching bits of several movies. I saw ten minutes of 'Liar, Liar', an hour of 'Big Fat Liar', and about two seconds of an indie flick called 'Deceptions'. Clearly my guilty conscience was after me.

I still slept well and so felt up to the challenge of facing my parents, who got home around 11:30 Sunday morning. I greeted them with a spaghetti casserole that earned me a couple of suspicious looks. I ignored them, graciously accepting their surprised thanks for cooking, something I rarely did since I wasn't particularly good at it. That day I think I did okay. I mean, neither of them openly gagged or anything.

While we ate at the bar, me to Mom's left and dad to her right, I told them about Payton's needing a makeover and me needing a ride to the mall so we could get on with it.

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by Linda Palmer

"What's her last name?"

"Long. Payton Long. She's an eighth grader."

"How did you meet her?" asked Mom, who knew very well that junior and senior high students rarely interact.

"She came up to me in the hall at school." I worded my reply carefully, trying my best to tell the truth, if not the whole truth.

"Is she short, tall...?"

"Tall and slender with smallish boobs."

Dad choked on his milk. Mom calmly pounded him on the back. I guess he wasn't used to graphic girl talk.

"Hair?"

"Red. I think it's pretty curly. She straightens it some, so it's kind of hard to tell."

Mom looked at me for a minute. "You know I'm not a bit surprised this young woman came to you for help. Haven't I always said your outgoing personality, good grades, and willing spirit make you a perfect role model? Too bad you can't seem to stay out of D-hall."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I've reformed," I announced as I meticulously wrapped spaghetti around my fork. "Starting January first, detention is a thing of the past."

Dad laughed out loud at that. Mom promptly quit pounding his back and glared at him instead.

"No really. It is." I leaned forward slightly so I could see my dad better. "Will you take me to the mall this afternoon? I'm meeting Payton at 1:00."

"I'll do it," said my mom. "I have to get out, anyway. You know, it's really very sweet of you to help this girl out. I'm very proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom," I murmured, wishing I could disappear into the floor. Her words made me feel that bad.

After dressing in jeans, a pink long-sleeved tee, and my most comfortable Nikes, I slipped on my usual denim jacket. Mom met me at the door, where she handed me a small shopping bag stuffed with white tissue paper.

"I got you a little souvenir."

"Why, thanks." Could I feel any guiltier? I opened the bag and found a pink leather purse in just the style I liked, not too big, with a slim shoulder strap and a place for keys, cell phone, and sun glasses. Naturally, I had to switch handbags right then so I could carry it to the mall. It matched my top, after all. "This is awesome."

"I'm glad you like it," she said, patiently waiting for me to finish. Then she led the way out the front door to her car.

I slipped into the front seat, passenger side. While Mom backed into the street, I waited for the questions I knew would come. My mom was always full of them. She was a judge, after all, and used to getting at the truth that way.

She didn't disappoint me today.

"Did you enjoy having the house to yourself all weekend?"

"Yeah, I did. It snowed Friday night and Saturday morning. It was gorgeous."

"I take it you didn't go to the dance. Did Hayley go with her new boyfriend?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did she say how it went?"

"She had a good time. Brian's nice."

"Does he have any unattached friends he could introduce to you? Double dates are so much fun."

"I'm not really into jocks, Mom."

"But you love football!"

"That doesn't mean I want to date one of the players." I shrugged. "They're just not—"

"Dugan?"

Gulp. "I was going to say 'my type'."

"What is your type?" she asked, taking her eyes off the road long enough to look at me curiously.

"I prefer a guy who's got more on his mind than cheerleaders, touch downs, and Gatorade."

"So you're into the artistic sort?"

"I guess you could say that."

"In other words, Dugan."

Did she know me, or what? I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Mom sighed. "Serena, I—"

Throwing up my left hand, I stopped what was bound to be coming next. "You've made yourself clear on the subject of Dugan, okay? Could we please not go there again?"

"I'm only trying to explain why I want you to keep your distance from him."

"I'm not a moron, okay? I understand the meaning of the words 'armed' and 'robbery'."

"It's more than that."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

More than a guy taking money from a convenience store with a gun in his hand? She had to be kidding.

"If you date Dugan, if you even hang out with him, you'll be guilty by association. People will look on you as a girl who thinks dating a criminal is appropriate. Never mind your straight A's, your committee work, your—"

"Dugan is not a criminal!" I practically screamed, unable to keep my mouth shut a second longer.

"I thought you said you understood the meaning of armed robbery."

"I do, and you know what? I don't believe that Dugan's capable of doing something like that. Oh, I know he went to Character Camp, and I know he served two years probation. I also know there's something the two of you aren't telling me. I'm perceptive that way."

Mom got very still. "So you've talked to him about this."

Uh-oh. "I—yes, as a matter of fact."

"When?"

"Tuesday at school."

"What did he have to say for himself?"

"He said that a nice girl like me should stay clear of a guy like him."

"He agrees with me, then." She looked very smug.

"Apparently, so you can stop talking, wondering, and worrying about it, okay? Your daughter is safe from Dugan Donovan."

"Good."

Mom turned the car into the parking lot of Blue Water's only mall.

"She's meeting me at the fountain," I said.

With a nod, Mom drove to the south end of the building, but she didn't stop. Instead, she cruised around as if hunting for a parking space.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly panicked. I'd expected her to drop me off, not go inside with me.

Since the parking lot this Sunday afternoon looked a lot like it did the day after Thanksgiving, Mom concentrated on finding an empty spot instead of answering me. Finally she pulled into one quite a way from the door and killed the engine.

She unbuckled her seat belt and turned to me. "I want to meet Payton."

Gulp. "And you will ... later this week. I'll have her over."

"But I want to meet her now." Her gaze narrowed slightly. "Is that a problem?"

A problem?

Actually, catastrophe described my current situation better.

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Chapter Seven

"No problem at all," I lied.

Without another word, Mom got out of the car and strode to the entrance. I had to run to catch up with her. Thank goodness all the ice and snow on the parking lots had melted. By the time we reached the front doors, my heart hammered in my chest. I couldn't imagine what she'd say when she saw Dugan.

Mom entered the building at once. I hung back, my gaze on the fountain, just a few yards ahead. I guess I thought I could signal Dugan from behind Mom so he could dive into the water or something.

But that wasn't necessary. Payton sat alone on the circular brick rim of it. I didn't know if I was more relieved or disappointed that Dugan hadn't tagged along after all.

I waved. Payton waved back and then stood when Mom and I reached her.

"You have to be Payton," said my mother with a smile. "You're the only redhead I see."

Payton nodded shyly.

"I'm Paula Montgomery, Ren's mother. I'm delighted to meet you." Mom turned to me. "Sweetie, could I steal you for a second before I go?"

"Um, sure."

We walked a few steps away from Payton.

"I guess I should apologize," said Mom. "I thought you might be trying to pull a fast one, but obviously I was wrong."

"What do you mean?" I asked, even though I had a pretty good idea.

"I thought you might be meeting Dugan here."

"Mo-om!" I rolled my eyes. "I told you he's not into me."

"So you did. I just didn't believe it since you're obviously into him and, well, what teen-aged boy can resist that? Anyway, I'm sorry I doubted you." She pulled me toward her and kissed my forehead, then handed me a twenty dollar bill. "Have a nice time shopping. Call me when you're ready to come home."

"Okay," I said, faking a smile since I was still a little rattled.

I watched Mom exit the mall and walk completely out of sight before walking back to Payton.

"So Dugan decided not to come?" I didn't know if Payton's brother had told her I wasn't supposed to hang with him, so didn't want to give anything away. Besides, keeping secrets from my parents was not an example I wanted to set.

"He's around here somewhere." She glanced over her shoulder to a men's store just behind her. I followed her gaze and saw Dugan leaving it to join us. He caught my eye and ruefully shook his head, but didn't say anything.

"You just missed Ren's mom," said his sister, unconsciously telling me exactly what I needed to know.

"What a shame." He turned to me. "Ready to get this show on the road?"

"I'm dying to get started," I told them. "I've been studying up on all the latest trends, and I have a pretty good idea how to transform you." I heard the negative echo of my words.

"Not that there's anything wrong with the way you are now." I let my gaze sweep her, noting how badly her jeans fit and the boxy shape of her beige corduroy jacket. "I'd kill for your height and figure."

"You would?" She sounded surprised and glanced down at herself uncertainly.

"Of course I would. I hate being so short and, well, curvy."

"But guys like curvy," said Payton with a quick glance at Dugan as if for confirmation.

He shook his head, a not-going-there look on his face.

"Yeah, well, that's small comfort when I can't get stuff to fit right. Now are we into quantity or quality today?" I rubbed my hands together in anticipation.

"Quality," said Dugan.

"Quantity," said Payton at the same time.

We all laughed. I motioned for them to follow, and began to share some of the stuff I'd read in my magazines as we walked to the first store that catered to the teen crowd, an upscale shop called Pockets that sold only jeans.

"The most important thing to remember is buy things that match your life."

"But I don't want boring clothes," said Payton.

I looked sharply at her, then saw how her big blue eyes twinkled. So she had a sense of humor. Good.

"You know what I mean. What are your hobbies? Are you into sports? Where do you go when you want to have fun?"

"I'm into mangas and I write short stories about elves, vampires and aliens. I don't do sports, but I do take violin lessons. And when I want to have fun, I rent one of the

movies on the American Film Institute's Top 100 list. I'm trying to watch them all."

I could see I had my work cut out for me. "Okay. There are three rules. One, don't buy anything you don't love. Two, don't buy something just because it's on sale or I say I like it. And three, have fun. What good is shopping if it doesn't make you feel better?"

"Not a bit," answered Payton, clearly getting into the spirit of the thing.

Dugan just shook his head again.

I ignored him. "Are you into low rise?"

"Yes," said Payton.

"No," said her brother at the same time.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing again. It was going to be an interesting afternoon.

Taking our time, we eventually purchased the quality jeans at the jean shop, and the quantity jeans at a store that changed styles as often as it opened its doors. I made her try on everything, of course, which gave me and Dugan some time to talk. Unfortunately, he'd apparently forgotten how, which meant I babbled like an idiot whenever we were alone to relieve the awkward silence.

Still feeling guilty about Mom's goodbye to me earlier, I kept my distance from the boy physically, even though I'd have loved to accidentally brush against him or stand a little closer while we waited for Payton to model whatever she tried on. Why bother to steal a spray of your Mom's best cologne if your guy never got near enough to smell it?

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

More than once, Dugan's sister refused to come out of the dressing room, instead summoning me inside for an opinion. The last time I did that, a toddler burst from under the door of another dressing room as I walked by.

"Kymmy Sue Henson, you come right back here!" The door opened a crack; a woman peeked through it. I saw in a flash that she wasn't dressed, so spun around and went after the little girl for her.

It wasn't that easy. She darted under a rack of denim jackets, which meant I had to get down on all fours to drag her out. Naturally, I touched her, something I always tried my best not to do to since it could be so disturbing. I mean, how could I look parents in the eye if I knew their kid was going to be a die-hard thrill seeker?

Kymmy Sue flashed the lightest green I'd ever seen.

That startled me so badly I nearly dropped her. This precious little girl with the angel eyes and Shirley Temple curls was going to be a greedy, egocentric workaholic?

Bummer.

"What?" asked Dugan.

I jumped at the sound of his voice and tried to keep my expression blank as I turned to him and shook my head.

"Did she bite you or something?"

"Of course not."

He frowned. "But you looked so ... shocked."

"Really?" With a shrug I returned to the dressing rooms and handed Kymmy Sue to her mom.

Faking a smile, I accepted her thanks and knocked on Payton's door. She reached out and yanked me inside the tiny

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cubicle. I did my best to counter her negative comments about her shape and size with honest compliments. It wasn't that hard to do. She had a lot going for her.

After about an hour, Dugan's sister warmed up to me enough to start talking non-stop, which made all of us relax, I think, and gave me insight to her personality. I found that I loved her dry wit, which actually matched mine.

Our next stop was an accessory shop called Buttons and Bows, where we picked up a purse and some cute belts.

"Are your ears pierced?" I asked, pushing aside her long hair so I could see her lobes.

"No, but I'd like to have them done."

I looked at Dugan. He shrugged his permission. Payton grinned.

In seconds, she sat on a stool with a sales clerk on either side of her. Dugan watched as they placed a spring-release gun thingy on each ear lobe so they could do both at the same time. Just as they started to count one-two-three, he pivoted and abruptly exited the shop. *Click!* went the gun, and Payton had 24 karat gold earrings in place.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

She nodded and hopped down from the stool, "You'd better check on Dugan, though."

I did, and found him just outside the door. He definitely looked a little 'green around the gills', a term my dad used to describe me every time I barfed.

"It's done," I said, touching his arm. "You can come back inside now."

He gave me a sheepish grin. "Sorry. I'm not into needles."

"It wasn't really a needle," I told him. "It was more of a—" He put two fingers on my lips to hush me up, blurting, "I don't want to know."

I caught his hand in mine, fully intending to pull it away, but wound up kissing his fingertips instead, a move that surprised me as much as it did him.

"Ren—" he murmured, his low tone warning me not to tempt him even as his gaze glued itself to my mouth.

It took all the willpower I possessed to release his hand and step back. I didn't apologize, but turned and went inside the store to where Payton stood, all her selections in hand. Dugan paid for everything.

"Ready for a break?" I asked, glancing at my watch. 2:30 p.m. "Or should we continue?"

"I need the ladies' room."

"Then let's chill for a while." I headed to the food court and found an empty table. Payton put down the packages she carried and made a bee-line to the restrooms.

"Want something to drink?" asked Dugan as I pulled out a chair and sat.

"I'll take a Coke." He went to one of the counters and ordered drinks, which he brought back to the table minutes later. I saw he'd gotten Payton something, too. He also had a warm pretzel, dripping in butter and sprinkled with coarse salt, which he set in the middle of the table.

"Help yourself."

I suddenly felt very awkward, but did pinch off a bite as Dugan settled into the chair opposite me. He broke off a bigger bite and ate it.

"I ordered the parts for your car. I should have them by Tuesday."

"I'll give Payton the money on Monday," I told him. "That is, if my plans for us to talk about make-up then work for everyone."

"They will. She's totally into this."

I smiled, pleased that he'd picked up on his sister's increasing enthusiasm, and snitched another bit of pretzel.

"Thanks again for helping her. I'll never forget it." He leaned forward slightly, as if he thought that would hold my attention better. Little did the boy know I couldn't have dragged my eyes off him if I wanted to, which I so didn't.

"I'm having fun." I self-consciously sipped my drink to wash down the pretzel, then tried to change the subject. "Did you go to St. Anthony's Saturday afternoon?"

He nodded and sat back in his chair.

"And...?"

"It wasn't half bad. You know how places like that sometimes smell like pee or bleach? This one totally didn't. And the rooms were actually pretty nice. I think we could put her things in there and make it seem like ... well ... home."

"So you're going to do it, then? Move her, I mean?"

He nodded again. "The day after Christmas."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"I don't think I have another choice."

His voice cracked, and I suddenly wanted to cry for him. This had to be so hard.

"Will you and Payton be okay without her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're what ... eighteen?"

"That's right."

"And you'll basically have custody of your step-sister, who's what...?"

"Thirteen."

"Is that legal?" I asked, though I knew the answer. I was the daughter of a juvie judge, after all. Determining custody was tricky in a simple situation. Dugan's was not simple.

"It is if no one knows." He looked away, frowning slightly. I suspected he might be thinking of my connection to the courts.

"No one will hear it from me," I quickly assured him, grabbing his hand. That drew his gaze to mine. "I promise."

"Thanks, Ren." He swallowed hard, squeezed my hand, then let it go. "It's not that I'm into lying. I admit it may seem like it, especially since you and I are keeping secrets from your parents. But I normally prefer the truth. It's a lot less complicated."

Boy did I know that.

"I just don't want anyone to put Payton in a foster home when I'm perfectly capable of taking care of her. Besides, I'll be nineteen in another six months."

"I understand," I said. "Really. It's just that..." I hesitated, not wanting to give him something else to worry about.

"Spill it."

"What if the people at St. Anthony's ask questions? Won't the social workers there want to know every last detail of your grandmother's home life? They might feel obligated to report anything they didn't agree with."

"I'll tell them that Payton's Aunt Lucy is going to help out, which she probably would, if I actually asked her."

"And you're not going to because...?"

"She'd want Payton to move to Oklahoma City, which would be a total disaster. You can see how shy my sister is. She'd have to start all over making friends. Besides, I want her here with me, where I can take care of her."

"Oh."

Payton walked up. "What'd I miss?"

"Most of this pretzel," I joked, pushing it toward her. Dugan gave me a quick smile of thanks for keeping my mouth shut about our conversation.

"You know what we haven't bought yet?" Payton asked.

I thought for a second. "Shoes?"

"Well, yeah, but I was actually thinking of underwear. Can we go to Victoria's Secret?"

"Sure," I told her, belatedly glancing at Dugan. "If you don't mind, that is."

"That's fine, but don't expect me to go in there with you. Guys have no business in a place like that."

"But how are you going to pay if you don't go in?" asked Payton, giggling.

Dugan groaned and thought for a second. "I'll wait outside. When you have everything you need, you can cover my eyes and lead me into the store."

Payton and I lost it then, laughing at Dugan until he started laughing, too.

In the end, we bought shoes before we bought undies. Payton picked out some really cute Nikes, a pair of boots, and

several other styles that would complement the clothes we'd bought so far. I have to say that Dugan never flinched, no matter how much things cost, which made me wonder if they were rich or something.

Not that it mattered. I didn't really care about stuff like that. I just knew that my parents would not let me buy a pair of boots that cost as much as Payton's did. Besides, Dugan worked in a body shop. And while he probably got paid a lot for his custom airbrushing—that kind of talent didn't come cheap—he was still in high school, and only working part time.

Right before we got to Victoria's Secret, we ducked into a store that had skirts and dresses, something we hadn't purchased yet. Payton tried on the cutest dress ever, which opened my eyes to that possibility. I wasn't a dress person, myself, so hadn't even thought about going there. In the end, we bought three, and they all looked great on her, thanks to her height and her slender build.

Finally, we got to the lingerie. Payton passed on thongs, choosing bikinis, instead. As for bras, we finally had to get a clerk to measure her so we'd get the right size. Payton had always worn sports bras before, which tended to flatten instead of flatter her curves. When she saw the difference an underwire could make, she insisted on wearing one of her new bras home. So she looked like she'd suddenly grown boobs by the time I dragged Dugan inside the store to pay.

He kept his eyes on the cash register, so didn't notice anything until we left the place. That's when he finally looked at his sister. "Where in the hell did those come from?"

We lost it again. I mean ... who wouldn't?

"Are they real?" he demanded.

I guess he thought we'd bought fakes ones or something.
For an eighth grader. Who did that?

Guys. You had to love 'em.

"Of course they're real," I told him. Payton couldn't even talk by then.

Dugan groaned again, which just made his little sister laugh even more.

We bought just a few more things—some socks, a scarf with matching gloves, a cute necklace—before I called my mom to pick me up. While we waited for her, we strategized the rest of our makeover and decided we'd devote Monday to make-up and Tuesday to hair. Payton gave me her address.

I couldn't think when I'd had as much fun and said so. Payton thanked me again and again before she and Dugan left, which put me in a great mood.

"How'd it go?" asked Mom the minute I got into the Avalon, around 5:00.

"We had the best time ever," I said, jokingly adding, "I'm thinking of doing this for a living. It's so much fun spending other people's money."

"I hear you," said Mom, laughing. She drove out of the parking lot and headed for home. Just before she turned into our driveway, she said, "Check with Sam when you get in the house, okay? He said he needs to talk to you."

"About what?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I was distracted when he told me, so I'm not sure. Something to do with Larry, I think."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

Larry? The deputy I called to beg a ride to the Christmas dance? The deputy who undoubtedly wondered if I ever got there?

How could I have forgotten to call him back and say "Never mind—I'm not going"?

My good mood melted as thoroughly as the ice on the streets.

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Chapter Eight

Sure enough, the minute I walked in my front door, Dad called out to me from the living area. "Is that you, Ren? We need to talk."

Gulp. Dragging my feet, I walked to where he sat in his recliner, watching pro basketball on our big screen TV.

"Hey," I said, sitting down on the couch. My wits scattered in fifteen directions, trying to think up answers to questions he hadn't even asked yet.

He smiled at me. "Hey, yourself. Did you have fun shopping?"

I considered that smile a good sign, so relaxed a little. "Uh-huh. Payton bought some cute outfits. She's going to look fantastic when we go back to school."

"Your mom's proud of you for helping her, but she probably told you that."

I nodded, waiting for him to get on with whatever he had to say to me.

"I don't know if I mentioned this, but Larry's in charge of Christmas boxes this year." He referred to a long tradition of Craig County law enforcers collecting food for families that needed help around Christmas. The sheriff and his deputies plus some volunteers usually made the deliveries.

"He'll do a good job," I said, feeling generous now that I knew Deputy Larry hadn't gotten me in trouble.

"He's been great at getting donations, but I'm a little worried about delivery manpower. We've got to pull

everything together by Wednesday. I was wondering if you could call in some of your friends to help fill the boxes and maybe even deliver like you did last year."

Whew! "Of course," I said.

"Maybe Payton could help," said Mom. I didn't even realize she'd joined us. "Didn't you say she doesn't have many friends?"

I nodded. "I could call some of the junior high kids I've worked with at school, the ones that volunteer every time we do a community project. Payton flashed purple, so she's probably into—"

"Payton did what?"

Oh my God. Had I really said 'flashed purple'? In all my years of soul sensing, I'd never messed up like that before. But I guess a girl who couldn't remember her locker combination half the time shouldn't be surprised if her mouth occasionally spouted off without permission. Wide-eyed, I looked from Dad, who calmly waited for my answer, to Mom, who gave me the strangest look ever.

"Payton's got this flashy purple sweater she's dying to wear someplace special."

Dad chuckled. "Then you'd better invite some guys to help out, too, so it won't go wasted."

I couldn't even force a laugh. "Great idea. You'll need us Wednesday morning, then?"

"As early as possible ... say, 8:00. At the fire station. They're going to pull the trucks out and give us room to work."

"No problem. Me and my crew will be there." I got up and as good as ran to my bedroom, where I collapsed on the bed.

"Ren, you are such an idiot!"

Clearly I had to do a better job of keeping my head in the game. Not that I'd have minded if someone knew about my ability to read souls. I wouldn't. At all. I just wasn't sure either of my parents was right for the job. Accustomed as they were to working with the logic of law, how could they ever accept or appreciate a talent that defied common sense?

