

1

“Dad, seriously. I can go by myself. I’m not a baby.” I grasped the door handle, ready to step out of the car. Dad placed a hand on my other arm, probably trying to slow me down.

“Honey, I know you’re not a baby. I just thought you could use some help finding the band room.” He sighed. I pushed my head against the headrest and fiddled with the treble clef charm on my necklace.

“I wouldn’t have to *find* the band room if I made it to Boston Youth Orchestra auditions last spring,” I pointed out. I picked at the button to release the automatic lock. “I know *exactly* where they rehearse.”

He steeped his hands on top of the steering wheel and regarded me over his glasses, eyes hard. “Elsie, don’t be rude. We’ve spent all summer discussing this.” He gripped the wheel, knuckles white. “The audition schedule hadn’t been published when I booked the trip to Austria, and

when I called the president to ask for an individual evaluation for you he said they couldn't make exceptions. I can't apologize to you anymore. That's the way it is."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I muttered. Not looking at him, I clicked the lock button and it popped up and down. Unlock/lock. Unlock/lock. Missing the youth orchestra auditions left the high school marching band as the only musical ensemble that would fit into my fall schedule, so I had to join. "Besides, it's Shining Birches that *really* matters, not the BYO."

Shining Birches is *the* most prestigious summer music camp in the Northeast. I'd audition for it right after Thanksgiving, and one of the application requirements is "ensemble diversity," which meant I had to play in a structured group this fall. Which is why I had to join the marching band.

Getting in to Shining Birches was part of following in my dad's and grandfather's footsteps—both of them went there in high school too. And both of them ended up as principal French horn players for the Boston Symphony Orchestra—exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Why mess with success? All I had to do was take their path.

"Are you sure you want to pursue auditioning this year? Starting high school is going to be a big enough challenge for you, I think."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped. I squeezed the armrest.

"It's just a lot of changes, Elsie. You have a rigorous academic schedule. You're keeping up with your Tuesday/Saturday private lessons. You're joining a new ensemble that also practices twice a week. You're younger than the other kids in your class. Shining Birches is typically for older high school students." He ticked the reasons off on his fingers, but his voice sounded weary, like he was already tired of our fight.

"It wasn't *my* choice to skip kindergarten," I reminded him. He and my mom thought their only child would be bored since I already knew shapes and colors and numbers, but had been worried about me being the youngest in my class ever since. And what was such a big deal about having a busy schedule? I'd been plenty busy in junior high, playing in All-State orchestra, taking lessons, and doing schoolwork. "I can handle this. I *want* to audition for Shining Birches this year. You're the one who always says that musicians need to take every opportunity they can to push themselves and grow, right?" There was nothing he could say to that. He just shook his head.

"I'm going to be late for practice if I don't get going," I added.

"Late for practice"—those were the magic words. He sighed again, and then leaned over and pecked me on the cheek. "Okay. Fine. You win. Go."

Unlock.

I climbed out and grabbed my French horn case, feeling

both heated and victorious. Dad could say all he wanted, but he knew how important Shining Birches was to me—and how important it could be to my career. The Boston Symphony resided there every summer, and when I got in, I'd be exposed to world-class conductors and players. I'd be among the best. *One* of the best. As a freshman!

The car pulled away, avoiding the yellow parking lot speed bumps, and I turned toward the building.

That's when a whiff of panic blew through me.

It was two weeks before school officially began, and I'd only been to Henry Herbert High School during eighth-grade orientation last spring. And the building was a *lot* bigger than Howard Hoffer Junior High. I had *no idea* where I was going.

But once the snares started playing, I figured it out.

And once I entered the band room, I got whisked through check-in stations like I'd joined the army. I was measured for a uniform, handed checklists, music, a hatbox, and a boxy case that contained something called a mellophone, which I was supposed to play *instead* of my horn. What?!

"You can't march with a French horn," said the blond girl sitting at the instrument table. "Well, you *can*, but barely anyone outside of the U.S. Navy band does. It doesn't make sense."

"No, not playing *my instrument* doesn't make sense," I snapped. What was I supposed to do, start over? How

would *that* look on my Shining Birches application?

"Chill!" she said, holding up her hands in surrender. "I just give stuff out. Talk to your section leader or the band director about it."

"Fine." I snatched the oversized boxy case and moved on, fuming.

By the time I reached the fifth station, lockers, I was loaded with marching paraphernalia and ready to put everything down and get answers.

"Name?" The guy stretched behind the table wore a blue T-shirt and had a pair of sunglasses perched on top of his head. He had magnetic blue eyes. I gave him my name and instrument—"French horn, but everyone here thinks I'll be playing mellophone"—and he gave me a locker number and combo, plus a smile that'd melt chocolate.

Even annoyed, I couldn't take my eyes off the dimple in his chin.

I thanked him, finally pulling my gaze from his dimple and trying to concentrate on hating the mellophone, then stuck the piece of paper in my pocket and began gathering everything. Again.

As I turned away, the hatbox caught on the side of my shorts. The plastic hasp popped, and with an awkward jerk the bottom of the box swung open. A shiny black hat and plastic-wrapped fuzzy thing fell onto the floor.

