**BAD APPLES**

SCENE ONE

Big News!

Showtime!

Saving my announcement until lunchtime wasn’t easy, but this wasn’t just any news. This was big. Bigger than the time I got the lead in the sixth grade play. Much bigger than the bor-ring seventh grade chorus and band performance—even though I did have a solo. By the time they’d posted the picks for this year’s musical leads, nobody had been surprised to see my name, Claire Campbell, at the top of the list.

But today’s news was so big it needed an audience, which was why I’d waited until everyone was together in the cafeteria. Each of my friends knew they were my *very best* friend. I couldn’t let one hear it before another. It wouldn’t be fair.

As I mentally rehearsed the coming scene, I was bumped from behind.

“Exsqueeze us. Coming through.” The Cooper twins cut the line. One of them, either Brendon or Bryan, appeared ready to have a baby, based on the suspicious bulge under his shirt.

Mr. Willard, my science teacher back in sixth grade, limped closer to investigate. The pregnant twin turned his back to hide his baby bump.

The teacher had come back from summer vacation using a cane and looking twisted even when he stood straight. Some kids said he’d been in a car accident; others said he was dying from some strange hip disease. I’d come up with my own story idea, deciding he’d been shot while on assignment at a super-secret lab where he was working on a new pill to cure middle school stupidity.

The Cooper twins could be his first test subjects.

A friend of theirs dive-bombed the line, coming boldly close to the teacher—even one who used a cane. Mr. Willard yelled at him to walk. The boy took a few slowed steps, then took off again as the science teacher hobbled after him. The twins punched each other in victory.

“That was a close one,” one laughed.

“Yeah, good thing Gerald distracted him. Today is going to be awesome.” The lumpy belly shifted dangerously to the side as they cut the rest of the line.

They had no idea exactly how awesome. And not having to deal with their antics next year was just a bonus.

After choosing an ice-cream sandwich to calm the near-nausea that hit before any performance, I got to my seat. My best friend Marianne looked up at me and gasped. “Oh, my God. Look at your outfit! You look so cute.”

Was there any doubt why she was my best friend? Only a true pal would appreciate how much time I’d spent deciding on the perfect thing to wear. It had taken three wardrobe changes and a hair do-over to come up with this look. I thought the miniskirt and tights with the spangley top said Kids Choice Awards meets charity event. “Thanks. I wanted to look especially nice today.”

Unfortunately, she didn’t pick up on the cue. “You do.” She ran her hand over beige-blond hair that tended to frizz. “I could never wear a beret.”

I adjusted my knit cap as I sat next to her. “Of course you could. It’s all about the attitude.”

She beamed. Marianne wasn’t as bad-looking as she seemed to believe. She had a pretty face and lashes I’d kill for, but a tendency to focus on the wrong things. Like the sweater she was wearing. It stretched too tightly across her middle and drew attention to her muffin top. All she needed was some skills with a flat iron and some fashion advice. I had piles of *Teen Vogue* that could help. I decided to help her with some of her choices before I left.

“Speaking of leaving … ” Oops. I realized that response had been to dialogue in my head. In the acting biz that’s called “playing the result” but Marianne didn’t understand theater terms so she just frowned.

Maya Washington slammed her tray on the table before I could explain. “You are not going to believe what happened to me in Spanish today.”

Ashley Petrillo sat down beside her. “What did *Señor* Sweeney do now?”

They all laughed because the Spanish teacher wouldn’t allow himself to be called plain old Mister. Even though he was born in Rhode Island, he spent most of his class speaking in Spanish. The kids in his class complained they didn’t know what he was saying half the time. I didn’t take a language, but I’d never made Maya feel bad for being smarter than me. I just used big words around her sometimes and acted as though we were on the same level. My portrayal was flawless.

“He scheduled a test for tomorrow!” Maya groaned, making the universal sign for being strangled.

This was her big news? Jeesh, and they called *me* dramatic! Of course, I didn’t say that out loud. “What’s so strange about that?” Testing was kind of in a teacher’s job description.

“Are you kidding me? On the same day our big English project is due? He didn’t even give us any warning. I swear they do this on purpose just so we’ll flunk!”

I could have mentioned that Ms. Duggan had given us weeks to work on our Percy Jackson book project, but I didn’t. See? I know how to be supportive.

They spent a few minutes talking about the unfairness of teachers and middle school in general. I waited for a break in the conversation so that I could give them my big news, but it wasn’t easy.

Ashley looked around the cafeteria as she munched her chicken nuggets. “Has anyone seen Brody? I heard Heather dumped him, and he’s not at lunch.”

Okay. That was my cue. Normally I acted as if I matched her boy craziness, but I couldn’t let the conversation get started on stupid Brody Hayes or I’d never get the chance. Ashley was on permanent Brody watch. She knew his classes, his birthday, his address, his dog’s name, and his favorite foods.

Brody didn’t care about her—or anything else as far as I could tell.

I put down my melting ice-cream sandwich. “Actually, I have an announcement to make.”

All eyes at the table turned to me. “I got some exciting news yesterday.” I took a deep breath and let the anticipation build. “I got accepted into Sage Academy.”

I waited for the cheers and maybe some applause. What I got was three blank stares.