* * * *

I hung out in my room the rest of the weekend in an odd funk considering I'd shopped for hours that day. Shouldn't I be feeling great ... even if I hadn't bought anything for myself?

I kept thinking of Dugan and his Granny Opal. Putting her in St. Anthony's had to be tough. I felt so bad for him. As for Payton, I thought about her a lot, too. A very sweet, funny personality lay hidden deep inside that ultra-shy shell of hers. I hoped I could think of a way to draw it out. Dugan was counting on me.

At breakfast Monday morning, I told my parents that Payton and I intended to work on make-up at her house. Neither had a problem with that. Once they left, I took a minute to figure out what I wanted to wear. Though I knew Dugan would be working, I couldn't help but hope he'd come home for lunch since I'd be there. So I chose my favorite jeans and a fitted tee trimmed with sequins. In my opinion, you couldn't go wrong if you sparkled.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

I stuck a photo that Hayley had taken of me a couple of weeks ago into my purse, then got on my bike and headed to the branch bank. It felt a little weird wiping out my savings account in a fraction of the time than it took me to earn the money that was in it. Feeling considerably poorer, I then rode to Payton's, a distance of about four miles. Thank goodness the clouds overhead weren't offering sleet or snow at the moment, though it was definitely cold enough for either.

Blue Water, my home town, was divided by a train track, with older houses on the east side, and newer ones on the west side. There wasn't really a wrong-side-of-the-tracks stigma if you lived east of them, but it was a fact that residents who lived to the west were generally more affluent. I didn't know why.

I lived in west Blue Water; Payton and Dugan, in east. I'll admit I had no idea what to expect. Though familiar with the street on which they lived, I couldn't picture any of the houses in their block. Turned out that they lived in a large, one-story red brick house that was probably pretty old, but still looked quite nice. It had a deep front porch that stretched the entire width of the structure, with concrete steps leading up to it. I liked the place on sight.

Payton threw open the door before I rang the bell, which told me she'd been watching for me. It made me feel good. She'd obviously had as much fun as I did yesterday. She motioned for me to come inside, explaining that her Granny Opal was at the adult day care center. As I entered the house and slipped out of my jacket, my gaze took in everything.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

I saw a nicely furnished living room, with a TV that was even bigger than ours. Shelves loaded with books covered one whole wall. Family photos covered most of another. Though I wanted to stop and examine every one of them, I didn't just then. There'd be time for that later, I thought.

A very fluffy cat came up to inspect me. Taffy, Payton called her. Taffy immediately began to circle my legs, first one, then the other, making it impossible to take another step.

Payton shooed her away, then offered me a soda, which I really needed. She led me to the kitchen to get it. I noted the modern appliances and stainless steel sink, which somehow did not clash with the country charm of the wooden dinette set, gingham curtains and tile floor.

"Very nice," I commented. "I feel like I should whip up a soufflé or something."

Payton looked pleased by the compliment. "Thank you. Mom and I copied a picture we saw in 'Southern Living'."

"So the two of you remodeled?"

"Yes. About six months before she got sick and died."

"I'm sorry you lost your mom, Payton." I took a wild guess. "Was it cancer?"

She nodded. "A really fast kind. She died about a week after the doctor found it. I was seven. It really shocked us ... dad most of all. That was the second time he'd lost a wife to cancer so it kind of messed him up."

"You mean Dugan's mom died of cancer, too?" Yikes.

"Yeah. Dugan was six, I think." She grabbed a soda from the fridge and thrust it at me, then got one for herself. "Um

... could we change the subject? I really don't want to think about all that bad stuff right now."

And no wonder. "Sure, but I do have one more question I'd like for you to answer. If you can, that is. I don't want to put you on the spot or anything."

She gave me a curious look. "Okay."

"Why was Dugan sent to Character Camp? And don't tell me it was armed robbery. I've heard that answer, and I don't believe it."

"Who told you he got busted for that?"

"My mother and Dugan, himself."

She looked stunned. "He really used those words?"

"He did. Is it true?"

"Kind of, I guess, but mostly not."

"I knew it!" I popped the top of my can. She popped hers, too, then pulled out a chair and motioned for me to sit. By the time I did, I found a plate piled high with brownies sitting on the table in front of me.

"I made these for you."

"Why, thank you," I said, grabbing one. I took a big bite and sighed. Man, I loved chocolate. "Now talk."

Payton nodded, pulled out her own chair and reached for a brownie. "Dugan was fifteen when Dad went sort of psycho and, well, you know."

Actually, I didn't, but I nodded anyway. I'd solve the daddy mystery later.

"My brother started running around with some guys who were into restoring classic cars and stuff. They were way

older and sort of wild, but they let him hang with them for some reason."

"Was he already into airbrushing?"

She blinked. "Oh my gosh. I'll bet that was it. I wondered. Dugan didn't really have that much in common with them. I mean, he'd never drink like they did or anything. We both saw what it did to Dad."

So their dad drank. Finally, a piece to the puzzle.

"And he wouldn't smoke, either. Not after his mom died of lung cancer."

Poor Dugan. "Those guys got him in trouble, then?"

"Oh yeah. Dugan always had money, thanks to his mom. She was one of those people who do things with the stock market. I forget what they're called. Plus she had an insurance policy or something. Anyway, since he didn't have a car then, he usually paid for gas whenever he and his friends cruised."

I began to get the picture and already hated how Dugan's fake friends used him.

"One night they stopped for gas and cigarettes. While Dugan filled the tank outside, his friends went inside and robbed the place. With guns! He didn't even know they were going to do it."

I gasped.

"I know," said Payton. "It was awful. Luckily there were two cops in there who weren't wearing uniforms. They arrested everyone, including Dugan, even though one of his so-called friends finally admitted he wasn't in on it."

My jaw dropped. "So my mother sentenced Dugan to Character Camp and two years probation, even though he didn't do anything wrong?" I couldn't believe it. She was usually so fair.

Payton went very still. "Your mother?"

"Judge Paula Renfroe ... then, anyway. She's Judge Montgomery now."

Dugan's sister slapped her hand over her mouth and mumbled something.

"What?"

Payton lowered her hand so I could hear. "I had no idea."

"I'm surprised Dugan didn't tell you."

"Me, too." Her eyes got wide. "Is that why Dugan hid at the mall when he saw you walking up with your mom?"

"Yeah. She doesn't want me to see him."

"But you're doing it anyway?"

"Not really. I mean I'm seeing him, but not as a boyfriend. Just as your brother. But she might not get the difference."

"Oh. That's okay, then." She just looked at me for a minute, clearly deep in thought, then scooted back her chair and stood. "Are we ready to get started on the make-up? I've got tons of it to go through. I'm always trying to find something to make me look better."

"There's nothing wrong with the way you look."

"Then why don't I have a boyfriend?"

"For the same reason I don't. Our beauty and brains scare them off." I stood, too. "Now show me what you've got."

With a giggle, and the plate of brownies, she led me down the hall.

We wound up sitting on Payton's bed, with all her make-up dumped in a huge pile in the center of it. I stole a second to take in my surroundings and smiled at all the white eyelet I saw. The curtains, pillow shams, sheets, and comforter were all trimmed in it, giving the room an ultra-feminine air that contrasted sharply with my own bedroom, which wasn't a bit frilly.

I sorted through all her cosmetics, tossing the kohl first thing. She had several shades of foundation. Luckily we found one that matched her skin tone, so got rid of the others. We also got rid of a too-pink blusher and some awful peacock blue eye shadow, among many other things.

I shared something that my mom told me when I started fixing my face. "You don't want anyone thinking what a nice job you did on your make-up. You want them thinking what an attractive girl you are." Payton saw the truth of that, just as I had. So we went into the bathroom, where she practiced keeping color to a minimum and blending until everything appeared natural. She looked so freaking good once she got application down pat.

That happened around noon, thanks to our getting sidetracked by her enormous CD collection. Did that girl ever love music! I learned that she'd never tried out for band, so added that to my mental list of ways for her to make new friends.

"Does Dugan ever come home for lunch?" I asked, trying to be nonchalant once we returned to her bedroom and gathered up the make-up she wasn't keeping. We put it all in a trash bag.

"He is today," she told me with a sassy smile that said I hadn't fooled her for a second.

"When?"

"Around 12:30." She twisted the top of the bag. "I'm making Frito-chili pies. Is that okay?"

"Sounds delicious." I followed her, oh so thankful that I'd be seeing Dugan soon. When I passed the bedroom Payton had earlier pointed out as his, I slowed down and then stopped. "I'm just going to lay the money I owe your brother on his dresser. Okay?"

"Sure," she called back to me before vanishing into the kitchen.

I entered Dugan's room and slowly pirouetted, taking in every detail from the masculine bedspread in shades of maroon to the bay window. I saw earth-toned carpet on the floor, fantasy posters on the walls, and stars on the ceiling. They looked like the kind that glow in the dark. That made me smile.

After digging the thousand dollars out of my jeans pocket, I put it on the dresser, as promised. I also replaced that awful photo of me with the one Hayley had taken with her digital camera. We'd done our own glamour shots. This was the best of the bunch. I started to join Payton in the kitchen, then didn't, instead stealing a moment to examine everything else sitting on Dugan's dresser.

I so wanted to know him better.

I smelled his aftershave, counted his change, and slipped on his class ring, which was way too big, before moving to a bedside table that had some papers on it. I picked up an

envelope from Oklahoma State University, but didn't have the nerve to read what was inside it before I put it back down. Then I picked up another letter, this one from a Whit Donovan, Oklahoma State Penitentiary, McAlester.

I tensed. Was Whit Donovan Dugan's dad?

The rest of the puzzle pieces suddenly fell into place.

"Lost?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Whirling, I found Dugan looking at me from the doorway.

"Um, no. I actually just came in here to lay your money on the dresser."

He glanced to where I pointed, then glanced back at me, his expression unreadable.

"I couldn't resist exploring a little. Please don't be mad."

Dugan entered the room, took the letter from me, and set it back on the bedside table without a word. My face—no, actually my whole body—burned with humiliation.

"Was that from your dad?" I asked. I'd come this far. I had to know.

"Yes."

"He's in prison?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Dugan."

"It's not your fault." His voice sounded very cool. "So how do you feel now that Dad's behind bars?"

"It doesn't matter one bit."

"Maybe not to you. It matters to me, though. And it obviously matters to your parents. You know ... the whole guilty by association thing."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

I'd have loved to once again claim that my parents were above that, but how could I when I now knew they weren't? "My mom was wrong in sending you to Character Camp when you didn't even know there was a robbery going on."

He winced. "Payton talks too much."

"Don't blame her. She was just trying to be nice and answer all my questions."

"Then maybe you should've minded your own business."

"Maybe, but I want to know everything about you."

"Why?"

"Because you're so amazing."

Dugan groaned. "God, Ren. Could you make this any harder for me?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to ... or maybe I am. I don't know." I pressed my fingertips to my temples and heard Dugan's sharp inhale. "What?" I demanded, even as I realized what he looked at. His senior ring. Still on my second finger left hand.

I almost peed my pants.

"Sorry," I murmured, immediately letting it drop off my hand and onto his dresser. "Why don't I go help Payton with lunch..."

I slipped past Dugan ... or tried to. He reached out just as I got to him and sort of spun me straight into his arms. I tipped my head back to check his expression just as his mouth came down on mine in a hard kiss.

And he didn't stop with one. Oh no. Tangling his fingers in my long hair, he kissed me over and over—hungry kisses that stole my breath and my heart.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

I could barely think as I wrapped my arms around his neck and eagerly returned each and every one of them. But I knew one thing for sure. There was no going back after this.

The boy was mine now. All mine.

We made sweet magic together, and nothing could break the spell. Nothing.

"Hey! Are you guys ready to—oops!"

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Chapter Nine

"This isn't what it looks like," Dugan told his sister as he stepped quickly back.

"It's not?" we blurted in unison.

"No." Almost growling, he swept past Payton and left the room. We scurried behind him to the kitchen. "Maybe you'd better fix my lunch to go."

"You're not eating with us?" Payton looked hurt.

"Nope."

"Why not?" I asked. Things had been going so well.

"How can you even ask me that?" he as good as yelled at me, pulling on the beat-up leather jacket he'd worn that day at his shop. I noticed he had on his paint clothes, too.

"Because ... I don't know?" The boy really confused me with his hot-one-second, cold-the-next performances. I mean, how was I supposed to react?

He huffed in obvious exasperation, which sort of ticked me off.

"Never mind lunch," Dugan said to Payton, frantically trying to find something to put his chili in. "I've lost my appetite." Then he noticed her expression. "Sorry, Pay-Pay," he mumbled, giving her a quick kiss on her forehead. "This isn't your fault."

Did that mean it was mine? Now I was totally ticked off. So I followed him right out his front door. He strode across the porch. I caught up and grabbed him by the arm just before he

started down the steps. He stopped with a sigh and turned to face me.

"What is the matter with you?" I demanded the minute our eyes met.

"You are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you make me crazy, okay?"

Aha! "So you are saying your tantrum is my fault."

"This isn't a temper tantrum," he said.

"Well, I don't know what else you'd call it. You yelled at me and your poor sister, who just cooked your lunch, by the way. Then you stomped out the door, which would've slammed, if I hadn't been right behind you. I think that qualifies as a tantrum."

Dugan's shoulders sort of sagged. "I apologized to her."

"Yeah, but not to me."

He sighed again. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I came home for lunch because I had to see you. I'm sorry you looked so damn good when I got here. And I'm sorry I couldn't not kiss you one second longer. But most of all ... most of all, Ren ... I'm sorry that I talked to you that day in D-hall. I swear if I'd known who you were I'd never have done it. There. Am I sorry enough?"

Tears filled my eyes. I blinked to hide them, but Dugan wasn't fooled. Cursing, he wrapped his arms around me in a really tight hug. "Baby, you're killing me."

Baby. He called me 'baby'.

"Not on purpose," I said with a sniff, my words muffled against his broad chest.

Dugan stepped back. "I'm really not trying to confuse, hurt, or tease you."

"You could've fooled me."

"I know!" He grabbed a support post with both hands and banged his forehead on it a few times, all the while cursing. "Look, I'm sorry I'm such a jerk, okay?" Dugan began to pace the porch, speaking with his hands as much as his voice when he said, "It's just ... well ... I'm so damn frustrated with this whole situation. But me losing it and kissing you doesn't change the truth, Ren—I can't be your boyfriend."

I didn't answer. I mean, what could I possibly say when I'd never accept that?

Luckily he didn't seem to notice. "Let's go back in. I don't want to hurt Payton's feelings." He opened the glass storm door, then stopped and turned to me. "Please try to act normal, okay?"

"Okay."

Unbelievably, we did go inside, where the two of us ate and talked with Payton as if we were casual acquaintances instead of a guy and a girl who'd just swapped spit and mean words.

By the time Dugan went back to work, I felt emotionally drained from all the play acting. But I stayed with Payton long enough to help her clear her closet of some of her funkier outfits. Most of them, she told me, came from her Aunt Lucy, a real bargain hunter who bought everything she found that was cheap and in Payton's size. No wonder Dugan didn't want his sister to go live with her.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

Mom and Dad both seemed pretty distracted when they got home from their respective offices that night, so neither asked me about my day, which suited me fine. I watched TV for a little while in my room after dinner before turning it and my bedside lamp off. Lying in the bed in the dark, I stared out the window and thought about Dugan. He said we were never going to be together. I still thought we were. If there was any justice in the world—and what respectable daughter of the legal system didn't believe that?—Dugan would be mine someday. I couldn't imagine my life now without him.

Tuesday dawned cloudy and cold again, with a seventy percent chance of winter mix, which meant rain and sleet together. Though I wasn't sure I felt up to another day of rubbing elbows with someone Dugan loved, I rode my bike to Payton's, anyway. What else could I do?

She told me first thing that Dugan had called to report the parts for my car were in and he planned to start working on repairs tonight.

After looking at the hair styles I'd found in my magazines, the two of us rode our bikes to the beauty shop, located in a little strip mall about three miles from her house, but on the west side of the tracks. It was a pretty straight shot, streetwise.

I was glad that Renee, her hairdresser today, looked relatively normal for a change. A time or two, when I went in for a trim, I found her dressed way too Goth, as in purple streaks in her spiked black hair and studded leather encasing her slim body. That look could really shake a girl's confidence if she wasn't exactly sure what hairstyle she wanted.

Renee talked knowledgeably about face shapes, cuts, and tints. She loved Payton's natural coppery-red color, so didn't suggest a change, thank goodness. That kind of makeover was very high maintenance, and I doubted Payton could keep it up. She did suggest cutting off some length, adding layers, and thinning it a little. She also suggested adding mousse for manageability and using a diffuser to dry it.

I could tell Payton didn't like the idea of keeping her natural curls intact, but she didn't speak up, so Renee proceeded. The whole cut and style took over an hour, but man, was it worth the wait. I couldn't believe my eyes when Payton, who'd bent over so Renee could dry the underside of her hair, finally raised back up and looked in the mirror. Neither could she, if her sharp gasp was anything to go by.

"Payton, you're gorgeous!" I exclaimed, touching her curls, which now hung to just below her shoulders. We both stared at her reflection, open-mouthed with shock.

"Dugan's going to flip," said Payton with a giggle of pure delight. She played with the fresh ends of her hair, an action that drew my attention to her nails, badly in need of a manicure, something I hadn't even thought about. I captured that hand in mine.

"Once we get these taken care of—" I pointed to her chipped nails "—you'll be ready to call up some of your friends and go someplace that's extra fun."

Payton's smile faded. "I don't really have that many friends."

"Then I've got a great idea," I said. "Tomorrow morning I'm filling Christmas food boxes with my dad and his deputies

at the fire station. I'm going to get together some friends from school, some of them eighth graders, to help. If I promise to call some really cute boys, will you join us?"

Her smile suddenly reappeared. "Of course. I'd help even if you didn't call any boys."

I wasn't surprised. As I'd accidentally almost told my parents, people who flashed purple were like that.

Before we left, Renee showed Payton how to shape her nails, then gave her a professional emery board and a free bottle of nail polish, which I thought was awfully sweet of her.

We stepped outside to find pouring rain, mixed with sleet—the dreaded "winter mix." While that didn't matter to me and my ponytail, Payton had no intentions of getting her new do wet. So we walked into the little café next door and sat at one of the tables to have some lunch and wait out the weather.

"Dugan's gonna flip," Payton said again, catching sight of herself in a mirror mounted on the wall. "So will Bo."

Bo. I realized with a guilty start that he hadn't entered my head in a couple of days. But his name still made my stomach knot.

"Bo seems nice," I commented, determined to use this one-on-one time with Payton to find out more about him.

"Oh, he is." She looked at the menu. "What are you getting? I'm not sure I'm hungry enough for a whole anything."

"Want to split something instead?"

"Yeah."

We decided on a club sandwich, so ordered one with chips with an extra pickle spear. The minute the waitress left to get

our food, I casually resumed the question and answer session.

"Is Bo married?"

"No."

"Is he divorced?"

"I don't think so. At least he's never mentioned an ex-wife."

"How about kids? Has he mentioned having any kids?"

"I'm sure he'd have said something if he did. Bo loves kids."

My stomach knotted again for some reason. "Dugan seems really grateful to him."

"Big surprise." Payton told me the same thing her brother had, that Bo hired Dugan while he was still on probation.

"That was really nice," I said as if I hadn't heard that story before. "I saw a picture of Bo and your Granny Opal on his file cabinet."

"Yeah. She loves him to death."

"So he hangs out at your house a lot?"

"Uh-huh. I always cook a little extra at night, just in case he drops by for supper." She shrugged. "It's the least I can do."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he bought me this really cool necklace, so I sort of owe him a meal or two."

My stomach turned again. "What kind of necklace?"

Reaching into the neck of her tee—one we bought her Sunday—Peyton retrieved a delicate silver chain. From it dangled what looked like a diamond drop.

"Oh my gosh! Is that real?"

Payton nodded proudly. "He gave it to me when I turned thirteen."

"I'll bet Dugan couldn't believe it."

"He hasn't seen it."

"What?"

"Bo told me not to tell him."

Now I wanted to hurl. "Should you be keeping secrets from your big brother?"

"Well, I don't usually, but this is just a little one. Besides, Bo said Dugan might get mad because it cost so much. I was afraid they'd fight about it or something, which would be awful. My brother really loves his job."

"It's never a good idea to keep secrets from the people you love," I said.

"But aren't you keeping Dugan secret from your mom?"

Busted.

And by a thirteen-year-old, no less.

"Yeah, and I feel awful about it, too." I gave her a rueful smile. "Maybe we should both think about telling the truth."

"Maybe," she murmured, clearly not so sure.

I didn't believe for a second she actually would, but couldn't really judge her for it. I didn't intend to, either.

We ate, then paid and walked outside. Instead of getting better, the weather had actually worsened. I could tell the temperature had dropped several degrees, and a bitter wind had kicked up.

"I'm calling Dugan," said Payton.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

I handed her my cell phone, figuring her brother could come in Bo's truck and put her bike in the bed of it. I still intended to ride my bike home. No way would I make Dugan drive me there. After what happened between us yesterday, I figured I'd give the guy a break and keep my distance ... if I could. Besides, my mom might've come home early because of the roads, and I didn't want her to see that truck.

When Payton handed me my phone a couple of minutes later, she told me Dugan had said he'd be there in the truck in ten minutes. But it wasn't Dugan who pulled into the parking lot in that bright yellow truck. It was Bo, himself.

I suddenly found it hard to breath.

So much for me riding my bike home. Even at the risk of my mom seeing the GMC, I would never purposely allow Bo to be alone with Payton. I just couldn't do it.

Bo got out and joined us on the sidewalk. I saw that he wore a beat-up cowboy hat and boots. He looked like some cheesy country and western star to me. Payton obviously didn't agree. She looked thrilled by that hayseed get up.

"Hey, ladies. Dugan's busy, so he sent me to rescue you." Bo grinned, then did a classic double take when he got a good look at Payton. "Hold the pony! Who is this beautiful young woman you've got with you, Ren? I thought I was picking up Payton."

I nearly gagged.

"Am I gorgeous or what?" asked Payton, preening for Bo.

I'd never seen her so animated, not even when we were alone and acting silly. The blush on her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes—they scared me half to death.

"You're way beyond gorgeous, hot stuff," gushed Bo. "And into ravishing territory. Let me look at you."

Payton pirouetted for him, then broke down in a fit of giggles. He gave her a big hug.

"I see you're wearing my favorite hat," she commented when he finally released her.

He sort of tipped it. "I thought you'd like that."

I actually did gag then. Neither of them noticed. How could they, when they only had eyes for each other?

This is bad. This is bad. This is so freaking bad.

My stomach continued to churn. I swallowed hard to keep my lunch down.

