

## Prologue

**THERE WAS A TIME, NOT SO LONG AGO, WHEN YOU** couldn't have a great party in our town without Crazy Chicken. She was the first thing you booked, months in advance. And she wasn't just for kids. Adults loved her, too. Crazy Chicken would bring down the house and have entire crowds in belly laughs, anywhere and everywhere she showed up—every single time.

Crazy Chicken was a cross between the wackiest sports mascot you've ever seen and a gold medal-winning Olympic gymnast. Picture a gigantic chicken with rainbow feathers and neon green feet wearing baggy overalls and a big straw hat doing insanely complicated contortions on a trampoline. When you saw her you had to smile. When you thought about her you couldn't keep the grin off your face. And when you witnessed her doing her routine, you were left speechless.

Crazy Chicken did stunts like nobody's business. She showed up with her own extra-springy trampoline and an iPod loaded with awesome tunes. Her own fancy speakers, too, because any old sound system wouldn't do the trick.

She'd warm up with some squawks and a few short hops. Then before you knew it she'd be jumping wildly, wings flapping. Eventually she'd move on to flips—forward and backward ones and handsprings, too. The trampoline jumps were only the beginning. If your backyard was long enough she'd do five cartwheels in a row and three handsprings followed by a double flip, landing in a split. When people clapped in awe she'd get right back up and do a backward flip and then the moonwalk. Next she'd rush over to the drinks table and glug lemonade straight out of the pitcher. There's nothing funnier than seeing Crazy Chicken drink your lemonade. Oh, except for when she sprayed it out. That was truly hilarious.

Once she flung a cupcake into the air and caught it in her own beak. The cupcake was regular size, not a miniature, but that didn't stop her from gobbling the whole thing down in a series of exaggerated bites. As soon as she finished she clutched her feathered belly, stumbling around as if she was sick. Then she pretended to throw up on the birthday boy, except rainbow confetti came out of her beak instead of goopy cupcake crumbs.

Crazy Chicken was featured not once but twice on the front page of our local paper. “Who Is Crazy Chicken?” was the last headline, followed by fifteen question marks. Someone offered a thousand-dollar reward to anyone who would divulge her real name. No one talked.

Crazy Chicken’s true identity was never revealed, publicly. The mystery was all part of her mystique. It wasn’t merely a matter of wearing some costume, or perfecting a gymnastics routine, or doing crazy antics afterward. It was the whole entire energy-infused package. Crazy Chicken was magical. Crazy Chicken was magnetic. You didn’t just watch the chicken—you fell in love with the chicken. In a platonic, chicken-loving fashion, I mean.

People booked Crazy Chicken through WE ARE PARTY PEOPLE, the top party-planning company in town. Other outfits tried to compete. There was Loretta the Unicorn, who specialized in balloon animals, and Cheesy the Cow, who sang opera. But no one came close to the charm, the magnetism, the intense and extreme popularity of Crazy Chicken. She was untouchable, a legend. People still talk about her even though she disappeared years ago.

I know I’m making Crazy Chicken sound superhuman. You may say to yourself, What’s the big deal? She’s just a crazy chicken. Perhaps you think my memory has been warped by the hazy lens of time, that I’m romanticizing something that no longer exists for humor or

effect, because I can. But I'm telling you, I'm not. For a good long stretch, Crazy Chicken was the life of the party. Every party. I know this for a fact because I am one of the few people who actually know the truth about Crazy Chicken. I know this because Crazy Chicken was my mom.



**“WE NEED YOU TO BE A MERMAID NEXT SATURDAY,”** MY dad says, all matter-of-fact, like this is no big deal, as if he’s simply asking me to make my bed, which I’m not going to do, either.

We are at breakfast and I’m halfway through with my Cheerios. It started out as a good morning because we had all the right fruit in the fridge. I like it when my real-life bowl matches the bowl on the cereal box: Cheerios, milk, a few strawberries, and a handful of blueberries. I replicate it as best as I can, even counting the number of berries in the bowl. There are too many actual Cheerios to calculate, but my guesstimate looks pretty close today.