"Whoop-whoop!" called the dimple-chinned guy at full volume. "Chicken down! I repeat, chicken down!"

The room went silent.

Everyone froze, eyes on me.

This guy—and his dimple—was suddenly not nearly as cute as he had been.

A hot flush spread across my cheeks, and I bent down to repack the box. Then came the clapping, slow at first, then faster: *Clap. Clap. Clap-clap-clap!*

Awesome. I was the spectacle of check-in. A fresh flame of anger at Dad and his poorly timed trip to Austria (so he could play with the Vienna Symphony, of course) flared in me.

“Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!” Dimple Chin chanted, playing the role of maestro. After a second, everyone else in the room joined him.

“Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!”

I stood there like an idiot, stuff scattered at my feet. Was I supposed to do something?

“Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!” They chanted louder and faster.

“What the . . . ?” Angry and embarrassed, I kept my eyes on the floor and hoped the noise would miraculously stop, ‘cause, you know, telepathy totally works.

“You have to cluck like a chicken.” The guy whispering in my ear did not belong in marching band—or any orchestral band. A snapshot: streaky green hair. Brown eyes. Lots of metal bits stuck in his face. Skinny. Orange T-shirt and faded basketball shorts. “Then they’ll stop.”

I had to what?

“*Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!*”

I didn’t move, I didn’t cluck. The anger evaporated. Fear scuttled through me like a spider. Lime Head nudged me.

“Do it!”

“No way!” I snapped. *This* was high school? This was marching band?! This was horrifying and non-musical.

“C’mon, it’s okay. I’ll do it with you,” he said. I wanted to throw up. “Seriously, they won’t stop unless someone clucks.”

I nodded, fear in the pit of my stomach, and he whispered, “On three. One . . . two . . . three!”

“Buck-buck.” Mine came out as more of a croak than a cluck, but next to me Mr. Green Hair was going for the chicken imitation hall of fame.

“Buck-buck-buck-ba-gawk!” He tucked his hands up by his armpits, flapped his “wings,” and bobbed his head.

“Aww, we’ve got a chicken chicken!” someone called, pointing at me. I scowled, but inside, I wanted to fall through the floor.

Then, as a group, the returning kids clapped a rhythm and sang as I started collecting my stuff:

“Someone dropped a chicken.

Someone ditched the bird.

Screaming Hellcats to the rescue!

The best marching band ya’ve heard!”

Clap-clap-clapclap. Clap-clap-clapclap. Clap-clap-clapclap.

“Gooooo, Hellcats!” There was some whooping, and

then they finally went back to what they were doing before my social disaster unfolded.

“Punk,” the facially decorated green-haired chicken imitator said.

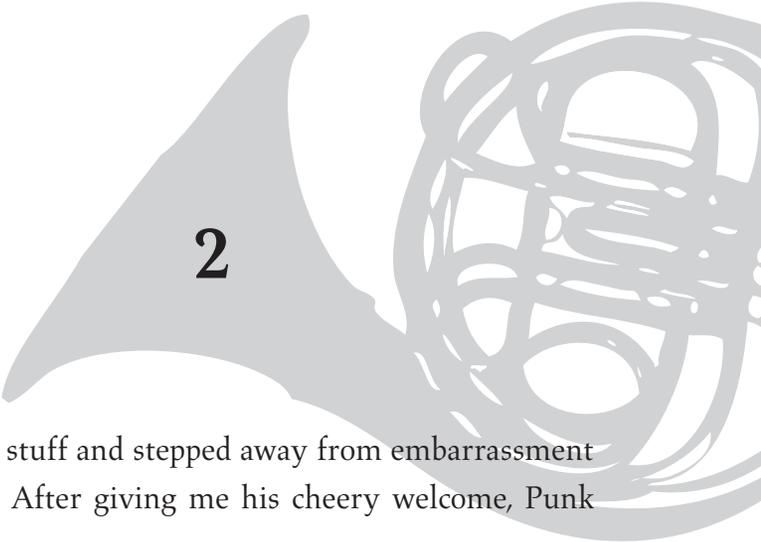
“Huh?” My head buzzed. Was there something wrong with this kid?

“Punk. That’s my name,” he responded, as if my cheeks weren’t still on fire and my hands weren’t sweating. As if I’d asked.

Of course. How original.

“Welcome to the Screaming Hellcats Marching Band,” he said.

I wished my father had never heard of Austria.



2

I hoisted my stuff and stepped away from embarrassment ground zero. After giving me his cheery welcome, Punk had drifted away.

Good riddance.

I surveyed the room and caught a glimpse of an alcove behind a set of lockers that jugged from the wall. I beelined for it, hoping to hide there until everyone forgot what I looked like or until practice began.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only one intent on hiding out. I turned the corner and stopped short, nearly tripping over a clarinet case. Three kids sat in a clump at my feet. They were surrounded by piles of stuff like my own.

Other freshmen.

“Sorry,” the one with the clarinet said. He slid his case off to the side, making room for me. “Want to sit?”

Out of options, I just plopped down with them—the clarinet kid, a trumpet player, and . . . oh. Sarah Tracer,