"Ready to roll?" asked Bo.

"More than," I murmured. I pointed to where we'd parked our wheels, in front of the beauty shop.

He retrieved the bikes in a flash and swung them over the tailgate and into the bed of the truck. Payton got into the cab with me right behind her. Bo got in, too, shaking off the rain and sleet like a puppy, which made Payton giggle again. He took off his hat and set it in her lap.

"What's your pleasure?" he asked her, reaching for the radio knob.

"The usual."

Bo pushed a button and Miley Cyrus's voice filled the air. "That's Hannah Montana, isn't it?"

Payton nodded. "Yes."

"She's one cutie patootie," said Bo. "But not as cute as you, of course." He glanced at me. "I keep telling Payton that

she could be the star of her own television show, too, someday. She's got the talent."

I could barely answer. "Really, Payton? Are you that good with your violin?"

"You betcha," said Bo before Payton could answer. "And she sings like an angel, too."

"You're full of it." Payton said, but I could tell the compliment meant a lot to her. She turned sideways in the seat so that she almost faced Bo. "Do you like my new outfit?"

"Love it. Now buckle up, you two. The roads are getting bad."

We both did. After locking in his own seat belt, Bo started the engine with a flick of the key and headed the truck toward the street. In a daze of worry, I barely registered the splat of the sleet and the swish of the wipers on the windshield.

It took me almost a mile to realize I needed to talk to Bo alone about Payton. Only then could I really gauge the depth and nature of their relationship. Talking to her certainly did no good. Her naivety made it impossible to get to the truth.

Like I had a lot of experience with pervs.

Still ... I figured that after we dropped off Payton, whose house was just a couple of miles away, I'd play detective and casually broach the subject of Bo's relationship with her. Surely he'd say something and give away his true motives toward them before we got to my place, another four miles away.

I mean, it happened all the time on TV, right?

But Bo drove right past Payton's house.

My jaw dropped. My heart slammed into overdrive.

"You missed your stop!" I cried, hoping he'd turn the truck around and take her home.

"I'm going to drop you off first," said Bo, tapping his hands on the steering wheel in time to whatever Disney song played now. "I figured that would be easiest, since you're sitting on the outside."

I suddenly wanted to bang my head on the dash.

How could I be so stupid?

"Is that a problem?" He leaned forward slightly to make eye contact, the oddest look ever on his face.

My lunch lurched inside my roiling stomach.

Knowing if I opened my mouth, I'd hurl, I simply shook my head. What else could I do? Accuse him of trying to steal time alone with Payton? Something told me he could have that whenever he wanted.

Bo pulled into my drive. Noting that my parents weren't home, I climbed reluctantly from the cab while he scooped my bike out of the back.

"Thanks for the ride," I said, grasping the handle bars. I waved to Payton, who'd scooted over to her right a little, but still sat too close to Bo, now getting back into the truck.

He shut the door and said something to her. She laughed and flipped her hair over her shoulder. I stood in the wet until Bo backed his vehicle onto the street and left.

Dropping my bike, I ran up the sidewalk and onto the porch. I fumbled putting my key into the lock, twisted it and dashed inside, for the second time in just four days barely making it to the guest bathroom before I puked.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

Now I knew that sometimes girls threw up on purpose to lose weight or something, and that it was a very serious health problem. I had to admit I didn't know how they could do it. Personally, I couldn't think of anything nastier.

Disgusted, I flushed the toilet, rinsed my mouth and staggered to the living room, where I collapsed on the leather sofa.

I had to talk to Dugan about this, I realized, covering my face with a sofa pillow and groaning into it.

I had to talk to him now.

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Chapter Ten

I thought about calling Dugan before Bo got back to the shop, but abandoned the idea. This type of conversation needed to take place face-to-face. So I called him to ask when that could happen, instead.

"Hello?"

"Dugan, it's Ren."

"Can I call you back? I'm in the middle of—"

"No. I mean yes, but don't forget, okay?"

"Why? What's wrong? Is Payton all right?"

"She's fine." *I hope.*

"Look, I'll take a break in about thirty minutes. I'll call you then."

"Do it where Bo can't hear."

"What? Why?"

"Would you please just do what I ask?"

"Okay. Fine. I'll call you." He hung up.

I lay on the couch for forty-five minutes waiting for his call before grabbing my cell and trying him again. Someone clicked in before it even rang.

Dugan, calling back as promised.

Oops.

"I thought you'd forgotten me," I said by way of answering.

"Fat chance. Bo came back, so I'm outside the—"

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did Bo get back?"

"About five minutes ago."

So he'd been alone with Payton for a good forty-five minutes. Had he gone inside the house? I wondered.

"What's this all about, Ren?"

I took a deep breath. "I really need to talk to you."

"You are talking to me."

"I mean in person. Can you meet me somewhere after work?" It would be hard to get away from my parents, especially on a night this nasty, but it could be done.

No, it *had* to be done.

"I'm starting on your car then."

"This is actually more important than my car."

"How can you say that? It's December twenty-second. I have exactly ten days to fix it. That comes to about twenty actual hours unless I work until midnight every night, which I'd rather not do. I tend to get a little sloppy when I get tired, and I want the car to be perfect."

"I know, and I really appreciate it." I thought for a minute. "Can I come to the shop and talk to you while you work?"

"I guess."

"What time does Bo leave?"

"Six-ish."

"Okay. I'll be there around 6:30." I wanted Bo to be far, far away when I showed up.

"What'll you tell your parents?"

"I'll think of something."

A long, dead silence followed before Dugan spoke again. "What's going on, Ren?"

"Nothing, I hope. See you later." I clicked off before he could ask any more questions. I wanted to think about what I had to say—maybe even rehearse—before I spilled the beans on Bo. Dugan was not going to like what I had to tell him.

I called Hayley next.

"So how's the make-over going?" she asked first thing.

"Fantastic. You should see her hair." I told Hayley what Renee had done to it that morning. "Now all she needs is a boyfriend."

"Speaking of boyfriends ... how's yours?"

"Just fine, I guess, if you consider split personalities normal."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a boyfriend who tells me we'll never be together one second, then kisses me crazy the next."

"I'm liking the sound of this," said Hayley with a laugh. "Tell me everything."

I did, as usual leaving out any references to his soul-shade, of course. "So what do you think?"

"I think he's your Superman and you're his Kryptonite."

That made me smile because it actually made perfect sense. "How are things working out with Brian?"

"Working out or making out?" she retorted with a laugh.

I laughed, too, feeling a little better now that I'd stepped outside my tiny, troubled world for a second. A mental change of scenery could do wonders for morale. As Hayley caught me up on her love life, I admit I felt a stab or two of jealousy. Would Dugan and I ever be able to go to a movie

together, eat at a restaurant, or just hang out in my bedroom to watch TV? Not if my mom had a say in it, I realized.

When Hayley finally ran out of steam, I asked if she'd back me up if I told my parents I was visiting her tonight. She lectured me for a couple of minutes on the difficulties of keeping a boyfriend secret—as if I didn't already know—but, in the end, promised she would. Hayley was that kind of friend.

By then, the clock said 3:30 p.m. I thought about cooking supper, but decided not to. I didn't want to make my mom and dad suspicious, which cooking for them twice in one week might do. I did take some chicken out of the freezer so it could thaw in time for Mom to cook it once she got home.

Both my parents left work a little early, thanks to the sloppy streets. The temperature hovered at the freezing mark. I knew things would only get worse once night fell and the temperature dropped even more.

Neither Mom nor Dad liked the idea of my going to Hayley's that late, even though she only lived a few blocks away. I told them she had a new CD I'd been thinking about buying for Will. I said I wanted to listen to it and I wouldn't stay long.

Another lie? They just kept piling up.

And I wasn't proud of them, either.

But what was I supposed to do? Tell them the truth?

No freaking way.

My life as I knew it would be over. I'd never get to drive again, much less hang with Payton, Hayley or any of my other friends. As for hooking up with Dugan...

Could I twist my actions around as I sometimes did, and justify them as "right"?

Maybe if I really tried. I mean, it was right to handle my wreck myself, wasn't it? My parents were busy people. What could be right about them having to take time to clean up a mess I'd made, especially when I had a secret boyfriend perfectly willing to do the job right, himself? Besides, if I reported the accident to our insurance company, our rates would skyrocket. What was right about that? As for that secret boyfriend of mine, I still maintained that we were so right for each other that it was only right for the two of us to be together.

Now didn't six rights more than make up for one lousy wrong?

I sure thought so.

A chilly wind threatened to topple me from my bike as I pedaled as fast as I could to the body shop at 6:30. My parents had offered to drive me, of course. But I wouldn't let them. I said I needed the exercise and it wasn't that far, both of which were true statements for a change.

I found the garage locked up tight when I got there, so knocked on the side door. Dugan opened it and let me in.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi." He barely looked at me as he walked back to my car. I saw that he'd opened the boxes the car parts came in and spread everything out on the floor. He appeared very distracted. I recognized the bumper, headlight and grille, but nothing else.

"Can you listen to me and work at the same time?"

He didn't answer, which told me he couldn't.

"Dugan?"

He frowned at what looked like a packing list, then spit out a curse.

"What?" I demanded.

"I think they forgot to ship the ... no, there it is." He picked up something and examined it closely, belatedly murmuring, "Yes, I can work and listen at the same time."

Then I'd better get on with it.

Since I'd decided earlier that it might be best to ease into this thing, I started out slow.

"I was surprised you sent Bo to pick us up today."

Dugan, now examining the car itself, never glanced my way. "He's great about stuff like that. Between Payton and Granny Opal, I could keep the road hot twenty-four-seven. I'd never get anything done if he didn't help out."

"Why do you suppose he does that?"

"I've told you before—he's a good guy. Plus, he'd probably rather have me here, working, than dropping Payton off at the book store for a new manga or picking up Granny Opal from the day care, which he's doing for me tonight, by the way."

"So Bo and Payton are alone a lot, then?" I deliberately kept my voice free of expression.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Do you think that's smart?"

That got his attention. "What do you mean?"

"Payton is very young and trusting. She'd do just about anything Bo asked."

Now he frowned at me. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing ... if he never asks her to do anything, well, bad."

"Why in the hell would Bo ask Payton to do something bad?"

"Because he's infatuated with her...?"

Dugan's jaw dropped. So did the wrench he held, clanging on the concrete floor. The sound echoed in the garage. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I sincerely hope so," I murmured.

"Bo's been like a father to Payton ever since Dad got arrested on that DUI charge."

Was that why he went to prison? But no. People only got county jail time, fines or revoked licenses for that.

"I don't know what we'd have done without him."

"I realize that."

"Then how can you suggest that he's anything but the incredible guy he is?"

"Because I got a weird feeling today when he drove us home."

Dugan gave up all pretense of working and walked over to me. "Weird how?"

"Weird as in uneasy."

"Bo made you nervous?" His gaze bore into mine.

I nodded.

"In what way?"

"He kept going on and on about how cute Payton looked, and he had on that stupid hat and those boots."

"Is that all?" Dugan laughed, turned and scooped up the wrench he'd dropped. "Bo knows how worried I am about

Payton's low self-esteem, so he was probably just trying to build her up. As for the hat and boots, he used to rodeo some in Colorado, so he's got enough cowboy in his past to justify wearing them."

"Maybe, but I still don't trust him."

"You don't trust him." Dugan got very still while he thought that over, which seemed to take forever. "What is this really about, Ren?"

Huh? "This is really about Bo, who has no business being alone with your little sister."

"I don't think so."

"Excuse me?"

Dugan walked back to where I stood fidgeting and looked at me. "I ... don't ... think ... so."

I couldn't believe my ears. "What do you mean?"

"Can you look me in the eye and say that you don't wish you could make me over just the way you've made over my Payton?"

What? He had to be kidding. "That's just crazy!"

"Is it? Wouldn't you like it better if I'd never been to Character Camp, didn't have a dad in prison, and didn't work in a smelly garage with a redneck for a boss?"

I gasped. Where was this coming from and what did it have to do with anything? Stung, I blinked back tears and let him sidetrack me for a nanosecond. "How can you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true." He shook his head in visible disbelief. "Man, did you ever have me fooled. I mean, you've always seemed so nice."

Nice again? I suddenly realized how much I hated that stupid word.

"That's where you're wrong," I retorted, now angry. "A nice girl would never let a loser like you stick his tongue down her throat!"

Completely abandoning my original mission to expose Bo, I marched toward the exit and left the garage. The door slammed shut behind me. Without a backward glance, I jumped on my bike and pedaled as fast as I could to Hayley's house, where I knocked on the door. She opened it, took one look at my face, and pulled me inside. We went straight upstairs to her room, where I plopped down on her bed and burst into tears of frustration.

"What happened?" she demanded, wide eyed.

"I have to tell you something," I said. "It's a big secret, and you have to promise not to ever tell anyone else."

"Oh my God. You've had sex with him!"

"No, no, no! Not that kind of secret. Something way bigger than that."

"Bigger than you having sex with Dugan Donovan?" She sat on the bed beside me.

I nodded. "Promise me that you won't ever tell."

"I promise."

"Okay. Here goes..." I swallowed hard and told her all about my ability to sense soul-shade, beginning with the first flash of color I ever saw, and ending with her own color.

"Are you telling me that you've been doing this ever since you were a little bitty girl and you never told me?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to say."

"It wasn't because I didn't trust you," I quickly assured her. "I just didn't want you to think I was a freak or something."

"You're saying that to me, the girl who wanted to marry Barney until she was seven?"

I would've laughed, but something still weighed on my mind. "I guess you're wondering what all this has to do with Dugan."

"Now that you mention it, yeah. Did Dugan flash a bad color or something?"

"No, Bo Jennings, his boss, did—black."

"And black means..."

"Evil."

"Evil as in capable of lying, cheating and stealing?"

"Evil as in capable of kidnapping, raping and murdering."

Hayley sucked in a sharp breath. "Crap!"

"Yeah."

She gulped. "Holy crap."

"Yeah. And he's alone with Payton all the time. I tried to tell Dugan tonight, but he just got mad—"

"You told him that you can see the color of people's souls, and he got mad?" To Hayley's credit, she never questioned the plausibility of my secret talent.

"No. I said that Bo made me nervous, and I thought he was infatuated with Payton."

"I'll bet that went over big."

"Dugan totally wiggled out." I told her everything he'd said about me being a snob and all.

"What a jerk," she murmured, laying a sympathetic arm across my shoulders. "So you really didn't tell him about the color thing?"

"No."

"Why not? That would've helped, I think."

"I haven't told anyone but you, okay? Not even my parents."

Hayley suddenly wrapped her other arm around me and squeezed tightly, her head on my shoulder. "Thanks for sharing."

"So you believe me?"

"Of course. I'm totally into the paranormal. I mean 'Ghost Whisperer' is just my favorite television show ever."

"I don't see dead people, Hayley."

"No, but you do see the shade of a person's soul." She gasped. "Oh my God. What color does Brian flash?"

"I've never touched him. Do you want me to?"

"Of course! No, wait. Um ... let me think about it."

I cracked up then, and she did, too.

"Do you want to know what I think?" she asked, standing.

"Of course. That's why I'm here."

"I think that Dugan's subconsciously looking for reasons to keep you at a distance. If the two of you are fighting, there's no chance you'll end up making out, and that keeps his life simple."

"Really?" I asked, hopeful in spite of myself. "You think that?"

"I do."

I looked at Hayley with new respect. "I had no idea you were such a psychologist."

"Actually, I saw it in a movie."

"So what should I do about Bo flashing black?"

"I don't know. I mean, you sure can't let it go."

"No."

"Maybe if you wait a few days until things cool down, you can bring up the subject of Bo again, only in another way."

"Maybe," I said, though I couldn't think of one at the moment.

"Or you could 'fess up and tell him about the soul-shades. He'd listen then, I'll bet."

"Don't count on it."

Hayley suddenly cocked her head as if listening for something. "Is it sleeting again?"

"I hope not." We walked to her window and peered out at the street light below. That's when my gaze landed on her digital clock, and I realized how late it was. "Oh gosh. I really have to go."

"But that is sleet! Want me to get Mom to drive you?"

"No. I'll be fine."

We hugged again. "Stop worrying," Hayley said. "You tried. That's all you can do."

"I know," I murmured. Before I left, I asked Hayley to help out with the food boxes tomorrow. She said she'd be late, but promised she'd be there.

I cycled home with sleet stinging my cheeks, but didn't mind. The wild weather sort of suited my mood. I found my parents in the living area, watching television and talking.

Mom stopped in the middle of whatever she'd been saying. "I was about to come looking for you." She took a closer look at me. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I said. I sat beside her on the couch, probably a little closer than usual since I felt so funky.

"Sure?" she asked, clearly picking up on my gloom. She rested her arm on the back of the leather cushion on which I leaned and played with my damp hair.

"Yeah."

Mom looked at Dad. "So what did the FBI want?"

I perked up and looked from Mom to Dad to Mom, again, waiting for an explanation. "Your dad had visitors in the office today," she said.

I turned to Dad, my mind going wild with scenarios in which some FBI guy arrested Bo, one of America's most wanted. "Cool. What for?"

"To help me out. In college, I roomed with Tom Canton, who's now FBI. I called him to ask who I should contact for training regarding internet stalking. He had one of his men stop by to see me. It's an area of expertise we really need to beef up, so they're going to talk to my deputies early next year."

"That's wonderful," said Mom, who was all for programs that protect juveniles.

"Did you round up some friends for me?" asked Dad, abruptly changing the subject.

Oops. "Yeah, but I'd probably better remind them all." I dragged myself off the couch and started up the stairs.

"Ren?"

I turned and looked back at my mother. "Mm-hmm?"

"Will called. He's coming home tomorrow." She said it as if she thought my brother being around might make me feel better or something.

I faked a smile. "Sweet."

Once I escaped to my bedroom and shut the door behind me, I got online and began e-mailing all my friends who had siblings or knew someone in the eighth grade. Between e-mails and the telephone, I soon had ten volunteers for Dad, some of them cute guys I thought Payton might like.

Yeah. In spite of all Dugan's hateful words to me, I still wanted to help his little sister break out of her cocoon. Most of all, however, I wanted to keep her safe from the likes of Bo Jennings.

Too bad I didn't have a clue how to do it.

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Chapter Eleven

I wasn't sure how Payton would get to the fire station on Wednesday. I hoped Bo wouldn't drop her off. I'd have hated to be the reason she spent one more second alone with him. In the end, I never knew who drove her. At around 8:45, she just came strolling out of nowhere into the big building where all the food donations now were.

I stopped sorting canned goods long enough to note that she'd picked out a trendy pair of jeans and a sparkly tee to wear. She had on her boots and her denim jacket, plus a long knitted scarf that she'd looped around her neck.

"Great outfit," I said the moment she joined me. I gave her two thumbs up. She gave me a shy smile.

I introduced her to the other kids who'd gotten there so far—tenth grade twins Katie and Kyle Bell, ninth grader Lee Jason Faulk—otherwise known as L.J.—and eighth graders Mac Hermann and Carter Wells. Mac and Carter were band geeks, according to my friend Lana, who suggested the pair to me as possible volunteers. I hoped Payton would hit it off with the two of them.

"Don't we have math together?" Mac asked, running his fingers through his already-tousled brown hair. "Fifth period. Mrs. Griffith?"

Payton nodded.

"You look ... different."

"I got my hair cut." Her voice sounded a little strained. I could see the pulse throbbing just over the scarf wrapped

around her flushed neck and imagined how nervous she must feel.

Mac didn't seem to notice. "Oh, yeah. That's it."

"I hear Payton's an amazing violinist," I said. "I've been trying to talk her into trying out for band."

"You really should," said Carter, whose own hair matched Payton's. His blue eyes twinkled. "We need someone new in the strings section. Lulu Bynes totally sucks."

Mac elbowed him sharply in the side.

"But you think so, too," said Carter, looking surprised by the attack.

I tried not to laugh. "Okay, everyone. There are seven of us here, so let's get started. I've sorted everything into categories like fruits, vegetables, breads, desserts, staples and—"

"Staples?" asked Carter, as if wondering why we would include an office supply in a food box.

Everyone laughed at the look on his face.

I sighed. "Flour, sugar, salt, spices."

"Oh. Staples." He grinned, revealing surprise dimples.

"We have ten boxes to fill. Each one of them should get something of everything until we run out of food. Then Larry's going to add a ham. Any questions?"

"Shouldn't the ham go on the bottom so we don't smash the bread?"

I glared at Carter, who was obviously class clown. At any rate, he sure made Payton giggle. Glad to see that she was relaxing a little, I herded them to the piles of food on the

tables and floor. I noticed that Carter somehow managed to wind up near Dugan's little sister, as did Mac.

Good. She deserved a little male attention. I only wished she'd gotten it sooner. I mean, nothing had changed but the packaging, right? She was still the same sweet girl she'd always been. Guys could be so shallow sometimes.

Hayley arrived around 9:45 and, to my dismay, Trey Parker walked in about five minutes after that. Only then did I remember that he was Larry's nephew.

Payton tensed when she saw him, but kept right on flirting with Mac and Carter.

Yeah, flirting. Oh, she wasn't obvious or silly about it. But compared to her silence before today, she flirted. Amazing what a pair of hip huggers can do for a girl's confidence.

Trey joined our classmates, Katie, Kyle, and Hayley just putting the finishing touches on their food boxes. He didn't even notice Payton until Hayley began making a fuss about how cute she looked. And then he didn't really react, which told me one of two things: he didn't recognize her or he remembered the pain I could inflict.

By 10:30, we were ready to add the fully cooked hams, which weren't going to be put on top of everything else, of course. Larry had them wrapped in white butcher paper. Hayley and I added red bows and wrote Merry Christmas on each.

Seven volunteers split up between four deputies, all that my dad could spare at the moment since someone had to help clear traffic for a funeral procession and someone else

had to hold down the fort. Payton, L.J. and I went with Dad in his official Sheriff's vehicle.

I talked to L.J. about his first love, mangas, something I knew about because of an article he once wrote for the school newspaper. That led to a discussion on anime. As I'd hoped, he and Payton soon argued over which Hayao Miyazaki piece was best.

I sat in contented silence, congratulating myself because Payton seemed to have cracked out of her shell. I really felt a whole lot better about the extra hours Dugan would have to put in to get my car repaired before New Year's Day. Payton's progress, I thought, made the Cinderella swap more equal.

We all enjoyed delivery. That was because it was always eye opening to walk into the home of someone less fortunate. I mean, this was America, the richest country in the world. Why were people still going without basics like food?

Around noon, we handed over the last box. Payton immediately asked to borrow my cell so she could let "someone" know we'd finished.

"I'll run you home," said Dad.

"I can do it," said L.J., surprising all of us. "My car's at the station."