Of course, my bowl will never match the picture exactly. That’s impossible, because the food on the box probably isn’t real. The Cheerios pictured could be floating in

yogurt, or condensed milk, or possibly something that's not even edible. The fruit might be plastic. If the liquid is actually milk, it could be sprayed with something toxic to give it a shine. Or maybe all of the food in the bowl is edible but more delicious-looking on the box due to the magic of Photoshop. I know this is true but I still like to make an effort. As long as I get close enough I'm happy.

Except now I can't finish. My appetite is ruined and I feel twisty and sick to my stomach.

"There's no way. You promised," I tell him.

My dad puts down his coffee. "Pixie, please. I told you I'd try not to make you work unless it's absolutely necessary and that's exactly where we are right now."

I think about this for a few moments, desperate to figure something else out. Meanwhile, my throat feels tight and it's hard to talk. "Saturday is almost two weeks away. Mom might be back by then."

My dad sighs. "Possibly, but it's not looking good, Pix. I wanted to be fair and give you enough time to get ready. Things are more complicated than we—"

"Why can't you do it?" Even as I ask the question I realize how ridiculous it is. My dad would never pass for a mermaid. Not even if he shaved his whole entire body. He's over six feet tall and has big biceps, especially for an old guy. He'd be laughed out of the swimming pool.

He doesn't even dignify my question with an answer. I don't blame him but I'm still not going to give in.

We lock eyes. My dad is stubborn but so am I.

"I'm going to call Mom," I say, scraping back my chair and standing up.

"Do not bother your mother with this. She's dealing with too much."

From the harsh and prickly tone of his voice, I know he's serious, so I sit back down. That's when I notice my Cheerios are getting soggy. Not that it matters, since I've lost my appetite anyway.

"Pixie, listen to me. I wish there was another way, but we're really in a bind. I can't cancel at the last minute and there's no time to train anyone new. Plus, I know you can do this."

I shake my head. "It's not about that. I don't need a pep talk. I'm busy next Saturday."

"With what?" he asks.

I cross my arms over my chest and huff. "Sophie invited Lola and me over for a Ping-Pong tournament." This is not technically true but it could be. Sophie wants to play Ping-Pong pretty much every weekend.

Dad gives me a small smile. "Well, that's perfect. The party is only two hours long—from ten to twelve. You can meet them afterward. I'll even drive you to her house. That leaves you plenty of time for Ping-Pong.



And we can pick up a pizza for everyone on the way there—my treat.”

I want to scream. I want to kick something. I want to run my fingers through my hair and then pull until my scalp tingles, except I don’t do any of that. Instead I yell, “Fine, I’ll be the stupid mermaid but I’m not going to wear the wig and I am not doing the accent.”

Our mermaid is named Luella and she sounds British. She’s punk rock by design, with pink-and-blue-streaked hair and a rhinestone-studded tail. We’ve got to make sure our costume looks nothing like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, so Disney doesn’t sue.

“Pixie.” My dad calls for me but it’s too late. I’ve already stormed out of the kitchen.

Here’s a secret: I said I’d be the mermaid but I don’t mean it. There is no way I will ever be the mermaid, but I don’t have time to argue at the moment. It’s a school day and I can’t be late, so I head to my bedroom and get dressed.

I pick out my favorite faded jeans and a dark green sweatshirt with gray stripes on the arms. My sneakers are navy blue and scuffed because that’s how I like them. I brush my hair into a low, loose ponytail and stare at myself in the mirror. My hair is brown and my eyes are light green. I have freckles across the bridge of my nose that look like they’ve faded in the sun. I am average



height and average weight. I look a little tomboyish, like the kind of twelve-year-old who could throw a decent spiral and corner-kick a soccer ball straight past a goalie's outstretched arms. Except it's all an illusion. I'm way too clumsy for sports. Also, I can't stand the pressure.

Grabbing my old maroon backpack, I sling it over one shoulder and head downstairs.

I check myself out in the mirror by the front door one last time, just to be safe. No food in my teeth or on my face. Nothing tucked where it shouldn't be tucked. No hair out of place. No flashy jewelry. No jewelry, period. I am dressed to blend in with the crowd, not to stand out or be noticed. That's the best way to survive at Beachwood Middle School, at least for girls like me.

I am the opposite of a mermaid, and that's exactly the way I like it.