Maya’s face scrunched the same way it did when she tried to say Spanish verbs. “Sage Academy? The acting school?”

“It’s a performing arts school, actually. They have music, theater, dance. I got into their drama program, obviously.” Although maybe not *that* obviously because I could also sing and play the piano, and I’d taken years of step and jazz. “Can you believe it? I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure.”

“Wow,” Ashley said finally, probably wishing she hadn’t gone all drama girl about her test.

“It’s no big deal. Well, I mean it *is*. I had to have good grades, and recommendations from acting coaches, and I had to audition. On stage. In front of the selection committee. It didn’t hurt that I’ve been acting since I was eight.” In fact, I’d been putting on shows in my living room long before that.

“And, of course, my commercials.” My other credits included summer theater and local shows, but the ads for a local clothing chain had run on cable for months. I nailed the “Girl on Swing” role. And I got to keep the clothes.

Marianne just stared, her lashes looking spikier than ever. “You’re leaving?”

“Not really. I mean, yeah, I won’t be going to Regional, but I’m not moving away or anything.” A few years ago, our town and a bunch of towns around us didn’t have enough kids, so they built a new central high school and merged them into Claymore Duncan Regional High School, a k a Regional. Sage Academy is a magnet school, which means it’s part of the Regional area, so they can take the best kids—kids who *want* to be there. Unlike the Cooper twins, or anyone else who thinks school is for goofing around in.

Speaking of which … The noise from the Coopers’ table was even more obnoxious than normal. The twins were in the middle of their favorite lunchtime activities: playing with food and being disgusting. Brandon had a pasta curl sticking out of his nose, creating a pretty convincing spaghetti snot. Bryan poured milk on his tray and blew bubbles in the puddle with his straw.

I looked around for Mr. Willard, but didn’t see him.

But actors had to deal with bigger distractions than middle school boys, so I kept on script. “The school is amazing,” I went on. “It’s got a full theater with a real lighting and audio system, not like our tiny auditorium with ripped seats and a curtain that won’t open all the way. Marianne, remember when we went to Sage to see *Annie*?”

Marianne nodded.

“It was like we were on Broadway.” I paused for a moment, caught up in visions of starring on opening night. I’d wanted to be that curly redhead so bad I was twitching in my seat.

I blinked. Back to reality. “Did you know Suzie Millhouse went there? Can you believe it?”

“Who?” Maya asked.

“You know, the mother on the Disney show with the witch?”

“Oh … yeah.”

“Her.”

“Wow,” Ashley repeated. She didn’t sound as impressed as she should have been, but that’s because she doesn’t understand how hard it is to break into Hollywood.

“Lots of famous people went there,” I continued. I didn’t have to point out that I would be one of them. These were my friends.

Marianne didn’t look excited for me. She looked worried. “But what about high school? We were going to be in homeroom together … Drama Club … prom.”

We’d been friends since the first day of middle school, when the alphabet system had put Campbell in front of Cannon. “I’m going to Sage Academy, not Mars,” I told her.

“But you’ll have new friends.” Her voice quivered. “Talented, pretty friends.”

Oh. I got it now. While I got to live my dream, they were going to be stuck here with a school full of Cooper twins. I’d be depressed about that too.

Whatever the brothers were doing behind me, they must have been putting on quite a show. The kids at their table were howling. The distraction was making it hard for my friends to hear my news.

I ignored them. “Do you really think I’m going to ditch you guys for a bunch of superstars with big egos? No way! When I’m famous, I’m going to invite all of you to the premieres. You’ll get to walk the red carpet right behind me. And meet other famous people. Like Niall Whitmore from One Way.”

“You’re going to meet Niall?” Ashley had a serious crush on the leader of the boy band: he was even higher up on the scale of obsession than Brody.

“I’m not making any promises. But probably.”

I could see her planning their first date.

“I know it’s not what we’d expected to happen”—actually, it was exactly what I’d expected; that wasn’t the point—“but this is important to me. It’s what I’ve wanted all my life.”

I stood up. Every eye at the table was on me. I heard music, and realized it was coming from the twins’ table behind us. The tune swelled like it was coming from an orchestra pit below my stage—even if it was a thumping beat and screaming lyrics.

My voice rose as if reaching the back rows. “The four of us will always be friends, but I have to do this! It is my destiny.”

I think I saw a tear in Maya’s eye before the table behind us erupted. The twins stood up and started an awkward flash mob, baby-bump sized speakers sitting on the table. Their friends followed. Cell phones, not allowed at the middle school, were whipped out to record the event.

I gasped. They couldn’t be doing this. Not now. I had to tell the Drama Club about my news. They’d freak if they heard it from someone else.

I heard a pop and a hiss. The Coopers and troupe didn’t react, their skinny bodies spazzing in what was supposed to be a dance.

I’m not clear about what happened next. The skies opened. Even though we were inside. I was getting drenched. Everyone was screaming. And running for cover. If there was supposed to be an orderly exit, the system failed. Nobody seemed to be in charge.

I looked up and saw the sprinklers streaming down on the entire cafeteria. Even the Coopers finally noticed. They went crazy with joy and abandon.

My friends dashed for the exits, but I just stood there, getting soaked. My composure melted away. I didn’t know how to act.

This was not the way I’d rehearsed it.