"That's really sweet," I said to him, thankful that my Dad would not be driving by Payton's house. What if Bo's truck was there for some reason? Dad would recognize it in a heartbeat.

"Where do you live, Payton?" asked Dad.

She told him her address.

"That's just a few blocks from here. Why don't I just go ahead and drop you off?"

I swear if I'd been in the front seat I'd have kicked him. Hel-/o. Had he not picked up on L.J.'s wanting to spend more time with Payton? Could a guy be more dense? Payton and I exchanged a panicky look.

"Can I have your number?" asked L.J., giving in to Dad's plans.

"Sure," answered Payton, with another glance at me. This one wasn't a bit worried. No, ecstatic better described it.

Keeping my fingers crossed that the Donovan driveway would be minus a bright yellow GMC, I dug into my purse for a notepad and pencil, which I handed to Payton. Then I anxiously looked out the window, straining for the sight of her house. I finally spotted it, along with Dugan's Bel Air, parked in the driveway.

"Nice ride," murmured Dad when he pulled over and braked in front of the house. He loved classic cars as much as I did. "Your dad's?"

"My big brother's," Payton blurted, most of her attention on writing down her phone number on the piece of paper I'd found for her. "He must've come home for lunch."

"You have a brother?"

"Uh-huh."

"How'd he rate a car like that?"

"Oh, he works—ow!"

I withdrew my elbow from Payton's ribs and glared at her, an action that seemed to yank her back into the present.

Wide-eyed, she passed the paper to L.J. in the front seat without looking at him. She mouthed *I'm sorry* to me.

"You okay?" asked Dad, glancing into the rearview mirror.

"Yes, sir. I ... poked myself with the pencil." Payton handed it back to me. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I replied, my voice shaky to my own ears.

Dad shifted his gaze to me. "What?"

I gave him my most innocent smile and a clueless shrug. "Nothing."

"Well, thanks for the ride," said Payton, bounding from the car. "Bye Sheriff Montgomery, bye Ren. See ya L.J."

"See ya," he said, words that made her smile.

I sagged back against the seat. Dad eased the car back into the street. I saw him glance at me in the mirror a couple of times and wondered why. Was 'Dugan lives here' tattooed on my forehead or something?

Once L.J. got out of Dad's car at the station and I moved to the front seat, we headed home.

"How old is Payton?" asked Dad.

"Thirteen."

"I figured that. I know you wanted her and L.J. to get together, but I thought maybe her parents should meet him first before she got into a car with him."

"Oh." So he wasn't as dense as I thought.

I hoped I could run straight upstairs and hide in my room for a bit when I got home, but of course that didn't happen. That's because Will and my mom met us at the door. I felt a rush when I saw him, which sort of surprised me. Not that he

was a bad adopted brother or anything. We've just never talked that much.

"Hey, Dad," he said, grinning.

I noticed Will now wore his hair military short, a completely different look for him. And I could've sworn he'd grown another foot.

"Hey, yourself." Dad gave him a guy hug—you know, one of those stiff upper-body-only embraces that last a split second.

Will turned to me and grinned. "Hi, short stuff."

"Hi."

Will flashed deep orange, which made him warm and spontaneous. Though his warmth remained a mystery to me, I could vouch for his spontaneity. I mean, no guy could put a big foot in a bigger mouth faster than my brother.

"Where's the Camaro?" asked Will, right on cue.

By now, I walked behind my parents, all of us headed to the living area. I caught Will's eye and made slashing motions across my neck so he'd shut up even as my dad said, "I thought you were home for Thanksgiving when Ren got that speeding ticket."

"Um ... no?" murmured Will, still focused on me.

I nodded.

"Guess I wasn't." He really was, of course.

Dad sighed and sank into his recliner. "Your sister got caught doing fifty in a twenty. We took away her driving privileges away until New Year's Day." He shifted his gaze to me. "Won't be long now, huh?"

I couldn't even speak. My heart pounded so hard in my chest I actually worried it might bust loose.

"It's parked in the garage out back," Dad continued. "We'll go out there later if you want." He winked at me. "Miss that car, do you, son?"

Will hesitated as if waiting for guidance from me before answering.

I shook my head ever so slightly.

"Nah. I just expected to see in parked in the driveway." Will sat on the couch. "I like my current wheels just fine." He drove a '68 Mustang. "Though I have been thinking about getting some airbrushing."

"Yeah? There's a body shop in town, er, Jennings', I think. I've never met the owner, but I hear he's got a talented artist. Some high school kid with a real gift. We can check into it while you're here if you want."

Could things get any more complicated?

Gulping, I walked over to where Mom worked making tuna sandwiches in the kitchen.

She looked up at me. "He's talking about Dugan, isn't he?"

Now how did she know that?

My surprise must've shown.

"My office found him that job, Ren," she said. "I got reports from his boss every month the whole time he was on probation."

Of course. Duh. "So you know Mr. Jennings?"

"Not personally. I met him once at a meeting of probation work sponsors. Why?"

"What did you think of him?"

"He seemed nice enough. Why?"

I shrugged. "No reason."

Mom clearly didn't believe me, but she didn't ask me any more questions, either, thank goodness.

After we ate, I escaped upstairs to catch my breath. All that deception was getting to me. A scant two seconds after I fell across my bed, face down, someone knocked on my door jamb. I rolled onto my back and looked to see who it was.

Will.

Big surprise.

I motioned for him to come on in. He did, joining me on the bed.

"What gives, Renny?" he asked, using the nickname he'd given me when our parents first started dating.

"A big fat mess," I said with a heavy sigh, sitting up.

"Talk."

I did just that, telling him about the fender bender.

"So this Dugan dude is fixing your car for free."

"Free labor. I bought the parts."

"And why would he do that?"

I explained about the Cinderella swap and my keeping Payton's real relationship to Dugan a secret. Will thought about that for so long that I got a little nervous. "You're not going to tell on me, are you?"

"No," he answered, standing. "But I want to go on record as saying this whole set up stinks."

That? From Will Montgomery? Why, I couldn't count the number of occasions he sneaked out his window at midnight during the few months we shared a roof before he left for

college. Since my bedroom was next door, I only heard him every single time.

My mouth must've fallen open.

"I mean it," he said. "You should do the right thing and tell them about the wreck and the connection between your mechanic and this Payton chick."

Right for who? Not me, Dugan, or Payton. That was for damn sure.

"Can't," I told him with a firm shake of my head.

"Then it's your funeral," he murmured, exiting my room.

Unbelievable. One and a half years at college, and he was suddenly a model son? Who'd have thought it?

The four of us went to the Blue Water Christmas parade Wednesday night, a sort of tradition for our new family. As we stood on the sidewalk, waiting for it to start, I stole a moment to appreciate the cold, the crowd, and the Christmas lights, not to mention the familiar faces of friends.

I noticed that the sky had begun to spit snow just as the high school band, still a block or two away, struck up the opening chords of "Jingle Bells." That made everything exactly perfect in my opinion.

The band didn't reach us for another five minutes. When it did, I looked for Mac and Carter in the neat rows of marching members, all wearing casual clothes. Just as I spotted Carter's red head, he waved, but not to me. Turning, I searched the crowd for someone waving back and saw Payton, Opal, and Dugan, together, not ten feet away in the horde of people.

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Chapter Twelve

My heart jumped into my throat. My gaze locked with Dugan's a split second before I dragged it away. I frantically searched for a diversion of some kind.

"Oh, look," I said to my parents, pointing in the opposite direction. "There's Hayley and her boyfriend, Brian Summers. Her parents, too. Can we go talk to them for a minute?"

"Sure," said Mom, letting me lead them through the noisy crowd and far away from awkward encounters with my unboyfriend and his little sister. We visited with Brian and the Perrys for several moments, talking about nothing that mattered.

By the time I focused on the parade again, a local riding group displaying colorful flags trotted by, dressed in full cowboy regalia. The pungent scent of horse poop, a natural byproduct of parades with them in it, filled the air. I didn't mind. It was all part of the tradition, after all.

As for Dugan, he was nowhere to be seen.

"Was that your mechanic?" asked Will right in my ear.

Wide-eyed, I glanced back at him. He sure hadn't missed a thing. Had anyone else seen Dugan and Payton together?

"Don't worry. They didn't see him."

Whew. I felt a little sick to my stomach, a sensation more than second nature to me now, thanks to lying so much. Not for the first time, I wished I could take Will's advice and blurt the truth. Life would be so much simpler.

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After the parade, we ate dinner with the Perrys and Brian at The Pasta House, an Italian restaurant we all liked. What should have been a fun time wasn't. It really bothered me to see how Lee and Angela, Hayley's parents, included Brian in their conversations and jokes. He was just like a Dole banana, you know? Hanging around, one of the bunch.

My good mood slipped a notch.

"Will you go shopping with me tomorrow?" Will suddenly asked.

"On Christmas Eve? Are you nuts?" The mall would be crazy.

"But I don't know what to get your mom."

Will's own mother, divorced from his dad, lived in Texas. He usually spent Thanksgiving with her and Christmas with us.

"Please oh please, Renny."

I rolled my eyes and gave in. "Oh, all right." Shopping would give me something to do besides obsess over my sorry state of affairs. Besides, I hadn't bought anything for Payton yet.

"Thanks." He pulled my hair.

I slapped his hand away and whispered, "Consider it thanks for keeping your mouth shut."

So we found ourselves at the Blue Water mall the moment it opened on Thursday, two in a crowd of thousands. Okay, maybe it was only hundreds. But it might as well have been thousands, and all of them were very rude, jostling me and my brother as they pushed their way into the building. I couldn't believe I'd let Will talk me into last-minute shopping.

We went straight to Mom's favorite store, Serendipity, where I helped him pick out a necklace and earrings for her. Mom was big into accessorizing with color since she had to wear boring suits to work. Using the meager funds I had left, I bought a jeweled photograph album for Granny Opal while I was in there. Even though I didn't really know her, I figured Dugan and Payton could fill it with pictures of home to help her remember them when she went to St. Anthony's.

Once Will and I left Serendipity, we waded through a throng of bustling shoppers to get to Old Navy. There I picked out a really cute sweater for Payton that was on sale. I next bought Dugan a T-shirt with a car on the front. That seemed appropriate, but impersonal, which felt about right. I honestly didn't know if I'd give it to him or not. After all, he'd been pretty ticked at me the last time we talked.

"I'd like to meet this boyfriend of yours," commented Will once we stepped out of the store.

"I don't think so," I told him, adding, "And he's not my boyfriend."

"Yeah, right," murmured Will with a sarcastic laugh. "I saw the way he looked at you last night."

Say what? "I'm not kidding. He's my mechanic, nothing more."

"And why is that?"

"It would take forever to explain."

"I've got the time."

"Forget it," I said, exasperated with him and his stupid questions. "I'm not talking."

"Then I'll just have to ask him."

"Huh?" I retorted even as I realized he'd shifted his gaze from me to something behind me.

I naturally turned to see what.

It wasn't a 'what' at all. It was a 'who'.

Dugan. And Payton. She waved frantically and grabbed her brother's arm, dragging him along as she wound her way over to us through the crush of bargain hunters.

"Merry Christmas Eve!" Payton exclaimed, jubilantly adding, "L.J.'s called me three times!"

I had to smile. I mean, who wouldn't in the face of all that enthusiasm? Belatedly, I noticed that Will and Dugan warily eyed each other. Dugan looked a little weirded out for some reason.

"Don't worry," said Will with a mischievous chuckle. "I'm just Ren's brother." He offered his right hand to Dugan, along with his name.

"Oh, right. The one from college." Dugan took, shook and released Will's hand with a smile I'd have called sheepish if I hadn't known better. "I'm Dugan Donovan. This is my sister, Payton. Ren's been helping her with some stuff this week."

"The Cinderella swap. I heard all about it."

Dugan tensed and looked at me in disbelief.

"I had to tell him," I explained. "He missed the Camaro."

"So how are the repairs coming along?" Will asked.

"I'm getting there. It should be ready in time."

"Dugan's the guy dad mentioned last night," I said. "The one who does such amazing airbrushing."

"No shit." Will looked at Dugan with new eyes and immediately began to drill him on his craft. Dugan ate up his questions.

Suddenly feeling a whole lot better about everything for some reason, I showed Payton what I'd bought for Granny Opal. "Will you see if you can find some photos to put in it?"

"Of course," she said.

We talked for a good twenty minutes before I managed to drag Will away. It wasn't that I didn't want to be around Dugan. In spite of myself, I still loved every moment spent in his company. Unfortunately, he did not feel the same. His body language and the fact that he never said one word directly to me made it obvious.

Besides, I feared some friend of my parents or maybe one of Dad's deputies would spot us and later mention it. One thing might lead to another, and my folks would figure out the connection between Payton and Dugan.

On the way home, Will and I stopped for a sundae at McDonald's. We went inside the place because he used to work there and wanted to BS with some of the workers, not to mention the manager. Once we sat at a table, Will began asking me questions about Dugan that had nothing to do with his airbrushing. No, he'd already exhausted that subject at the mall. Now he wanted to know how we ever devised the Cinderella swap. So I wound up telling him how I saved Payton at school and got detention.

"Again?" He shook his head. "What's that? Four times this year? You've got to be the only overachiever who's ever managed that."

"I'm not an overachiever."

"You mean you aren't still Sophomore Class President and Ambassador, student council rep and what else was it...? Oh, yeah ... Journalism Club secretary?"

I looked at him for a second in surprise. "Just because I'm active in student organizations, doesn't mean I'm an overachiever."

"Really? How's your grade point these days? Still a four-point-0?"

"Um ... yes."

Will sat back and linked his fingers together behind his head. "Face it, Renny. You're an overachiever. Not that there's anything wrong with that. You should get in any college you want."

"Whatever," I said, past ready to change the subject. I'd never liked talking about myself.

"So you saved Payton, got detention and ... what? Keep talking. This is getting good."

I told him about Dugan's driving me home and recognizing Mom from juvie court.

Will sat up straight in his chair. "Well that sucks."

"You're telling me?" I explained about the armed robbery fiasco and Character Camp, then related how Mom had forbidden me to see Dugan—a travesty my unboyfriend actually supported.

"Now let me get this straight," said Will, leaning forward to prop his elbows on the table between us. "Your mother the judge won't let you date Dugan because he's been to the

Character Camp that she created to redirect juveniles headed in the wrong direction?"

I nodded.

"Doesn't that strike you as a little two-faced?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Judge Montgomery is famous for her devotion to reforming juvies, right?"

"Right."

"And she works very hard to convince everyone these guys and gals deserve a second chance."

I nodded. "Mom travels all over the state to talk about her program."

"Exactly. So if her ideas are all that wonderful, then why won't she let you date Dugan, who is clearly one of her success stories?"

Wow. The problem in a nutshell.

Maybe college was helping Will after all.

"So what should I do?"

"There's only one thing you can do." He sat back again. "Confront her."

Easier said than done, right? But I tried it anyway when Mom and I loaded the dishwasher after lunch. Dad and Will sat in front of the television, caught up in some basketball game and oblivious to us.

"I've been thinking," I said out of the blue.

"Should I be worried?" teased Mom.

"Actually, you probably should." I stuck some silverware into the rack. "Because I've been thinking about you."

Mom blinked. "Do continue."

"What did you talk about when you went to Nowata County last month?"

"Just my usual."

"Meaning Character Camp, the good that's done by hiring probationers, that kind of thing?"

"That's right." She scraped a plate over the disposal, then stashed it in the dishwasher.

"Did you share any statistics or success stories?"

She nodded. "I always do. Data fully supports my program. I want the facts to get out there."

I handed her a glass, which she rinsed. "Was Dugan one of those stories?"

Mom froze, the hand holding the glass now poised over the top rack of the dishwasher.

"Because he's definitely a success," I continued. "I mean he's got a great job and makes good money and—"

"Are you seeing him?" Mom demanded, dropping the glass into the rack, shoving it back, and raising the door. She started the dishwasher with a flick of her wrist. It began to hum.

"How can I not? In case you haven't noticed, Blue Water is a small town."

"Let me rephrase that: are you dating him?"

I leaned casually against the counter and shook my head. "Believe me, I would, but he won't have anything to do with me."

That clearly surprised her. "Why is that?"

"He told me he respects you too much. He said you saved his life, and the least he can do to repay you is stay away

from me." I looked her dead in the eye, which wasn't easy, let me tell you.

Someone hit the mute button on the remote. I realized that both Dad and Will now watched us intently.

Mom realized it, too. She swallowed audibly. "Well, that's very ... um..."

"Nice? Honorable? Gallant?"

"I was going to say interesting, but any of your suggestions will work just as well, I suppose."

"If Dugan's as bad as you say he is," I blurted before I lost my nerve. "Then why is he so determined to do what you think is right, even though it's really wrong?"

That got her.

In fact, the kitchen clock ticked out a full sixty seconds before she spoke again, her voice steady and low, her gaze glued to mine.

"Dugan obviously understands what you don't, Serena—in spite of all my efforts to the contrary, there is a stigma attached to juveniles who've been convicted of a crime. If you date this boy, if you're seen around town with him, all your good grades, your memberships, and your community work will be forgotten. You will be guilty by association, which means your good reputation will go right down the toilet."

Red-faced and shaking, my mom tossed down her dishtowel and stalked out of the kitchen.

I stood still as stone, trying to figure out if I'd won or lost the debate. I honestly didn't know.

I looked at Will. He looked at me. Dad looked at both of us. With nothing more than a bemused shake of his head,

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Dad hit the mute button once again and got back to his ballgame.

My big brother, however, gave me two thumbs up and a huge grin before he did.

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Chapter Thirteen

Around 3:00 that afternoon, the four of us sat down by the tree to open one present apiece. This was a Montgomery family Christmas Eve tradition that Mom and I gladly embraced once we knew about it. Who didn't love to open presents early?

Mom seemed to be over her mad, so we managed to have a pretty good time. The present I picked to open was from my dad—a license plate frame and reflective decal for my Camaro.

"Want me to put them on for you?" he asked.

"Not yet," I answered with a quick look at Will. "That'll make me even more impatient to drive it."

Dad laughed and didn't press the issue, thank goodness.

Once we'd thrown away the brightly colored paper and bows, Mom asked if I'd like to help her make some holiday cookies to take to some of our neighbors. We'd never done that, but it sounded like fun so I agreed even though I feared she might reintroduce the topic of Dugan. I'd said all I knew to say and didn't really want to go there again.

She pulled some old-looking recipe cards out of small metal file box in the cabinet and handed them to me. I'd seen that box before, but never really looked inside it.

"Those recipes belonged to your dad's mom." She caught my eye. "I'm talking about Jim Renfro. Your biological dad."

"Oh." We hadn't talked about him in ages.

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"I'm sure I've mentioned that we tried for ten years to have a baby before I finally got pregnant with you. Jim was so excited. You were the light of his life, let me tell you."

"I wish I remembered him better."

"So do I, sweetie." Mom dug out a mixing bowl, a spoon, and all the ingredients we'd need. I arranged them on the counter.

"Turn the oven to three-fifty, will you?"

I did.

"Jim and I lived in an older part of town and had several elderly neighbors. Your dad had a lot of special gifts, one of them cooking. So we had a Christmas Eve tradition of baking holiday treats and delivering them to all our friends down the street."

"Which recipe did he like best?" I asked, shuffling through them.

"The Russian Tea Cakes."

"Let's bake some of those, then."

She smiled. "Okay."

I deliberately put all unresolved issues out of my head as I measured ingredients, which meant we worked in a comfortable silence. Mom stirred everything together in the bowl. It was an easy recipe. Soon we formed our buttery dough into one-inch balls and arranged them on a sheet for baking.

"As I remember it, almost every neighbor we gave cookies had made something for us, too. So we always got back home loaded down with sweets. One lady ... I think her name was Sheila ... made the best peanut brittle ever." Mom

sighed, her thoughts clearly far away. "She died of Alzheimer's a few years ago. It was very sad."

"Payton's Granny Opal has that. They're putting her into a special home the day after Christmas."

"I'm so sorry. That must be very hard for everyone." Mom paused to mess with my ponytail for a second. She suddenly kissed me on the forehead.

"I've been wondering what I could do to help."

"Just be there for her, Ren." Mom looked sad. "Listen if she needs to talk."

Good advice, I thought, though sort of hard to follow ... at least where Dugan was concerned since he wanted nothing to do with me.

Mom and I finished our baking around 6:00. By that time, Will had gone out with some friends, so Dad helped us to deliver the treats. In keeping with Renfroe tradition, we received as much as we gave, though there wasn't any peanut brittle among all the goodies.

I went up to my room around 10:00, but couldn't seem to wind down. It wasn't my usual Christmas Eve excitement—the what's-under-the-tree anticipation that made sleep impossible. At sixteen, I was way past that. No, my overactive brain kept me awake. Regrets about everything from my wreck to my real dad's untimely death ricocheted inside my head. I actually felt dizzy from the mental traffic jam.

The second I finally dozed off, my cell phone rang. Murphy's law, right? Figuring it was Hayley, I leaped out of

bed and lunged for my purse, trying to answer it before voice mail clicked in. I barely made it.

"Hello?"

"Ren, it's Dugan."

What! My heart slammed into my ribcage. "Hi."

"Hi. Do you, um, have a minute?"

I wanted to tell him he could have the rest of my life, but restrained myself. Chasing that boy had not worked out for me. Maybe it was time to change my strategy.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Nothing really. I'd just, well, like to vent to someone besides Bo—someone who's not in the middle of this."

"This' being?" I crawled back into bed and pulled the covers to my chin. I kept my voice low even though my parents' bedroom is downstairs.

"The situation with Granny Opal."

"Oh." I remembered what Mom had said that afternoon.

"Have you changed your mind about St. Anthony's?"

"Almost. I mean, she's got to go somewhere. I know that. But I'm still not sure where."

"I totally understand," I said. "She's your grandmother, and you love her. You want her to be happy."

"Exactly. Granny Opal is a very special lady. Did you know she taught first grade for over thirty years? She still gets Christmas cards from some of her students."

"That's so cool."

"Yeah." Dugan began to reminisce, and I let him. He shared how his grandmother married a railroad man at eighteen against the wishes of her wealthy parents, who

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thought her life would be over. She surprised everyone by enrolling in college and getting her degree—a real success story. Just like his, in a way, since he'd surprised some folks, too.

I told him that once he quit talking.

He laughed at me. "You think I'm a success." Clearly he didn't agree.

That sort of shocked me. "Of course I do."

"I work in a body shop, Ren."

"So?"

"I'm a grease monkey."

Now I laughed. "No, you're an artist that I really, really admire."

Dead silence followed that.

"Dugan?"

"I'm still here. I ... er ... thanks for listening."

"That's what friends are for, right?"

"Right."

So right. He and I. Together, but as more than friends. How could he not see that?

"Damn, it's after midnight."

"Really?" I glanced at the digital alarm clock beside my bed. "So it is. Merry Christmas, Dugan."

"Merry Christmas, Serena."

Oddly at peace, I fell asleep seconds after we ended the call.

* * * *

In keeping with a new Renfroe-Montgomery family tradition, my parents, Will, and I ate a huge breakfast, then opened presents. Dad took a lot of pictures, which meant my sloppy pony tail, Tweetie Bird PJs and bunny house slippers would be immortalized forever.

Shortly afterward, my parents, both workaholics, retired to their respective offices. I secretly asked Will if he'd take me to Hayley's via Dugan's to deliver Christmas presents. Clearly curious about my unboyfriend, he agreed.

I rang Dugan's doorbell at exactly 10:00, hoping he wouldn't be mad that I'd dropped by without calling first. Payton answered the door and squealed with delight when she saw me. I waved to Will so he'd know he could leave. We'd already agreed that I'd call him when I was ready to be picked up.

The smell of homemade bread greeted me when I followed Payton into the kitchen, carrying their presents. There I found Dugan at a bread machine and a woman who had to be Granny Opal, sitting at the table. I don't know what I expected. Not the sweet little old lady who greeted me so warmly.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Ren." She offered her hand. I shook it. "I'm Opal Tippin. Everyone calls me Granny Opal."

I smiled. "Nice to finally meet you."

"Ditto."

She sounded so normal that I unconsciously looked at Dugan for ... I don't know ... confirmation, I guess, that this was the same woman he'd called me about last night. I admit

I knew nothing about Alzheimer's, but she really seemed perfectly okay.

"I brought you a present," I said, shyly offering it to her. Then I handed Payton hers. "Merry Christmas."

"Wait right here." She dashed out of the kitchen, then returned again in seconds to thrust a wrapped box at me. "Merry Christmas."

"Thanks." I made myself turn to Dugan. "I got you something, too."

"You shouldn't have," he said, taking the gift with obvious reluctance.

"It's not much."

We opened our presents. Opal loved her album, especially when Payton immediately produced photos to put in it. Dugan looked surprised for a couple of seconds. Then I guess he figured out that I'd told his sister in advance what I'd be giving. Payton got me a sterling silver bangle bracelet that I immediately slipped onto my wrist.

"Where's Ren's present from you?" asked Payton of her brother. She pulled her new sweater over her head. It fit perfectly, as I'd known it would. "The one you got her at the mall."

"Oh, um, in here." He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room, where a real Christmas tree stood. I could tell because the smell of pine permeated the room. I liked that. We never put up anything but artificial at the Montgomery house.

Dugan, who hadn't yet opened the box I'd given him, scooped a present out from under the tree and thrust it at me

before motioning to the couch. I sat on the edge of one of the cushions, suddenly very nervous.

"On three?" I asked to break the awkward silence.

Dugan laughed kind of sheepishly and nodded.

"One-two-three." I tore into the wrapping paper around my box and opened it, gasping when I saw a cream colored blouse I'd admired when shopping with Payton and Dugan that day. "I can't believe you got this for me. Thank you."

"Thanks for this." He inspected the tee.

"It's not much," I said once more.

"I like it."

Our eyes met.

"And thanks again for listening last night."

"No problem," I said.

Dugan stood, so I did, too. Just as we were stepping into the kitchen, Payton yelled, "Stop!"

Startled, we did.

She pointed to something above us. Looking up, I spied a twig of mistletoe taped to the door jamb.

"You've got to kiss," said Granny Opal. "It's bad luck if you don't."

Though I'd never heard that before, I hated to tempt the fates so raised on tiptoe to kiss Dugan. He met me halfway. Our lips brushed together, barely touching.

Granny Opal and Payton applauded.

"Can you stay for lunch?" Payton asked.

"I'd better not," I answered with a nervous glance at Dugan. I knew she hadn't asked him before issuing the invitation.

"It's okay," he said. "But I should warn you that I'm cooking."

"Then I'll definitely stay. What time are we eating?"

"In about an hour."

"I'd better call my brother." I dug my cell phone out of my jacket pocket intending to update Will. I didn't see a single power bar, so stepped out the back door in hopes of a better signal. That's when I heard a sort of yowling sound. I swear it gave me goose bumps. Curious, I followed the noise into what turned out to be a laundry room, just off the back porch. I immediately heard scratching and a pitiful mew.

"Taffy?" I looked all around for the cat, which had to be stuck somewhere. Finally I raised the lid of the washing machine. The cat erupted from the tub, scaring me half to death. My phone hit the floor with a clatter. Heart hammering, I scooped it up and turned to exit the room. I almost ran into Dugan, who'd apparently come looking for me.

"I just rescued your cat from the washing machine."

His shoulders slumped. "Again? That's the second time this week. I'm not sure what Granny Opal's thinking ... maybe that Taffy needs a bath or something."

His grandmother put the cat in there? Wow. I didn't know what to say.

"One of our neighbors woke me up at 5:30 this morning, banging on the door. He'd discovered Granny Opal walking down the street in front of his house in her nightgown. She didn't have on shoes or a coat. Luckily he recognized her."

"Oh, Dugan," I murmured, shocked. "She seems so ... sane, I guess."

"Yeah. That's what makes the whole institutionalization thing so hard for us."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?"

He nodded. "I'm taking her there first thing tomorrow. After this morning, I really have no choice. She could've gotten lost and frozen to death before I even missed her."

Without thought, I reached out and wrapped my arms tightly around him. It was what I'd have done for anyone, and he seemed to realize that. At any rate, he hugged me back, his chin resting on the top of my head. I pulled away from him reluctantly.

"I've got to call Will."

"Right," he said, heading back inside.

My brother agreed to come get me in a couple of hours. Flipping my cell shut, I stepped into the kitchen, where I found Bo seated at the table with Granny Opal.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

I returned the greeting as naturally as possible, which wasn't easy. My heart rate must've tripled at the sight of him. I realized that he'd cut his hair very short and noticed for the first time that he had gray roots, which meant he tinted it brown. I also saw that he'd shaved off his mustache.

Payton dragged him into the living room a couple of minutes later, perhaps to give him a present. Biting my tongue to keep from saying anything, I took off my denim jacket and draped it over the back of a chair. Then I joined

Dugan at the stove, where he'd just set a pan of peeled potatoes. He adjusted the burner flame.

"I didn't know Bo dyed his hair," I commented as casually as possible.

Dugan grimaced. "Lame, huh?"

Or smart ... if he needed a disguise, anyway. Obviously I hadn't quite given up on my America's-most-wanted theory.

"Can I do something to help?"

"Not really."

"That's good," I said. "I'm a lousy cook."

"You've got kiss her!" Granny Opal suddenly exclaimed, which made Dugan and I look toward the mistletoe. I saw Payton and Bo now stood under it. To my horror, he ducked his head and gave her a quick kiss right on the mouth. Then he looked at me. "Next!"

Ew. I shook my head and took a step back, blurting, "Sorry. Dugan's got dibs on me."

Everyone laughed, including Dugan. It wasn't until after lunch—which was delicious, by the way—that I realized he really wasn't amused by my answer. We worked alone in the kitchen, clearing the table and loading the dishwasher since Granny Opal had retired to her room for a nap. Bo and Payton, now in the living room, played the Scene It game he'd brought her.

"What was up with that 'Dugan's-got-dibs-on-me' thing? Bo was just kidding you."

Was the boy picking a fight or what?

"I thought he was serious, okay? And I don't want to kiss him."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"Because you think he's some kind of perv?"

"Right in one."

"What can I say to convince you he's really a nice guy?"

"Nothing," I admitted, snatching up a dishrag and wiping down the dinner table. I pushed all the chairs up under it, deliberately avoiding Dugan's glare. "Because I'm dead sure that he isn't."

"How can you say that? You don't even know him."

"Actually, I do," I blurted, suddenly ready to confess everything—and I do mean everything—if it would keep Bo away from Payton. I sucked in a fortifying breath. "Ever since I was a little girl, I—"

The doorbell rang, stopping me mid confession. I heard the door open, voices, then Payton ushered Will into the kitchen.

"Ready?" my brother asked me.

"I, um..." I looked at Dugan uncertainly.

"We'll talk later," he said, his expression icy.

"Right." I grabbed my jacket off the back of the chair.

"Thanks for lunch. Merry Christmas, everyone." With a wave, I followed Will out the door.

"Are you okay?" he asked the minute we got inside his Mustang.

"Not really."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No. At least not with you." I caught sight of his expression, and realized he looked kind of hurt. "Sorry, Will."

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That came out wrong. What I meant is I'd better talk to Hayley. It's a girl thing."

"No problem," he said, putting the car in gear and pulling out into the street.

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Chapter Fourteen

Hayley loved the Blue Water Schooners sweatshirt I got for her, along with the cash that would cover getting Brian's football jersey number put on the back. Thanks to the stress of the wreck, I hadn't had wits to pull that together beforehand. She got me a couple of DVDs I wanted, plus a Kelly Clarkson CD. I caught her up on my sad saga. As usual, she sympathized. I actually went home feeling a little better.

It snowed on Saturday. I woke up antsy and stayed that way all day, most of my thoughts on Granny Opal. How would she withstand the move to St. Anthony's, I wondered, more than once tempted to call and get a report from Payton.

I resisted all temptation until 1:00, which is when both my parents left the house. I immediately called the Donovan residence, but no one answered. So I left a voice mail. When no one had returned my call by 3:00, I dialed Dugan's cell and left a message there, too.

Finally, around 5:00, I gave up and cycled through a near blizzard to his house. I rang the bell. No one answered. That worried the heck out of me. Had something gone wrong? Honestly concerned by then, I rode my bike to the body shop and found it still closed for the holiday. A peek through the tiny glass window in the side door, however, revealed that Dugan worked alone inside the garage. I banged on the door with both fists. Dugan finally opened up.

"Is your cell phone broken?" I asked, slipping past him to enter the building. I brushed snow from my jacket and stomped it off my boots.

"Nope." He shut the door behind me and walked back to my car.

"Then why haven't you returned my call?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to, okay? I'm trying to stay focused. I can't do that if I'm answering my phone every two seconds."

That reply didn't help my lousy mood.

"Why are you even here?" I joined him where the front left fender of my Camaro used to be. A small space heater hummed nearby, the only source of heat as far as I could tell. The vast room felt pretty chilly. "It's Saturday, the day after Christmas. The shop is closed. You should be home instead of here, working on my stupid car."

"I figured if I stayed busy I wouldn't think so much."

"About what? Granny Opal?"

Keeping his gaze on my Camaro, he nodded.

"Did you and Payton take her to St. Anthony's?"

"We took her."

"Was it ... bad?"

He looked at me then and ran a hand through his hair. "It was the worst thing I've ever been through in my whole life, and that includes a night in jail."

I pressed my fingertips to my mouth. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry." Grabbing his arm, I tugged until he gave in and followed me to what looked like an old bus seat that was

pushed up against the wall like a couch. I made him sit down beside me. "What happened?"

"She did great until we got there. I mean she helped Payton pack her things; she wrote out a list of snacks I could bring her later from the grocery store; she kissed Taffy goodbye."

My eyes filled with tears, which I couldn't begin to blink away. I'd never heard anything so sad in my whole life. To think I'd believed dying young like my dad was the worst that could happen to someone.

"I thought it was all going to be okay ... until we got there."

I took his hand and laced my fingers with his.

"The nurses scared her a little, but she got over that in a few minutes and even seemed to like them. Then it came time for Payton and me to leave. Granny Opal started crying, which made Sis cry—" Dugan broke off, apparently just noticing that I now cried, too. He looked quickly away, but not before I saw his blue eyes brim. He shook his head.

Releasing his hand, I wrapped my arms around his upper body and hugged him really hard. That only made things worse, of course. Sympathy always does that. With a soft curse, he shook me off, got up and quickly exited the garage into the office area, where he stayed for several minutes. When he finally came back he looked calm enough, but his red eyes told a different story. I swear I didn't know what to do or say to help him. He didn't come back to the bench, but walked to the car and began working on it again.

"Where's Payton?" I asked, wondering if I should go talk to her or something. "I stopped by your house, but—"

"She's with L.J. His mom took them to the book store for a so they could spend their Christmas money on a new manga. I thought that might cheer her up."

"Good idea," I said.

"She's going to her Aunt Lucy's tomorrow afternoon and will probably stay there until New Year's. Payton hates the three-hour drive, but once she gets around her cousins, she'll be fine. They're all about the same age. I'm thinking the visit will help get her mind off Granny Opal."

"What time are you two leaving?" I asked, very relieved to hear Payton would be far away from Bo for a while. I couldn't stop worrying about him. And there was also Dugan's complete and total inability to grasp how bad the guy was. That was really starting to freak me out.

"I'm not going. I need to work on your car. Bo's taking her. He said he'd be by around 1:00."

Oh. My. God.

My stomach sort of back flipped into my heart, which went totally berserk. I grabbed his arm. "Don't do this, Dugan."

"What?" he looked at me in astonishment.

"You cannot let Bo Jennings drive Payton to Oklahoma City. It's too risky."

Dugan jerked his arm free. "Will you just get over this whole 'Bo-is-a-perv' thing?" He practically growled at me. "I mean it, Ren. I don't know where it's coming from, but it's just crazy, and you need to let go of it."

"But it's not crazy," I argued. "He's a really bad man. I swear it."

"Not that BS again," groaned Dugan, dropping his head back to stare at the ceiling. He finally looked at me again. "Do you have any proof of what you're saying? Because if you do, I really need to see it."

"N-no."

"Then please give this a rest, okay? I'm sick to death of arguing with you."

I swallowed hard. "Okay, all right. Clearly it's time for the truth."

Dugan got very still. "What do you mean? Did Bo say or do something you're not telling me?"

"No ... not yet, anyway. It's just that I'm, well, psychic, and I've sensed that he's evil."

There. I'd finally said it. That was one giant *whew!*

For long seconds he just looked at me, clearly at a loss for words. I heard the swish of cars, driving through the deepening snow in the streets outside. I heard the steady tick of the clock on the wall. I heard my pulse pounding in my ears.

Finally he spoke. "Maybe you're the one who needs to be in St. Anthony's."

"You don't believe me?"

"You thought I would?"

I sighed. "Not really, I guess, which is why I've been putting off telling you for so long."

"Wait a minute. Holy shit. You really do think you're psychic, don't you?"

"I don't think it, I know it."

He laughed.

Laughed.

"Don't you trust me?" I asked, stung even though I'd known I'd have trouble convincing him.

"This isn't about trust," he answered. "This is about Ren Montgomery expecting Dugan Donovan to suddenly believe in the paranormal. And I can tell you right now—it ain't gonna happen."

"I'd never lie to you."

"This isn't about lying, either." He began to pace. "In spite of the fact that you're keeping secrets from your folks, I know you're too nice a person to lie on a routine basis. That tells me you really think what you're telling me is true."

"Yes!"

"Well, I've worked with Bo for almost two years. I've see him in here; I've see him out there. I've seen him mad, glad and just plain goofy. He's ... a ... good ... guy. Do you honestly expect me to deny what I know and accept what you feel?"

Put that way, I didn't. But I had to give it one last try.

"Listen," I said. "It was as hard for me to tell you this as it was for you to—" I fumbled for a comparison "—take your Granny Opal to St. Anthony's. But I had no choice, either. I had to do it because it's the right thing to do."

"That's it!" he exclaimed, throwing his hand up. "I'm done!" He strode to the door and opened it wide. "Go home, Ren. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"But—"

"No 'but's. Goodbye."

Biting back a sob of frustration, I ran from the garage and got on my bike. I pedaled against the wind all the way home, so by the time I got there my face hurt, my eyes watered, and I shivered from head to toe.

"My goodness!" exclaimed my mother, who'd apparently just gotten home, herself. She stood at the hall closet, hanging up her jacket. "You're frozen through. Where have you been?"

"I thought it would be fun to ride my bike in the snow." I faked a smile. "Bad idea, huh?"

"I'll say. Go put another log on the fire. I'll make us some hot chocolate."

In a few minutes, we both sat on the rug in front of the crackling flames, our steaming mugs beside us. Mom, who'd taken off her boots and socks, stretched out her long legs and wiggled her bare toes in appreciation. "That feels better."

"Yeah," I agreed. I sat cross-legged beside her, picking at a piece of ash that had landed on my jeans. Outside, snowflakes drifted to the ground. We sat in silence for a minute or two, enjoying the peaceful view through the glass patio doors.

"Have you spoken to Payton?" Mom asked. "I think you said her family was admitting her grandmother someplace today."

"I did, actually. Apparently it was very sad for all of them."

Mom nodded thoughtfully. "Sometimes it's hard to do what's right."

"Especially since 'right' is so iffy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that what seems right to one person might seem wrong to everyone else."

"That's true," she murmured. "Things aren't always as black and white as we'd like them to be."

"So what are we supposed to do when right could really be wrong?"

"Why, you take a step back and look at the bigger picture."

"But what if you don't know even then?"

"Well, you can always go with gut instinct, I guess, or you can get a second opinion." She took a sip of her chocolate before quietly asking, "Is there something you'd like to talk to me about, Ren? You know I'm always here for you."

Our gazes locked.

I sighed.

"Not yet," I told her, looking away.

If Dugan, my soul-mate, didn't believe me, why on earth would a by-the-book judge ... even if she was my mom?

* * * *

At five minutes after midnight Sunday morning, my cell phone rang. Since it lay on the bedside table, I didn't even open my eyes as I groped for it.

"Lo?"

"Were you asleep?"

"Mm-hmm. Who is this?"

"Dugan."

That woke me up. "Oh! Sorry. I must've been dreaming or something."

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

He laughed, an amazing sound considering we'd nearly come to blows just a few hours earlier. "I'm standing in your front yard. Can you come out? We need to talk."

"What—!" I scrambled out of bed and ran to the window on that side of the house. Sure enough. There he was. Like a total doofus, I waved.

I heard him laugh again.

"Go into the back yard, okay?" I told him. "Use the gate on the west side of the house. There's a gazebo. We can talk in it."

"But what if your parents wake up?"

"They won't if you're very quiet. Remember ... the west gate, not the east gate. That one is right outside their bedroom window and it squeaks something awful."

"Okay."

I flipped my phone shut and tiptoed to my bathroom to check my look. Yikes, I thought, grabbing a ponytail band. I didn't even use a brush when I pulled my long hair back and eased it one and a half times through the band. I brushed my teeth just in case and grabbed my long terry cloth robe from the hook on the back of the door, then located my bunny house shoes in the dark. Scooping up an afghan, I headed downstairs.

Four minutes after Dugan called, I met him in our gazebo. He sat on the bench swing there, almost invisible in a deep shadow. Loving how the snow continued to fall, blanketing everything, I sat beside him.

"What's up?" I asked, spreading the afghan over our laps.

"I want to apologize for what I said this afternoon. I was a real jerk."

"You mean you believe me?"

He hesitated. "Let's just say I'm carefully considering everything you said. That means I'm going to keep an open mind and take a second look at the situation so I can draw my own conclusions."

I almost burst into tears of relief and joy. "But why? You were so sure..."

"I thought about what you said—about how it was as hard for you to speak up as it was for me to take Granny Opal to St. Anthony's. That was pretty freakin' hard, you know? So I decided I should at least give you a chance."

"Thanks, Dugan." I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Well, that's what I came to say. I guess I should go now."

"Not yet," I blurted, grabbing him.

Instead of shrugging me off, as I fully expected him to do, he leaned closer and kissed me. Just once. Very quick. On the lips. I melted against him with a soft sigh of joy.

Groaning, Dugan pulled me close. He kissed me very slowly this time as if savoring the sensation of my mouth touching his. Two shorter kisses followed that one, then we shared another that lasted until I shivered in his arms.

He instantly pulled back. "Shit. You're freezing."

"I'm not. I promise."

"Yes, you are." He stood. "I'm going."

I stood, too. He gathered up the afghan from where it had fallen and wrapped it securely around my shoulders.

"Dugan?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you please drive Payton to her aunt's tomorrow?"

"I'm having trouble getting the fender on your car, Ren. It's not going together right for some reason. I really need to—"

"Forget my car, okay? Forget the New Year's Day deadline. I'll go inside the house right this minute and tell my parents the truth if you'll promise to drive your sister to Oklahoma City."

"You'd do that?"

"I would."

"But—"

"Please, please, please?"

"Okay, all right. I'll drive her."

I sagged against him. "Thank you. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know how it went."

He tucked his finger under my chin and raised it so I'd look at him. "You're serious, aren't you? You're going to go in there right now and tell them."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Yeah, but I—" He shook his head as if not believing his ears. "Look, don't tell them anything yet, okay? Maybe I can finish the car on time even if I drive Payton to Aunt Lucy's."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He suddenly grinned. "Sleep tight, Ren."

"You, too ... well, when you get home." I blinked. "Where's your car?"

"I parked it a couple of blocks away." He left me and started toward the gate.

"Dugan?"

He stopped and turned. "What?"

"Watch the roads. They may be icy."

"Okay." He turned and took another couple of steps.

"Dugan?"

He stopped again, but didn't turn around this time.

"What?"

"I love you."

"What?"

"I lo—"

By then he stood right in front of me again. "Are you nuts, Ren? You can't tell a guy something like that when he's trying to sneak out of your back yard."

"You can't?"

"Hell no."

"Why not?"

"Because he'll want to come right back and do this—" He wrapped his arms around me. "And this—" He gave me a quick kiss. "And this—" He released me, pulled off his class ring, and slapped it in my hand.

I looked down at it in disbelief.

Dugan made it all the way to the gate before pivoting and jogging back. "You do want that, right?" He pointed to the ring still lying on my flattened palm. "I mean, you tried it on everything."

I quickly closed my fist around it and blathered something incoherent that he took for the 'yes' it was meant to be.

Laughing, Dugan charged the fence again. This time he got all the way through it before he ran back to me.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"By the way," he blurted, "I love you, too." He kissed me again.

I didn't even have time to kiss him back before he vanished through the gate, this time for good.

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Chapter Fifteen

Though it continued to snow really hard, I stomped out our tracks before I sneaked back inside the house just in case we didn't get enough additional accumulation to hide them. By then my teeth chattered, and I shivered from head to toe. I crawled under the covers, where I lay for what felt like an eternity before I began to get warm. I didn't even try to sleep. I had too much to think about.

Dugan loves me. Dugan loves me. Dugan loves me.

That incredible refrain echoed inside my head and drowned out every other thought. Adrenaline pumped through my veins. I felt like I'd just consumed one of those high-energy sports drinks that always resulted in a huge caffeine buzz.

But the best part of all was Dugan's agreeing to drive Payton to Oklahoma City, himself. Man, was that a relief! Surely by the time she got back to Blue Water I'd have a plan in place for revealing Bo's evil soul.

* * * *

Early Sunday morning, Will began to get his gear ready to take back to his apartment in Oklahoma City. He was a server at T.G.I. Friday's and had to be back at work on Monday. That meant folding all the loads of laundry he'd brought home with him and washed in Mom's washer. It was free as opposed to the one in his building that ate quarters. I helped with that and with stuffing everything into a duffle bag. I also helped him pack his Christmas presents in a big box.

"So Dugan thinks your car will be finished in time?" he asked. We sat on his bed, taking a breather.

I nodded. "He's been working on it around the clock."

"Not every boyfriend would give up his nights and weekends just to keep you out of trouble."

"He's not my—" I began before I remembered the ring I wore dangling from a silver chain around my neck and tucked inside my sweatshirt. At the moment, it lay right over my heart. It was all I could do not to pull it out and show it off.

Will laughed at the look on my face. "Don't even go there. I know you met him in the gazebo last night."

Oops. Apparently my big brother could hear my secret comings and goings as well as I could hear his.

"Don't tell."

"As if."

"He was just updating me on the car."

"I can't believe you're such a slave driver."

"But I'm not! In fact, I made him promise to take the whole day off today since his sister is about to leave town for a while."

Will grinned, but didn't comment.

He left around 9:00 a.m. Mom went right to her office; Dad put on his uniform and went to work. I watched TV. At 9:10, my cell phone rang. I saw it was my brother.

"What did you forget?"

He chuckled. "Nothing. I just wanted you to know that when I passed the body shop, I saw Dugan's car there. I think he's going to give you his Sunday, after all. Now that's what I call true love."

Crap. Why hadn't Dugan devoted the morning to Payton?

"Thanks, Will," I said, ending the call. I immediately rang up Dugan.

"Good morning, beautiful," he answered.

My anger dissolved like sugar in hot coffee. "Good morning. Where are you?"

"At the shop."

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes."

"Dugan Donovan! Are you telling me you're not going to drive Payton to her aunt's after promising me that you would?"

"I never promised."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said, okay? And I meant it ... last night. Now I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Because I figured out why I can't get the new fender on. I'm running out of time, Ren, and it's very important to me to finish my girlfriend's car by New Year's Day. I'd like her to live long enough for a first date."

His girlfriend? First date? I sure liked the sound of that, but I had to stay focused. "Driving Payton is much more important."

"To you, maybe, but not to me. I know you honestly believe Bo's a bad person, but the truth is, I don't. In fact, I'm certain Payton will be perfectly safe with him, which means I'll have an extra day to devote to your car."

"Forget the freaking car!" I as good as yelled. That made Mom stick her head out of her office. "Sorry," I told her, grabbing the remote and turning off the TV. "Got caught up in my movie."

She just shook her head and went back to work.

"I'm going to tell you a big secret." I kept my voice low as I headed up the stairs to the privacy of my bedroom. "A secret I've only shared with one other person."

"You read minds. Yeah, you already told me that, remember?"

"Actually, I don't read minds," I said, closing my door and sitting on my bed. My stomach began to churn. "I read souls."

"Come again?"

"I read souls. The first time I touch a person, I see a flash of color that tells me his or her soul-shade."

"You're screwing with me, right?"

"Wrong. I'm finally telling you the truth. Your girlfriend is a complete and total freak."

"You're not a freak."

"Really? You mean you know of another teenager who can see the color of a person's soul?"

Dugan got very quiet for a couple of seconds. "Are you making this up?"

I huffed my exasperation. "Why on earth would I do that? I mean, it's not like we don't already have enough obstacles to our relationship."

He thought about that for a minute. "Do I have a soul-shade?"

"Everyone has one, Dugan. You flash deep blue. Payton flashes deep purple. My friend, Hayley, flashes deep green. Will flashes—"

"And these colors actually mean something to you?"

"Yes!" Was he finally getting it?

"Do you swear you're not making this up?"

"Of course I swear. Do you believe me?"

"I want to, but I've got to tell you I'm having a little trouble wrapping my head around this."

"Will you please, just this once, give me the benefit of the doubt and trust me? Your sister's welfare is at stake."

He didn't answer.

"Dugan?"

"I'm thinking."

"All right. Here's something that might help you make up your mind: did you know that Bo gave Payton a diamond necklace and told her not to tell you?"

Dugan sucked in a sharp breath. "What! When?"

"For her thirteenth birthday. She wears it all the time."

Another long silence followed.

"Dugan?"

"I'm going home to check this out."

"And if she has it on?"

"I'm confronting that asshole."

"Oh, no. Don't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Bo flashed black. Murderers flash that color, Dugan. Let me call my dad. He'll know what to do."

"Bo may have flashed black—God, I can't believe I just said that—but he's not a murderer, okay? I'm sure of it."

"But Dugan—"

No answer.

"Dugan?"

He'd hung up on me!

I barely made it to the bathroom before I puked the orange juice that was all I'd had for breakfast.

Once that ordeal ended, I sat on my bed to call my dad. That's when I heard voices downstairs. Curious, I opened my door so I could hear better.

It was Dad, downstairs talking to Mom. I heard his cell ring. Flipping my phone shut to end the call, I flew out of my room and down the stairs.

"Dad! I was just calling you. We've got to talk right now."

"We sure do," he said.

That's when I caught sight of his expression and realized something was very, very wrong. I looked from him to Mom, who looked upset.

"What?" I asked.

"I just had a very interesting conversation with Larry," said Dad.

Uh-oh. I'd forgotten all about that ticking time bomb.

"I can explain."

"I doubt it, but by all means give it a try." He crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"Why don't we sit down?" suggested my mom, laying her hand on my shoulder and sort of pushing me toward the living area.

"Could we talk about this later?" I dug my heels into the carpeting. "Something really important is going down, and I need you to—" One glance at Dad's flushed face shut me right up. I walked over to the couch and sat down on it. Mom chose a spot next to me. Dad settled in his recliner.

"Did you or did you not go to the Christmas dance?" he asked.

"I, um, did."

"Who took you?" asked Mom.

"I drove."

She and Dad exchanged a glance. She looked almost relieved, like she assumed I'd gone there with Dugan or something.

Dad did not look relieved. He looked torked. "So you got in that Camaro and drove yourself to that dance—in terrible weather, mind you—even though you were banned from driving?"

"I ... yes." I swallowed hard. "And that's not all. I wrecked it."

Mom gasped. Dad cursed.

"How bad?" he asked.

"A thousand dollars for parts. I cleaned out my savings account. The car's in the shop now."

"Oh, Ren," murmured my mom, now looking sick to her stomach. I fleetingly wondered if I inherited my tendency to barf from her.

"Bo Jennings's shop?" asked Dad.

I nodded.

"Where Dugan works?" asked Mom.

I nodded again.

"Trey Parker told his uncle Larry that Payton is Dugan's little sister," said my dad.

"Step-sister. Yeah."

Mom gasped again. "So all this time you've supposedly been helping Payton you've actually been seeing her brother?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly, is going on? Because I believed you when you said the two of you weren't dating. I'd hate to find out now that you lied to me."

"I didn't lie ... about that, anyway." I tried to catch my breath, which wasn't easy. I felt sick, lightheaded, and scared, all at the same time. "It was Payton I saved from Trey that day. You know ... the last time I got D-hall?"

They nodded.

"I didn't know she was related to Dugan until he thanked me later. When he drove me home and saw you, he backed off, just like I already said. We ran into each other at the dance. We argued. I tried to leave the parking lot too fast and had the wreck. He offered to work on the car for free if I'd help his sister break out of her shell. So I wasn't really seeing him as a boyfriend or anything. We just had a business arrangement."

"Is this the truth?" Dad asked.

"I swear to God."

"I knew that boy would get you into trouble," said Mom.

"That boy did not get me into trouble!" I exclaimed, jumping up and yelling right in her face. I started to cry. "I

did that all by myself. He tried to get me to tell you two the truth, and when I wouldn't he tried to help me fix the mess I made. He's been nothing but noble and kind, and now he's going to die."

Dad got up and grabbed my arm to stop my frantic pacing. "What are you talking about? Who's going to die?"

"Dugan." By now I sobbed. "He's in really big trouble and doesn't even realize it, and it's all my fault. That's what I came down here to tell you."

"Sit down, Ren. You're making me dizzy." Dad grabbed me by the shoulders and guided me back to the couch. He couldn't make me sit, though. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Dugan, who's on his way to his house right this minute to see if Payton actually has a diamond necklace, which, of course, she does because Bo secretly gave it to her for her thirteenth birthday. Dugan's going to be really pissed at him for telling Payton not to say anything about it, and the two of them will certainly get into it, and—"

"Bo Jennings? Dugan's boss?" Dad interjected.

"Yes."

Mom frowned. "But Mr. Jennings is such a great guy. I mean his references were impeccable."

"Mom! He's not a great guy at all. He's a total perv, maybe even worse."

She jumped to her feet. "Why would you say a thing like that?" She suddenly caught her breath. "Unless ... has that man touched you, Ren? Or said something inappropriate?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"Then why—"

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

"He flashed black, Mom," I blurted, realizing it was past time for true confessions.

"He what?" asked Dad.

"Bo Jennings flashed black."

"Oh my God." My mother sank back down on the couch, her brown eyes wide with shock, her face as white as the snowflakes still falling outside.

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Chapter Sixteen

"'Flashed'? What do you mean, 'flashed'?" asked Dad, adding, "Are you all right?" when he got a good look at Mom.

She nodded to him. "Ren means that when she touched Bo Jennings—and I don't even want to go there—a flash of black momentarily blinded her." She looked at me. "Is that about right?"

My knees buckled; I sat right down on the carpet.

"Ren!" exclaimed Dad, lifting me to my feet. Without letting go, he marched me the few steps to the leather couch and pushed me onto it. He glanced from me to mom to me again. "What in the hell is going on?"

"You knew!" I exclaimed, swiveling to confront my mom, who somehow, somehow understood soul-shades. "All this time you knew!"

"Actually, I didn't. In fact, I never even suspected until the other day, when you said Payton flashed purple. But you covered it up so quickly that I convinced myself I'd misunderstood." She shook her head slowly—I think in total disbelief.

"Do you have a sense of soul, too?" Why else would she know about it?

"Oh no. Not me. Your dad."

I gasped. "For real?"

"For real."

"My dad saw soul-shades and you never told me? I can't believe it."

"Actually, he called them character colors, and I'd have told you if I had any idea you'd inherited that gene. You never once let on."

"I didn't think you'd believe me."

"Oh, sweetie." She hugged me. "Jim drew charts; he kept notes; he had that skill of his honed to an art, let me tell you. He saw visions, sometimes, too. Have you seen any visions?"

"No." Thank goodness. That was all I needed.

"Jim's special gift was invaluable in his line of work. I still have all his stuff, if you want to see it."

"Of course I want to see it. Oh my freakin' gosh. When I think how much work and worry that would've saved me—"

My Dad cleared his throat really loudly. Startled, we looked at him.

"I'm needing a little more information, here, ladies."

"I'm sorry, honey," gushed Mom. "Apparently Ren inherited some of Jim's psychic abilities."

"I understand that part." He looked at me. "Did you say that Dugan is on his way to confront Bo?"

"Holy crap!" I exclaimed, suddenly remembering the urgency of my boyfriend's situation. I jumped up and grabbed my Dad's arm. "Yes, he is." I glanced at Mom. "I've been telling Dugan for days that Bo is bad, but he just wouldn't listen to me." I quickly shared each and every thing Bo had ever done to make me suspicious. It wasn't that much, I realized with dismay, even when added to the whole flashing-black thing.

Luckily, Dad took me seriously, anyway.

"So you think his hair is really gray?"

"Yes."

Dad pulled a notebook out of his shirt pocket. "Give me Bo's description."

I did.

"I'm going to call the office and see if anyone knows anything about him. Wish we had his fingerprints." Dad flipped open his cell phone.

I suddenly snatched it from him.

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind or something. "What are you doing?"

"I've got his prints! On my purse ... if I haven't smudged them out or something." Hoping against hope, I charged up the stairs to my room and found the leather purse I'd emptied when Mom gave me my new one last week. Carrying it gingerly by the shoulder strap, I handed it to Dad. "He had hold of it around here." I pointed, but didn't touch.

"Good job, Ren," my dad said, slipping his hand behind my neck so he could pull me close and kiss the top of my head. He strode to the front door. I scurried after him.

"Does this mean you forgive me for driving to the dance and wrecking the Camaro?"

"Nope," he said, exiting the house. A second later, I heard his car start.

I walked back to where my mom still sat on the couch. She had a little color back, so looked better. I figured I probably did, too. I sat down beside her.

"Is it really Payton's grandmother who has Alzheimer's?" she asked.

"No, it's Dugan's."

"As I remember it, his mom is deceased and his dad's in prison."

"That's right. Um, do you know what for?"

"Manslaughter, I think. He drove drunk and killed a young woman who was crossing the street."

"Oh." *Gulp.*

"I think he got ten years, which means Dugan and Payton are alone now, right?"

Trust Judge Montgomery to hone in on that sad fact. I hoped Dugan wouldn't think I told her. "Yes. What'll happen to them?"

"I'm not sure. Do they have any more relatives around here?"

"I only know that Payton has an aunt in Oklahoma City. But if she goes there to live, Dugan won't have anyone." My eyes filled at the thought and one tell-tale tear trailed down my cheek. I brushed it away, but not before Mom saw it.

"Don't worry, sweetie," she said, kissing me on the cheek. "We'll figure this out."

I nodded just as my cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Ren!"

It was Dad.

"Dugan's at his house, right?" he asked.

"Probably. He said—"

"Call him this minute and tell him to stay put. Under no circumstances is he to approach Bo Jennings. Have you got that?"

"Yes, but why? What's going on?"

"Just do it. I'll explain everything later." He hung up.

Frantically, I located Dugan on my list of recent calls. I punched the send button. He answered second ring.

"Hello."

"Dugan! Thank God. My dad says you should stay at your house, okay? Do not go after Bo."

"Too late," he coldly informed me, clicking off.

I screamed and whirled on my mom. "He's already there! Oh my God. He's already there!"

"Ren!" she exclaimed, trying to grab me. I shook like a leaf in a wind storm. She grasped my upper arms. "Serena, honey, you've got to get a grip. Call your Dad back."

My hands trembled so badly I dropped the phone. Mom snatched it up and punched the right buttons. "Sam. We think Dugan is already at Bo's."

I heard my Dad's curse from where I stood.

Mom listened to him for a minute. "Okay. I'll tell her." She shut the phone and turned to me. "Sam's sending deputies to Dugan's and to Bo's. Everything is going to be fine."

"Everything is not going to be fine," I yelled, sobbing again. "Dugan and Payton are going to get hurt or worse. We have to go to Bo's right now."

"Absolutely not!"

I reached out and caught hold of her wrists, forcing her to look at me. "But what if something awful happens, Mom? I love him so much. And he needs me. I've got to be there."

Mom started to say something, then didn't, then did again, "What color did he flash?"

"Deep blue," I told her. "Same as you."

That got her. "Oh what the hell. Where does Bo live?"

"I-I don't know."

"Then you'd better find the phonebook while I find my car keys."

* * * *

It took a good fifteen minutes to get to Bo's house on Martin Street, and not because of the snow. No, that had finally stopped. The problem was the city's largest church, which had just let everyone out. For God-fearing people, they were pretty dang rude—crossing the street in slow motion and driving their cars out of the parking lot without so much as a glance at oncoming traffic. Mom slammed on her brakes three times. I was ready for her to run down the whole congregation before we got past them.

I didn't need an exact address to find the right house. By the time we got there, two official cars were parked in front of it, blue lights flashing, along with my Dad's, parked in the drive behind Dugan's Bel Air. Bo's yellow GMC was nowhere to be seen.

Mom eased the car to the curb a short ways from the chaos and killed the engine. Breathless with anxiety, I saw my Dad motion to one of his deputies. They eased up Bo's front steps, quietly crossed his porch, and looked in the windows. Dad next tried the door. It swung slowly open. He and the deputy looked at each other before entering the house, one behind the other, guns drawn.

"I'm getting out," I said, opening the door.

"Not while I'm your mother," she retorted, grabbing a double handful of my sweatshirt.

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by Linda Palmer

Not two seconds later, Dad stepped back outside and shouted something to the deputy still waiting at the street. I couldn't hear what Dad said, but I saw what the deputy did. Unhooking his hand-held from his shirt, he spoke into it. I caught one word: ambulance.

With a cry, I ducked completely out of my blue sweatshirt and sprang from the Avalon.

"Ren!" screamed Mom, lunging for me. She missed.

I dashed across the yard and up the front steps, only to be waylaid by my Dad. Ducking under his arm, I managed to avoid him and burst into the house. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the dark after the blinding white of the snow. I ran from the hall to the living room to the kitchen, my boots sliding on the hardwood floor every time I scrambled around a corner. I barely stayed on my feet.

"In here, Ren!" called my dad.

I followed the sound of his voice to a bedroom, where I found Dad on one knee next to Dugan, who lay on his back on the hardwood floor, unconscious or dead. With a strangled sob, I dropped to my knees beside them.

"Oh my God ... oh my God." I saw bright red blood on his head and face and a spreading red stain on the right side of the Old Navy tee I'd given him, just visible under that beat up leather jacket. I also saw a puddle of red on the floor. I put my ear to his chest and listened.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I swear I almost fainted with relief. So dizzy I could barely walk, I got up and stumbled to the bathroom ... or tried to. The first door I opened was a closet. When I finally found the

right room I dry heaved over the toilet for several minutes. I mean, I'd already tossed my cookies once that day, right? My tummy had nothing left to give.

"Oh, Ren."

It was my mom. She grabbed one of Bo's clean washcloths off a rack, wet it down, and thrust it at me. While I mopped my sweaty skin, she wet another one and walked back into the bedroom. Kneeling, she gently blotted the blood from Dugan's face.

My dad handed me my sweatshirt when I rejoined them. As I slipped it over my head and then my cami, I caught Dad's gaze on Dugan's class ring, in plain view for the nanosecond it took me to hide it. He didn't say a word.

I thought Dugan would never open his eyes. I kept placing my palm on his chest, feeling for a heartbeat, which covered my hand in blood. I wiped it off on my light blue sweatshirt, barely conscious of the mess I made.

"Ren?"

Gasping, I looked at Dugan and found him frowning at me. He shifted his confused gaze to Mom.

"Judge Renfroe?"

"Hi, Dugan. How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. I—" He suddenly cursed and sprang into a sitting position. "Where's Payton?"

"I don't know," I said, frightened by the crazy look in those baby blues of his. I heard the wail of a siren.

"Bo's got her." He struggled to stand up.

"No," said my mom, trying to keep him still. That worked about as well as her trying to keep me in her Avalon ... as in not at all.

I saw fresh blood gush from Dugan's side.

Mom looked up at her husband. "Help me, Sam."

Dad put his hand on Dugan's shoulder. "Lay back down, son," he said. "You're in no fit shape to do anything but go to the hospital right now. We'll find your sister."

As if on cue, two paramedics walked into the room, medical bags in hand. Dugan gave in and settled down. Mom, Dad and I stepped aside. The medics went to work. I hovered anxiously, trying to stay close without getting in anyone's way.

"What happened?" one of the guys asked Dugan. He applied pressure to the side wound with a gloved hand.

"Bo Jennings shot me. Twice."

Naturally, I burst into noisy sobs again. I'd never known anyone who'd been actually been shot. I mean, I'd seen that kind of stuff on television, but it didn't really mean much. This was real blood oozing from real wounds on a real guy.

My guy.

And it scared the snot out of me.

Dugan looked in my direction and crooked his forefinger, indicating I should come closer. I immediately dropped to my knees by his left side. He slipped his arm around my neck and pulled me down to his level, then kissed me right on the mouth in front of everyone.

"I'm okay," he whispered when he ended that breathtaking contact, his warm breath fanning my clammy skin.

That, of course, made me cry even harder. When I stood up, my mom immediately put her arms around me from behind in a sort of backwards bear hug, which felt amazingly good. I watched while the paramedics started an IV.

One of them soon went outside for a stretcher. They lifted Dugan onto it, covered him with a blanket and fastened the safety straps before rolling it out onto the porch. The front steps took a little negotiation, but in seconds, they slid the stretcher into the back of the ambulance.

I barely registered that a small crowd of neighbors had gathered to watch since Dad and I both tried to get in that vehicle, too.

"Only one of you," said the medic, holding out a hand to stop us.

"I really need to ask him some questions, Ren," Dad told me.

By then I was nearly hysterical. With Dugan's blood on my shirt, hands, and probably my face, I desperately shook my head and opened my mouth to wail.

Mom reached out and gently tugged her husband's sleeve. "It's only five blocks, Sam. How much can you find out in five blocks?"

He hesitated, then sighed heavily and stepped back. "Okay. You win. He's all yours."

"You got that right," I told my parents, accepting the boost Dad immediately gave me into the ambulance. "And I'm keeping him."

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Chapter Seventeen

I held Dugan's bloody hand all the way to the hospital. Man, was he wired. I assumed it was from all the pain until the paramedics assured me they'd doped him up big time.

"This whole thing is my fault," he finally blurted.

So that was it.

"I should've believed you the very first time you tried to tell me about that fucker." He caught my eye. "I'm so sorry I didn't."

"Yeah, you blew it, mister," I teased in an effort to get him to lighten up. "But I forgive you. Besides, I wouldn't have believed me, either."

That earned me half a smile, which was better than nothing, I guess.

It broke my heart to watch the paramedics roll Dugan through some double glass doors and out of my sight once we got to the Blue Water Regional Medical Center emergency room. I must have looked pretty forlorn, standing in the middle of the hallway, staring hopelessly after him. At any rate, Mom walked up and gave me another hug.

"Did they already take him back?" asked my Dad, joining us a second later.

I nodded. He hit the door control pad and went the way of the paramedics.

"We may as well sit down," said Mom, guiding me to the waiting area where a smiling volunteer directed traffic.

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by Linda Palmer

Since one room served both sick folks and the people who brought them, I got an eyeful. I saw a woman puking in one of those pink plastic tubs, a man holding his side and groaning softly, and a baby who never stopped crying the whole hour we sat in there. And that baby wasn't the patient. Her daddy was—attacked by a kamikaze kitchen knife, according to him.

I thought my dad would never get back, but he finally did.

"You need to come with me," he said, words that scared me half to death.

"Why? Is he worse?" I demanded, jumping up.

"No, he's trying to leave."

"You've got to be kidding!" Outraged, I followed Dad down the hall. Mom came, too. He gave me an update as we walked.

"Bo's bullet went clean through Dugan, missing all his major organs. The surgeons have closed the wound, which is still going to hurt like hell for quite a while. As for Dugan's head, the bullet just skimmed his skull, but he's definitely concussed."

"Did he tell you what happened?"

Dad grinned. "He tried, but he's not making a whole lot of sense."

We walked to a room that was nothing more than a six-by-six three-sided cubicle with a curtain hanging across the front of it. I pushed the fabric to one side and slipped past it to find Dugan sitting on the side of what looked like a glorified stretcher, with one of his Doc Marten boots in his hand. Dressed only in navy blue boxer briefs, with bandages

encasing his middle and his head, he looked amazingly wonderful to me. It was all I could do not to throw my arms around him in relief. But I didn't know how to do that without inflicting more pain.

I suddenly realized what he was trying to do—put on his boots.

"No way!" I exclaimed, rushing forward to snatch it from him. "You're staying right here until the doctor says you can go."

"But they want me to spend the night, Ren."

"Of course they do. You've been shot. With a gun. Twice."

"I feel fine."

"Yeah, well you're drugged, okay? You won't feel fine in another three hours, when that stuff wears off."

Dugan grabbed my hands, Doc and all. "I've got to find Payton."

"My daddy will take care of that. I'll bet he's already put out an APB and set up road blocks and stuff." I looked at Dad for confirmation.

"I most certainly have," Sheriff Montgomery said. "He won't get far."

"But Payton—"

"Will be okay," I said, even though I had serious doubts. But I couldn't have Dugan running out of the hospital drugged and bleeding. "I mean, I don't think he'd shoot her or anything. He really loves her."

"But I want to help catch that son of a bitch."

"Dugan, listen. You cannot leave the hospital now. You're a total mess."

He frowned at me as if my words didn't make sense.

"Mom, do you have a mirror?" I asked.

She dug her compact out of her purse and handed it to me.

"Look at yourself," I said to my boyfriend, opening it.

With visible reluctance, Dugan did ... and winced. He put his hand to the blood-spotted bandage that swathed his head and the deep purple shiner blossoming under his eye. He cursed. I handed Mom her compact.

"Now lie down before the nurse is forced to give you something to knock you out completely ... right in the butt and with a really big needle."

That got his attention. He lay gingerly back. Trying not to look below his waist, I straightened the thin blue top sheet that served as his only cover. I glanced toward my dad, who clearly struggled not to laugh. Then I turned away ... or tried to. Dugan grabbed my wrist and pulled me close again.

"I'll never get your car finished on time," he whispered.

"The deadline's been moved back indefinitely," I whispered back, even though there was really no need. "I told my parents everything."

His eyes widened slightly. "What'd they do to you?"

"Nothing, yet, but my dad assures me he's not going to forgive and forget."

"Damn."

"It'll be okay." Once again, I started to move away from the bed.

He tightened his grip on my wrist. "Stay."

I looked at Mom. "Can I?"

"If the doctor doesn't care. I'll stay, too."

Though another time I might've taken that as reluctance to leave us alone, tonight I didn't question her motives. I had, like, zero experience with concussions and gunshot wounds. At least she'd had a first aid course. Besides, I felt really vulnerable—I guess because my world had been rocked so hard. I wanted the people I loved to stay close to me.

The doctor admitted Dugan, so by 3:00 p.m., he wore one of those awful hospital gowns that won't close in the back and lay in a bed that looked a lot more comfortable than the one in the ER. Mom and I sat nearby. Dad was long gone. Decidedly loopy, Dugan dozed off and on for the next hour.

My mom and I quietly decided it might be best if we left. I stepped into the hall in search of a bathroom before we hit the road. When I got back, I found Dugan sitting on the side of his bed. My Mom stood in front of him, blocking his path to the door.

"Lie down, Dugan," I said, taking over.

He did. I covered him up and looked at my mom for guidance as to what I should do.

"Why don't we hang out a while longer?" she suggested.

I nodded, relieved that someone seemed to have a plan.

Since he seemed wide awake at that moment, I didn't sit down at once, but lowered the side rail and sort of perched on his bed. Mom walked around to the other side and took his hand in hers.

"I owe you an apology, Dugan," she said, surprising me and my boyfriend.

He looked at me, then back at her as if he couldn't imagine what might be coming next.

"I should've believed in you. After all, you're my biggest success story. You've really done me proud."

To my dismay, Dugan started crying. Crying! I hated it when guys did that, especially guys I loved. Not that they didn't have a right to express emotion in that way. They totally did. But they always got embarrassed, which made me very uncomfortable for them, and, invariably, I started crying, too.

"What's wrong?" I demanded, already wiping away my own tears.

"I am such an idiot."

"No you're not."

He looked at my mom, now blinking rapidly, herself.

"Some success story I am. I still don't have enough sense to stay away from the bad guys."

"Not everyone is as lucky as Ren, Dugan. Most of us can't see into the souls of the people we meet. And Bo is obviously an incredibly talented con man. He's avoided the FBI for how many years now? Two, three?"

"Really?" In all the excitement, I'd forgotten to get the scoop on Bo from my dad.

"Yes. Sam told me that Bo has a long history of internet stalking, sex with—"

I caught her eye.

She immediately shut up. "But let's talk about something more pleasant, okay? Ren, have you heard about the time

your dad had a vision about a cold case involving a robbery and then went out and solved it?"

I shook my head, just now remembering that she'd mentioned that earlier today. "Tell me about these visions."

She did, sitting in her chair again and talking softly about how my dad sometimes saw things that helped him on his cases. It was all a little creepy, and I was not one bit sorry I hadn't inherited that particular talent.

"My throat is really dry," Mom said, standing. The clock said 4:30. "Can I get you two something to eat or drink?"

"Both, please."

She left. I looked down at Dugan. "How are you doing?"

He sighed. "Not so hot. If I'd just listened to you—"

"Forget that, okay?"

"How can I? I trusted someone who shouldn't be trusted and didn't trust someone who should."

"Say that five times really fast."

"I'm not kidding," he growled. Suddenly he tossed the covers back and sat up. "I can't do this, Ren. I've got to find Payton."

"Stay put!" I ordered.

"But—"

"But nothing. Scoot over."

"What?"

"Scoot over. I'm getting in bed with you."

With a startled grin, Dugan did as requested. I took off my denim jacket and my boots and stretched out next to him, but on top of the covers. He slipped his arm behind my neck. I

pulled his class ring chain out of my bloodstained sweatshirt and began to twirl it on my finger.

"What happened?" I asked him. "Do you remember?"

"Some of its fuzzy."

I knew that short-term memory loss wasn't uncommon with a concussion, so didn't get too upset. It happened to football players a lot. "Tell me everything."

"Well, I went home to see if Payton really had that necklace and found Bo there. He said she'd called him to come over since she was upset about Granny Opal." Dugan stopped to explain. "We went to see her at St. Anthony's this morning. She didn't know me."

"Oh, Dugan."

He swallowed audibly and looked away. "Anyway, I questioned Payton about the diamond. She looked really scared, but she showed it to me. I asked Bo what in the hell he meant giving her something that expensive and then telling her to keep it secret. Without any warning, he pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot me in the head. I went right down and must've blacked out for a second or something, because when I came to, I saw him dragging Payton out the door. He had her suitcase—the one she was taking to OKC. I got up and chased them to his truck."

"You chased a man with a gun?"

"What else was I supposed to do? Let him have my sister?"

"No, of course not."

"And he didn't shoot me again, at least then, though he did hit me in the eye with it."

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by Linda Palmer

I sat up and looked closer at his poor eye, now badly swelled around four stitches and bruised deep black all around.

"They got in, he drove away. I got up again and jumped in my Bel Air and followed."

"You drove with a concussion?"

"I didn't know, okay? I thought my double vision was from him hitting me."

"You had double vision?"

"Still do, and I have to tell you that it's kind of cool lying here with two of you."

"Dugan!"

"I'm kidding, okay? There's nothing wrong with my eyesight now."

I checked the size of his pupils to be sure, something I'd seen on 'ER'. They looked okay to me. "So why'd he go home?"

"I don't know. Maybe to get his suitcase or more ammo or something. Naturally I followed them into his house."

Oh God. This was just getting worse. I felt like I was going to hurl again.

"I heard the two of them fighting in his bedroom. I ran in there. He shot me the minute I got to the door, and that's all I remember besides Payton screaming. The next time I opened my eyes, I saw you."

"Do you think he had this whole thing planned? I mean, was he intending to kidnap Payton instead of taking her to her aunt's?"

"I don't really think so. He had my complete trust and Payton's adoration, not to mention the admiration of people like your mother because of his willingness to hire a guy like me. Why risk a run-in with the law, especially since he'd managed to stay under the radar for so long?"

"What do you think set him off, then? Confronting him about the necklace?"

"Probably."

Suddenly, it was all too much, and I didn't want to think about it anymore.

"Does that TV work?" I asked, molding myself to the curve of Dugan's body and holding on tight.

"We can try it."

We looked for a remote, finally locating a button on his side rail console that turned on the television. When the door started to open, I hastily stuffed the ring back into my sweatshirt. Unless Dad had said something—and I didn't think he'd had a chance—Mom still didn't know about it. And though she'd obviously mellowed toward Dugan, I didn't want to push my luck.

So Mom found both of us in Dugan's bed, innocently watching a cartoon. She handed us our snacks, then got her coat off the back of the chair.

"I'm leaving for a while. I'll be back tonight."

"Okay."

Mom left; we ate our snacks. Then I snuggled up even closer to Dugan, who exhaled softly, closed his eyes and finally slept. I dropped off at some point, myself, and must've slept really hard because I actually dreamed. When I opened

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my eyes again and realized I lay in Dugan's arms, with my leg thrown over his, I nearly had a heart attack.

Gasping, I rolled right off the bed and landed smack on my backside on the cold, hard floor.

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Chapter Eighteen

"Damn, Ren. Are you okay?" asked Dugan, peering over the side of the bed.

When I nodded that I was, he started laughing at me ... for about two seconds.

"Oww!" He grabbed his injured side and eased back on the mattress.

"Serves you right," I told him, getting up and dusting off my jeans, which weren't even dirty. I could've eaten off those shiny tile floors. I moved to the vinyl chair and plopped down in it.

Dugan looked disappointed, but I didn't crawl back on that bed. No, siree. What if I went to sleep again and snored or even drooled on him?

"What time is it?" I asked, the next second seeking out the wall clock to answer my own question. Only 6:30.

We sat in silence for a moment, both of us staring at the TV, neither of us really watching it.

"Call your dad. I need to know what's going on."

"Good idea." I punched a couple of buttons on my cell.

"Sheriff Montgomery."

"Dad, it's me. What's happening?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. Our roadblocks are in place, but no airbrushed yellow GMC has been spotted. We've issued an AMBER alert for Oklahoma and all surrounding states and sent out Payton's photo. I've got a team at Bo's house and

shop, looking for clues as to where he might've taken her. No luck, so far."

I got off the phone and relayed all of that to Dugan, who didn't say a thing in response. He looked anxious, tired, and frustrated. And who could blame him?

We tried to watch the national news, but it was hard to get interested in the world's crises when we were stuck in our own. I noticed that Dugan looked a little pale. He couldn't seem to get comfortable, either, and sucked in a sharp breath whenever he moved.

"I think you need more drugs," I told him.

"I hate drugs. They make me stupid."

"Then tough it out, macho man."

Not twenty minutes later, he cursed, gave in, and pushed the nurse call button. When someone answered, he asked if he could have something for pain. In another fifteen minutes, a nurse wearing turquoise Scooby Doo scrubs came in, smiled sweetly at him, and injected something into his IV. She felt of his forehead and checked the ice in his insulated water pitcher, then left.

"Talk to me," said Dugan after a few minutes' silence. He already sounded a little groggy. "I don't want to go to sleep."

I got up and raised the rail so he wouldn't fall off the bed as I had, then rested my elbows on it. "What'll I talk about?"

"How about how lucky you are to have such a handsome, brilliant and talented boyfriend."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I've learned my lesson. I'm done with lying. Nothing but the truth falls from these lips from now on."

"Would you loan me those honest lips for a sec?"

Naturally I lowered the rail again and did just that ... several times. Then I took them back and put up the rail again.

I thought for a minute. "I guess I could tell you about the dream I just had. It was kind of weird."

"Okay." He put his hands behind his head and waited.

"It was night. I was driving your car on some highway. I turned off that onto a smaller road, then onto a gravel road somewhere in the boonies. You were asleep in the back seat."

"I slept in the back seat while you drove my Bel Air? That *is* weird."

I glared at him into silence. "I turned onto another road that was really hard to see. It was narrow, mostly rutted dirt and rocks, and it curved a lot. There were really tall trees on both sides of the car—oak and maple, I think, maybe some pine—and their roots sort of stretched over the road, making it even harder to drive."

"Did you scratch up my car?"

"I'll never tell," I teased, glad to note that he seemed to be feeling better. Obviously the pain killer had kicked in, though he still squirmed a little. "I came up on a log cabin that looked like something out of a story book—'Little Red Riding Hood' or maybe 'The Three Bears'."

Dugan grinned.

"There was a cute stone well beside it, a wood pile, and an outhouse with a crescent moon on the door, just like you see in pictures of the Ozarks."

Dugan's grin vanished.

Thinking he must've felt a really bad stab of pain or something, I rushed to continue. "To the right of the cabin, I could just make out a lake, about a hundred yards away and sort of down a long slope. The moonlight glistened on the waves or I'd never have seen it through all the trees."

"Did the cabin have a red door?"

I looked at him in surprise. I hadn't even gotten to that part of my dream. "How'd you know that?"

"You just described Bo Jenson's cabin at Tenkiller Lake."

"But I've never even seen that cabin. How could I describe it?"

"I don't know." He stared at me for a second without speaking, his gaze now alert and intense. "Do you think you could've had a vision, like your real dad used to?"

"It wasn't a vision, Dugan, it was a dream."

"Yeah. In intricate detail about a place you've barely heard about and never seen—a place that really exists. You had a vision."

I quickly shook my head.

"You had a vision, Ren, and you had it because that's where Bo has taken Payton."

"But you said he sold that cabin."

"What if he lied to me? What if he still owns it and planned all along to take Payton or even some other young girls there someday?"

I couldn't bear to think about it. "This is just too coincidental, okay? I mean, what are the chances that I'd find out my dad had visions, then have one, myself? That kind of stuff just doesn't happen except in books or the movies."

"Truth is stranger than fiction. Besides, I believe all things happen for a good reason. If my dad hadn't gone to prison, I'd never have gotten mixed up with the wrong crowd. And if I'd never gotten mixed up with them, I'd never have been arrested."

"And if you'd never been arrested, you'd never have gone to Character Camp, or met Judge Mom, who—"

"Gave me direction. Exactly."

"Actually, I was going to say 'who got you that job with Bo Jenson, who has now kidnapped your sister'."

He frowned. "So sometimes the reasons aren't so good. But not this time."

"Well, the cabin is certainly worth checking out."

"It's kind of hard to get to."

"If anyone can find it, Sam Montgomery can. He was born and raised in this part of the state."

"So call him already."

Once again I punched a couple of numbers and rang my dad.

"Sheriff Montgomery."

"It's Ren again."

"Hey, hon. I was just about to call you. Is Dugan awake?"

"Uh-huh."

"Put him on."

I handed my phone to my boyfriend.

"Hello?" Pause. "Crap!" Pause. He shook his head. "I'll try to remember. I'm a little spaced out. I think there was a green Silverado, a silver Saturn, and a taupe minivan of some kind, I can't remember exactly what model, parked in that

lot." Pause. "So you haven't heard a thing?" Pause. "Okay." Dugan handed the phone to me and put both his hands to his forehead.

I guessed he must be dizzy or something.

"Dad? Are you still there?"

"I'm here. I was telling Dugan that we just found Bo's GMC in the back lot of the body shop. Apparently he switched vehicles at some point. I'll check out what's left in that lot and hopefully update the APB. Um, Dugan seems a little out of it."

"Actually he's a lot out of it."

"Well, if he remembers any more of the vehicles that were parked in that lot, call me, okay? I've got a feeling Bo's driving one of them."

"Okay. Listen, Dad, Dugan thinks Bo might've taken Payton to his cabin on Tenkiller Lake."

"Where, exactly, is it?"

"I'll put him back on."

Once again I handed the phone to Dugan, who shook his head as if to clear it. "You take Hwy. 89, I think it is, to the turnpike and go about thirty miles or so until you get to this turn off. After you stay on it for a while, you'll come to a gravel road, I don't remember the name, but it's on the right, a couple of miles past the Tenkiller Lake sign. You stay on that road for about five miles or so, then turn left onto a dirt road that's really narrow and in pretty bad shape. It'll be hard to spot. The cabin is at the end of it." Pause. "Well, I thought it was Hwy. 89. Maybe it was 69."

Crap. My heart sank. My dad might be good, but he wasn't that good. I mean who could ever follow those crazy directions?

"I will." Pause. "Yeah, I promise. Thanks, Sheriff Montgomery." Dugan handed me the phone and shut his eyes. He looked so pale that I didn't even hear my dad say goodbye.

"Are you okay?" I asked him as I tucked my cell into my jeans pocket.

"He'll never find it."

I agreed, but I didn't say so.

Dugan sat up with a soft *oomph* of pain. "Where are my clothes?"

"I hid them."

"Well, you'd better cough 'em up, because I'm getting out of here."

Now he stood beside the bed, pulling out his IV. My stomach flip-flopped even though I didn't have an aversion to needles. "What are you doing?"

"Just what I said—getting out of here. No one will be able to find that cabin but me."

I saw blood running down his arm from the IV site and grabbed some tissues. "Keep pressure on that."

He did.

I paced the room, unsure of my next move. No way could this be construed as the right thing to do. No way. Yet part of me had to help the guy I loved.

"How will we get there?"

"The Bel Air. You can drive."

"And just how will we get out of this hospital and all the way to your car?"

"We can take the back stairs. It's only a few blocks to my house. I can make it."

He had to be kidding. He swayed on his feet as we spoke.

"I know ... let's call my Dad back. We'll tell him you want to ride down there with him."

"You honestly think he'll go for that?"

"No," I admitted. The last thing my dad would do is put his daughter and her boyfriend, who'd already been shot twice today, in any kind of danger.

"We have to drive there ourselves, and you know it."

"Why am I even considering this?" I asked, pressing my fingertips to my temples.

"Because we have no other choice. I'm telling you, no one can find that cabin but me, Ren. Now time's wasting." He slipped off the gown, which left him in those navy blue boxer briefs. "Where are my clothes?"

I dug them out of a drawer in the built-in closet and tossed them to him. He put them all on while I held his arm to keep him upright, my mind going nuts. Why? Because I didn't believe Dugan when he said we had no other choice but to chase Bo to his cabin. We had another choice, maybe even several. I just couldn't come up with any of them at the moment. All I could think was how much I'd like to be on Payton's rescue and how badly I'd wanted to know if that cabin really looked like the one in my dreams.

I found Dugan's Docs under the bed and handed them to him. While he put them on, I stepped into my own boots and

pulled on my jacket. The clock said 7:30 as we sneaked out of the room and down the back stairs. Dugan, who leaned heavily on me, never complained, though I knew he had to be in terrible pain. As we rounded the back corner of the hospital, I saw a taxi parked at the entrance of the ER. I ducked away from Dugan and ran to it, banging on the driver's window. The driver rolled it down.

"We need a ride."

"Sorry, ma'am. I've got another fare waiting."

Big surprise. He probably had ten fares waiting.

"But it's only five blocks. I'll pay you double." By now Dugan had reached the taxi. God, he looked awful. I turned to him and held out my hand. "I need some money."

Dugan pulled out his wallet and handed me a twenty, which I showed the taxi driver. "Please?"

The guy took a good look at my boyfriend. "Get in," he said.

We did.

This is a sign, I decided. We're doing the right thing, after all.

When we got to Dugan's, the taxi guy refused our money and drove away.

"I wish I had a gun," Dugan murmured.

"Thank God you don't."

We carefully negotiated the driveway, still patchy with snow. Dugan got a blanket out of his trunk, then let me talk him into getting in the back seat of his car. I figured if he stretched out a little he'd be more comfortable. His side had to be killing him. He made me promise to keep him awake.

I promised, even though I hoped he'd drop off. If he did that, I'd have an excellent excuse to abandon this misbegotten rescue and drive him straight back to the hospital.

"Get on Hwy. 69. That's the one that goes to—"

"The Muskogee Turnpike. I know."

"That's right. Once we're on that, tell me when you get to the 62 exit so I can get up and start watching for our turn off. I think I'll remember it when I see it."

I sincerely doubted that.

Just as we left town, we came to one of the road blocks. I slowed the car and got in line, praying the deputy who manned the thing would not be one of the ones who'd been at Dugan's house earlier.

He wasn't.

"Hey, Ren."

"Hey. Any luck finding your guy?"

"Not yet. "Whose car?"

"My boyfriend's. Mine's in the shop. It's his sister who was kidnapped. I'm going to get her aunt in Mazie." That was a little town off Hwy. 69, south of Blue Water. "She doesn't drive." So much for never lying again.

"Okay." He waved me through without looking in the car.

Dugan, hiding under the blanket in the back seat, raised his arm and gave me a thumbs-up in the rearview mirror. I drove onto the Turnpike, paid my toll, then kept the Bel Air between those white lines until I saw the Hwy. 62 exit sign. I tried to wake my boyfriend.

"Dugan?" I reached back and groped for his knee, which I punched. "Dugan!"

He didn't answer. I slowed the car and pulled onto the shoulder.

"Dugan!"

The boy was out cold. *Thank God*, I thought, easing the car onto the road again. All I had to do now was take the Hwy. 62 exit, just a few yards away, turn around and head back home. I'd deal with Dugan once he woke up. I was sure that when he could think clearly again, he'd agree that I'd made a wise choice. But just as I reached the exit, I saw a sign I'd seen in my dream, another hundred yards or so down the Turnpike.

Do I know the way to the cabin? I suddenly wondered, bypassing the exit. I actually believed I did, which made aborting this rescue mission unfathomable. How could I not drive to that cabin if I knew how to get there?

Now that would be nothing but wrong.

I'd been driving for a solid hour when I next saw an exit I recognized. I took it, braking where it intersected with a two-lane. I looked to the left and then the right, trying to guess which direction to take. I'd never been to Tenkiller Lake. I honestly didn't know where it was.

Someone in a pick-up truck behind me honked impatiently. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the right turn signal blinked. So I turned left. Not five minutes after that, I recognized the road again and knew I'd made the correct decision.

The clock in Dugan's dash said 10:20 when I finally turned off the gravel road I'd seen in my dreams onto a narrow dirt track that I believed would lead me to Bo's cabin. By then, I was one big goose bump, and not because it had begun to snow again. Following instinct for over a hundred miles had taken its toll on me. My stomach churned; my shoulders ached. I wanted to kill the lights and the engine, crawl under the blanket with Dugan, and never stick my head out again.

I didn't do any of those things but kill the lights and engine. The cabin lay through the trees, not that many yards ahead. I'd come this far. I had to check it out ... even if that meant doing it alone.

By now, I wished for a gun, myself. Not that I'd ever pull the trigger. I so wouldn't. Why, the thought of shooting someone, even a creep like Bo, made my stomach churn even faster. But a gun ... or maybe a flashlight ... would still have been nice.

"I won't throw up. I won't throw up," I chanted under my breath as I checked on Dugan, now totally zonked. I felt for the pulse in his neck, tenderly straightened his blanket, then got out of the car.

Staying near the trees, I crept up the narrow roadway that was really little more than a trail. More than once, I tripped over roots or twisted my foot on a rock, but I did not stop. The snow on the ground looked eerily iridescent in the all-consuming black of night and almost lit the way.

Suddenly the cabin loomed ahead, a few square feet of cozy log shelter in the middle of a dense dark forest. Bitter wind stung my face and cheeks and rattled the bare branches

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of the trees. The snowflakes that managed to sift through those dense branches, landed whisper soft on my skin.

I saw a Volkswagen Beetle parked near the cabin—not one of the cars Dugan had remembered. I stopped to catch my breath and think what to do next.

A twig snapped somewhere to my right.

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Chapter Nineteen

I ducked instinctively and spun in that direction, frantically scanning the trees. I tried to see anything in the intense dark, but saw exactly nothing. Panting with fear, I hid behind a tree while I composed myself. Sheriff Sam Montgomery, I wasn't. Rescues such as this should be staged by burly law enforcers with plans, guns, and back-up, not a five-foot-one D-hall alumnus without so much as a nail file.

I breathed deeply for a second or two, which helped, then left the cover of the trees and crept all the way to the front porch. There I saw a window with light coming through it. I tested the timber floor with my foot before I stepped up, just in case it creaked or something. It didn't.

Though I couldn't see into the cabin—the shades were apparently pulled down—I could hear low voices in that room. I thought I recognized Bo's.

Now what?

I left the porch and slipped around to the back of the cabin, where I found another, smaller entry. All the windows on the back side of the building were dark. I started to try the door I found there, but spied a fairly big rock, so picked it up first. It wasn't a gun, but it beat nothing, I figured, testing the weight of it in my hand. I'd played softball for years. I could usually hit what I aimed at.

I peeked through that window into a shadowy room. I gently tried the door knob. It actually turned easily in my free hand.

Gulp.

"One-two-three," I whispered, pushing open that door. It squeaked. Someone grabbed me from behind. I screamed bloody murder and promptly dropped my rock.

Bo!

"Welcome to the party," he said right in my ear, manhandling me on into the cabin, through a kitchen, and down a dank hall. I felt more than saw that he had a gun in his right hand. It dug into my ribs. We reached a small living area, where Payton cowered on a couch. Bo shoved me forward. I landed on my knees on the roughly hewn floor.

"Stay put," he ordered, pivoting.

While he walked to the back of the house, I scrambled to my feet. That's when Payton threw herself at me, sobbing hysterically.

We hugged like crazy.

"Are you okay?" I asked when she finally let go and stepped back. I saw she had on the sweater I'd given her for Christmas, some jeans, and her boots. She looked like she'd been bawling for hours and even now cried so hard she couldn't answer for a second.

"Dugan's dead," she finally gasped, squeezing my upper arms.

"He's not dead, Payton, but he is in the hospital. I left him there a couple of hours ago."

Just as I said that, Bo came back and grasped a handful of my sweatshirt to lift me right off my feet. I couldn't believe the guy's strength. He looked so wiry. Bo as good as tossed

me onto the couch. Payton rushed over to sit down next to me. She grabbed my hand in both of hers.

I inspected my stinging knees and found one leg of my jeans totally ripped. A big scrape on the skin under it began to gush blood. Belatedly, I heard a radio playing country music and realized I probably hadn't heard voices at all, at least not Bo's. I smelled wood burning and located an antique-looking iron stove, over in the corner. Cautiously, I scoped the rest of the room, trying to figure out the set up.

Bo pointed a finger at me. "Did I hear you say Dugan's in the hospital?"

I nodded.

"So he's not dead."

I shook my head.

"How'd you get here?"

"I drove his Bel Air."

Bo laughed. "You expect me to believe that your dad, the high and mighty sheriff, let you drive to Tenkiller Lake alone. I don't think so."

"He doesn't know I did it. Nobody does. Not even Dugan. I stole his keys, sneaked out of the hospital and borrowed his car."

"Aren't you a brave little thing?"

I had no answer for that.

"So how'd you even know about the place?"

"Dugan told me ages ago. He said his grandmother loved it here."

"And how'd you know how to find it? We're not exactly on the map."

"Don't need one. I'm psychic."

"Don't screw with me!" he growled, taking a threatening step in my direction. Payton cried out and cringed, which made me wonder if he'd already hit her or worse. But I didn't see any bruises ... at least on her face.

"It's true. I fell asleep in the ER waiting room and dreamed about this cabin and how to get here. When I woke up, I realized I'd had a vision. It's a talent I inherited from my dad."

"You can't tell me that oaf is psychic. Why I've lived right under his nose for almost three years, and he never once suspected the FBI was looking for me."

"Not that dad. My real dad. His name was Jim Renfroe. He was a cop and had visions all the time. Mom told me his specialty was solving cold cases and stuff."

"What is this, the Twilight Zone?"

"But I'm tel—"

"Shut the fuck up."

I did.

Bo began to pace the room, looking from us to the TV. I saw he'd stuck his gun in his belt. He obviously didn't believe a word I'd said, but I didn't think he could come up with another scenario that worked. I hoped he wouldn't lose it and do something desperate, like shoot Payton and me. He acted that disturbed.

"I swear I drove here all alone, Bo. Surely you know my dad would never use me as bait, even if he and his deputies were waiting for you outside."

He thought about that. "Where's the Bel Air? I didn't see it."

"I left it way down that trail posing as a road so you wouldn't hear the motor." I swallowed hard. "How'd you know I was out there, anyway?"

"I'm psychic, too."

For just a second, I almost believed him. Then he laughed again and pointed to the television. I looked closer at it and saw a split screen with a view of both porches and most of the front and back yards. I realized there must be some kind of security cameras mounted out there—cameras with night vision or something. Obviously he'd been planning this for a while.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Why don't you let Payton go? She's so young. You and I could party."

He looked at me in total disbelief. "How stupid do you think I am?"

Not stupid enough, apparently. But it had been worth a try. I just couldn't bear the thought of him touching Payton. As for him touching me, I found that just as unsettling, but better me than her.

Bo kept pacing. Payton and I watched him—back and forth, back and forth—nothing but our eyes moving. I tried frantically to think of a way to get out of that cabin and to the car. Nothing came to me. The whole situation seemed so surreal I could barely think straight. Like a horrible nightmare or a really lame horror movie.

"Are you bleeding?" Bo suddenly asked.

I realized he stared at my shirt and looked down at the blood stains all over it. "That's Dugan's blood."

Suddenly, he sat down in an overstuffed chair that looked a little the worse for wear. He sighed. "I didn't want to shoot him."

"Then why did you?" I asked.

"Had to. Payton told him about the necklace, and he came home all pissed—"

"I did not tell him!" exclaimed Payton.

I quickly nodded endorsement. "I did."

Bo's narrowed gaze zoomed in on me. "How'd you even know?"

"I saw it when we were clothes shopping. I made her tell me where she got it." The lie came easily to my lips.

"Clothes shopping, huh?" He got up and walked over to the couch, stopping right in front of me. "You and your stupid makeover. Everything was fine before that."

"What do you mean?" I asked, desperate to keep him talking. I didn't know why. I guess because it meant I'd live a little longer. "I thought you liked the changes."

"I did. Unfortunately so did that little shit, L.J. Can you believe that punk made a move on my girl?"

Was the man a sicko or what?

He sat down again, his gaze boring a hole through me. "In a way, it's good you're here. I can tell that Payton's feeling better. I never meant to scare her." He caught her eye. "I love you, baby. I want to make you happy."

Ew.

"If you really loved her, you'd let her go. She's way too young for you, Bo. I know you know that."

"Shut up."

So much for reasoning with him. He'd clearly lost it.

We sat there like that forever—Bo with his gaze now glued to the TV again, Payton and I exchanging frantic frightened glances.

"Do you have a bathroom?" I asked. "I really need to pee."

"In there," he said pointing down the hall.

There went my haphazard plan to make a run for it on my way to the outhouse. When Bo saw the look on my face, he guessed my ploy and laughed. "That outside john is just for show."

Great. I didn't bother to visit the inside toilet.

"Could I have some water?" asked Payton.

"Why sure."

Bo reached into an ice chest I hadn't even noticed and pulled out a bottled water. He gave it to Payton. He did not offer me one.

"How're you doing?" he asked, tenderly stroking her hair. His voice sounded almost gentle.

"I'm really scared."

"Don't be. I'd never hurt you. You know that. You mean too much to me."

She nodded.

"I know things seem a little crazy now, but they'll get better once I figure out what I'm going to do." He shook his head. "Dugan caught me off guard. I'll just need a while to come up with a Plan B."

"What was your Plan A?" I asked, the next second regretting my thoughtless blurt.

Bo glared at me. "Legal guardianship. I'd been hoping for months that Granny would wander off and croak, but that never happened. So I started in on Dugan, urging him to lock her away. I figured it would be a piece of cake to be appointed Payton's guardian once that happened."

As if. Was the guy living in a fantasy world or what?

He looked at Payton and smiled regretfully. "I'd have been so good to you."

Double ew.

But the thing is, if I hadn't known Bo flashed black, I might actually have been fooled. He had a way about him ... a certain charm that belied the evil inside. I thought of Ted Bundy, a serial killer who somehow managed to find a wife while in jail and on trial for multiple murders. Charismatic, but deadly.

I looked longingly at the front door. Only six feet from freedom, and I couldn't get there.

A loud thump near that very door made us all jump.

Bo whirled to stare at the television. The screen was black.

"What was—?"

He shushed me and stood very still, listening.

We heard another thump, this one on the east side of the house.

With a curse, Bo drew his gun and walked over to the window. He lifted the edge of the shade just a little so he could peer out into the dark. I immediately jumped up and lunged for the back of the house, dragging poor startled

Payton behind me. We made it to the kitchen. I slammed the door and held it shut with my body.

"Get a chair!"

Payton grabbed one of the four that were scooted under a rustic wood table and dragged it to the door. It weighed a ton. I jammed the back of it under the knob, just the way they do in thrillers. We charged the back door and burst outside.

"This way!" I yelled grabbing Payton's hand again and running like hell for the dirt road. We managed to cover about ten feet before Bo charged out the front door and tackled us. Payton and I both sprawled in the snow, but scrambled to our feet again almost immediately.

"Run!" I yelled to her as I turned to face Bo, now on his feet again, too.

She just stood there.

"Payton, run!"

Bo tried to stop her; I jumped between them, wildly clawing at his face, kicking his shins, biting him. He dropped his gun in the onslaught. I fell to my knees and fought to get hold of it. That earned me a swift kick in the side with a very sharp cowboy boot that knocked the wind completely out of me.

Gasping for breath, I struggled to rise. Bo swiftly scooped up the gun and started after Payton, now hauling butt down that narrow dirt road and almost out of sight around a bend. Somehow I stumbled after him and grabbed his shirt to impede progress. He actually dragged me a few feet before

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he cursed, whirled and punched me on the cheek bone, full force, with his fist.

Pain exploded through my face. I hit the ground hard. The world went completely black.

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Chapter Twenty

But only for a second. Shaking my head to clear it, I looked for Bo. I saw two of him running toward the road. I blinked several times to focus, got to my feet and ran after him. My low-heeled boots negotiated the snowy ground much better than his fancy cowboy ones. I actually caught up just he reached the edge of the clearing and tackled him. We both went down hard.

Bo pushed me aside and got up. I grabbed his foot with both hands. He went down again. Cursing, he snatched up a huge dead limb from the ground and twisted into a sitting position, swinging it at me. I screamed and ducked. It still connected with the injured side of my face. I saw stars and tasted blood.

Before I could recover from the blow, Bo wrapped his hands around my neck and pushed me backwards to the ground. He straddled my body, pressing hard on my wind pipe with his thumbs. I choked and gasped for air, frantically gouging his eyes, then struggling to yank his hands from my throat. The world faded to total black again.

Suddenly, Bo wasn't there anymore. Air rushed into my throat and lungs. I strained to sit up, wheezing hard. All hell broke loose at my left elbow, where Dugan and Bo now wrestled on the frozen lawn.

Dugan punched Bo in the face. I heard the sickening crunch of bone against bone.

"Run, Ren!"

Even if I'd tried, I couldn't have. My legs wouldn't cooperate. Lightheaded and spitting blood onto the snow, I groped everywhere for the limb Bo had used on me. My fingers found his gun, instead.

Grasping that weapon by the barrel, I wielded it like a hammer and lunged, trying my best to bash in the guy's brains. But I couldn't do that, either. The two of them wallowed in the snow, making careful aim impossible. I couldn't risk hitting Dugan, who might not survive another blow to the head.

Suddenly, I heard the whine of an engine, growing louder by the second. Headlights bobbed crazily between the trees, then abruptly stopped, then started forward again. Dizzy and disoriented, I fell back just as a Clark County Sheriff's Department Jeep burst into the clearing and skidded to a halt. I couldn't make out the faces of the guys who instantly leapt from it.

But I definitely recognized the voice that yelled, "Freeze!"
My dad, the sheriff.

Relief made me weak.

Sagging, I glanced over at Dugan and Bo, and saw one of them get to his feet. Bo. Dugan lay on the ground, still as death. With a cry of horror, I crawled over to him on all fours and pushed his jacket aside. For the second time in too few hours, I put my ear to his heart.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Bursting into tears, I buried my face in his chest. A couple of seconds later, the click of handcuffs drew my attention back to Bo, now standing slumped, with his hands behind his

back. A deputy secured his wrists. I saw that blood streamed from Bo's nose into his mouth.

I was not sorry.

My dad squatted next to Dugan and me, blocking my view. He pried the gun from my fingers, pushed the safety button, and tucked it in his belt.

"Are you okay?" he asked, shining a flashlight directly into my face. He grimaced at what he saw.

"Yes."

"Is Dugan?"

"I think so. His heart's beating, anyway."

Dad confirmed that by feeling of the pulse in my boyfriend's neck. He pulled up Dugan's shirt to look at his blood-soaked bandage, then raised his eyelids and checked his pupils.

"He is, isn't he?" I anxiously asked.

"Yeah, but he's torn open that wound." Dad sighed and looked at me, his forearms resting on his thighs. "You know I should lock you up for being here. What were you two thinking, Ren? I told Dugan to stay out of it. I said I'd find the cabin."

"We didn't think you could do it. His directions were so lousy."

"There are other ways than verbal directions to get where you need to be, okay?" Dad slipped his hands under my arms and stood, setting me on my feet. My knees gave way. He picked me up and turned toward the vehicle. I laced my fingers behind his neck.

"We'll need the first aid kit, Joe," Dad said to a deputy who'd just walked up. "And you'd better call Blue Water Regional and tell them we're on our way. I don't think there's another decent hospital between here and there."

"Already done," said Joe.

I gasped, just then missing Dugan's sister. "Have you seen Payton?"

"She's safe in the Jeep. Apparently she listens when grownups tell her to stay put."

I ignored that. "How'd you get past the Bel Air?" I asked, suddenly remembering I'd left it right in the middle of the narrow track.

Dad started walking to the Jeep. "Ran over some trees. How'd you get out of the hospital without being seen?"

"Ran over some nurses."

"Your mom is frantic. I'm not sure she'll ever forgive you for this."

"Well, I couldn't very well let Dugan drive down here all by himself, could I? He was drugged, Dad."

"Did it ever occur to either of you that you might get yourselves killed?"

"Several times, actually."

"Yet you did it anyway."

"Wouldn't you?"

"No. I'd listen to my dad, the sheriff, who always knows best."

I laughed at that. I mean, I couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" he growled, setting me in the back seat beside a wide-eyed Payton. She immediately grabbed my

hand, but didn't say anything. I gave her an 'it's-all-okay-now' look, then turned back to my Dad.

"You flash deep red, okay? That means you're impulsive, passionate, and persistent."

He rested his arm along the top of the door and just looked at me. "So that whole flashing thing is real?"

"You thought I made it up?"

"Well—"

"It's real."

He gave me a thoughtful look. "You could be a lot of help to me and my deputies."

"Maybe we can work out a deal. Pardon for all my crimes in exchange for soul-shades."

Dad shut the door in my face.

I finally gave Payton my full attention. "Dugan's going to be fine. Dad says he's just torn open his stitches or something."

She started crying again. That's when I hugged her really hard.

"It's over," I said. "It's finally over."

She looked at me, adoration written all over her face.

"Yeah. Thanks to you."

* * * *

Deputy Joe drove the Bel Air back to Blue Water. I rode with him. Dugan lay in the back seat, out like a light the entire trip. He actually didn't stir until they rolled him into the ER, where Mom anxiously waited.

She jumped up and hugged me and Payton at the same time.

"Did that awful man hurt you?" Mom asked her.

"No."

Mom focused on me next, shaking her head. "Great. Now you and Dugan have matching shiners."

With a gasp, I put my hand to my cheek, which throbbed painfully. "Oh no. Mirror. I need a mirror."

"Best not to look," said Mom.

They took Dugan back immediately, of course. He raised his head just as he vanished through those same double doors as before, his gaze frantically searching the small crowd of people now standing there. Payton and I both waved to catch his eye. He sighed and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"You again?" teased the volunteer I recognized from our first time in the waiting room. I had to wonder if she lived there or something.

I didn't have to wait long before I saw a doctor, myself. He checked out the bruises on my face and looked inside my mouth, which felt like I'd gnawed on it. He gave me an ice pack and told me I could go home. I didn't, of course. I nabbed Payton and Mom. We went straight to Dugan's room, which was the same one as before since he'd never really checked out. We waited there until they brought him up, freshly stitched, bandaged and totally out of it.

To Mom's credit, she didn't say a thing about me or Payton going home to sleep. Instead, she rounded up a third chair, and the three of us settled in.

Dugan opened his eyes again at exactly 9:00 a.m. Monday morning. I know this because I was leaning over his bed, looking at him when he did it. He gave me a sleepy smile, then suddenly seemed to remember everything and tried to sit up.

"She's right here," I said, pushing him back down.

Payton jumped up and ran around to the other side of the bed, where she practically threw herself on top of him.

Dugan winced in pain, but didn't complain. "Are you all right?"

Payton raised her head from his chest and nodded.

"Some big brother, I make. I couldn't even stop that asshole from taking you."

"It's all over now," said his sister. "Let's not talk about it ever again, okay?"

Dugan didn't agree to that. "What about Bo? Where is he?"

"County jail at the moment," answered my dad as he walked into the room. "You were damn lucky Ren had Bo's fingerprints."

Dugan looked at me in astonishment. I explained.

"Didn't hurt to have a Fed in my office when I ran the prints, either. According to the FBI, Bo's wanted in Texas and Arkansas."

"Then there's no way he'll get off?"

"No way at all." Dad smiled in satisfaction.

Dugan did, too, and looked at me again, this time a little closer. With a grimace, he brushed his thumb over my bruised cheek.

I shrugged. "His and hers black eyes."

"Yeah, just what I always wanted."

That made my mom laugh. Getting up from her chair, she walked to the foot of his bed.

"I owe someone an apology, and I'd like witnesses, if that's all right."

"But you already did that," said Dugan, looking decidedly ill at ease.

"This one belongs to my daughter." She looked at me. "Ren, I'm sorry I ignored your feelings and tried to make you do what I thought was best. Not that you shouldn't listen to your mother. But if I'd been a little more receptive, you might've told me about the whole soul-shade thing years ago, which would've saved both of us a lot of grief. Plus you might've had a ride to the dance, which would have saved the Camaro."

"No problem," I said, swallowing hard. I rushed into her arms and gave her a big hug that she returned. "I'm sorry Dugan and I sneaked out of the hospital and went after Payton. I didn't mean to scare you. We just didn't know what else to do."

"You took ten years off my life. Thank God it turned out okay." Mom turned back to Dugan. "Three things—first, I want to thank you for saving Ren. She told me Bo almost choked her to death."

Dugan suddenly got some color in his cheeks.

"Second, I want you to know that I'm very proud to have your named linked to Ren's."

"Whoo-hoo!" I exclaimed, digging his class ring out of my nasty sweatshirt and happily sliding it back and forth on the silver chain.

Mom just looked at it and sighed. "And third, I know about your grandmother moving to St. Anthony's. I'm guessing you might have concerns about getting custody of Payton."

Dugan shifted his gaze in my direction, his blue eyes accusing.

"Don't look at me," I told him. "I never said a word."

"That's true," Mom said, adding, "Don't worry another minute about this, okay? Legal age is eighteen in Oklahoma, well, except for drinking, which is twenty-one, of course. You shouldn't have a bit of trouble being named your sister's legal guardian. Especially if Sam and I vouch for you."

* * * *

Dugan got out of the hospital Wednesday morning. Though he technically had no boss, which also meant no job, he went straight to the body shop to finish my car. Payton and I hung around the whole time, helping him lift what needed lifting and handing him whatever tool he asked for ... after he described it to us, of course.

By New Year's Day I had my Camaro back, good as new. Mom and Dad let me throw a pizza party to celebrate. Dugan, Payton, and L.J. all came over, as did Hayley and Brian, who flashed deep green, by the way, just like my best friend. So they were a perfect match. Will came, too, which surprised me. I think he wanted check out the repairs or something.

The Cinderella Swap
by Linda Palmer

Dugan announced that he'd found another job air brushing at a really cool body shop in town. Will immediately arranged to have his Mustang done.

As for me, I'd definitely learned some lessons about myself as well as my parents. I intended to think things through completely before I acted in the future. As for my folks, I learned that they weren't always perfect, but it was okay to trust them anyway.

In the end, my parents graciously forgave me for driving my Camaro when I shouldn't have and then wrecking it. They even gave back my driving privileges, though they swore I'd lose them forever if I got D-hall again.

As if.

I was totally reformed.

Absolutely no more pinching ... well ... unless someone really, really deserved it.

The End