

FAKE

DONNA COONER

POINT

To Sarah Davies.

Your brilliance and faith changed my life.

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CHAPTER ONE

If a fairy godmother, with raspberry-colored wings and giant chandelier earrings, suddenly materialized out of the beaker on the front table of Mr. Vance's chemistry class and granted me three wishes, I would not use any of them to be thinner.

That would shock most people.

I'm not skinny. Not even close. I don't weigh a few pounds more than every girl in this room. I am fifty or more pounds heavier than every girl in this room. It isn't easy being sixteen and fat. Even with all my monochromatic black clothes and minimalist makeup, it's not like I can hide my size. Just spend one day walking with me through the halls of my high school and listen to the moos and oinks behind my back. Maybe I don't think I'm ugly, but others do. I can't live in this world and not see how people respond to me.

My pencil scratches furiously across the paper. A plus-size fairy emerges out of the binding of my notebook. She has a phone in her hand to text me, because that's how this fairy godmother rolls. The bottom of her body curls like smoke around the silver faucets on the sink and then disappears into a row of test tubes. I change pencils, pick out a magenta one, and quickly color a tutu around her waist.

“Hey, Maisie.” My best friend and lab partner, Owen Carpenter, sits down on the stool beside me. Owen is a tall, lanky boy with curly red hair and bright green eyes. Today, he wears an orange T-shirt that clashes with his hair. Owen is kind and thoughtful and more than a little . . . weird. In eighth grade, he ate Froot Loops for lunch. Not once. Not twice.

Every. Single. Day.

Middle school kids notice things like that and it doesn’t go over that well.

I look up from my drawing. “Hey.”

Owen leans over and says, “I heard Oxygen and Magnesium were going out.”

Unfortunately, this kind of greeting is not unusual for Owen.

“And?” I ask, even though I don’t really want to know the answer.

Owen grins. “O. Mg.”

I stare at him. He did not just make that lame joke.

But he did. “Get it?” he asks.

The history of humor is Owen’s latest preoccupation and he is currently obsessed with jokes. Really, really bad jokes. People might think it is his attempt at blending in, but I know Owen has no desire to “blend in.” It’s his superpower. The truth is, he is accumulating jokes like the butterflies pinned inside the glass case in the biology hall’s insect collection. He told me yesterday, he now has 241. Thank God I haven’t heard them all.

I roll my eyes and go back to my drawing. After a moment of contemplation, I add a green cat tattoo to the fairy's right shoulder. I box out a new frame, draw a close-up of the fairy's phone, and then print her text message out in block letters.

FAIRY: HOW ABOUT PRETTY?

Nope.

I'm concentrating so hard, I almost don't notice that the fashionably late parade has started. The popular crowd at Fort Collins High School prances into class, wearing their gorgeous skins and taking them for granted.

Dezirea Davis leads the pack, carrying her green Nalgene bottle. "OMG," she says to Leah Albertson, who's walking right beside her. "That new haircut is to die for!"

Leah looks dazzled by the compliment. She pats her new purple bob with satisfaction. "Thanks. You were so right about that new stylist downtown."

Dezirea beams. "And didn't I say that Kat Von D concealer was the best?" she asks acne-prone Casey Austin, who is trailing behind Leah.

Casey nods. "Absolutely. And it looks *amazing* on you."

Boom. Just like that, Dezirea gets the reinforcement she craves—an adoring audience.

Other than a brief eye lock, Dezirea brushes past my desk without acknowledging me. Not a surprise.

I watch as she takes her seat beside her bestie, Camila Ramos. In my high school, pretty and thin usually go

together, but there are some exceptions. Camila Ramos is one of them. She's curvy, not fat curvy like me, but voluptuous curvy like Jessica Rabbit. She's stunning. And she knows it. Owen once told me that Camila is just lucky enough to have good genes and to have landed in the right society to find her particular blend of genetic soup labeled *beautiful*.

"Let's get started, people," Mr. Vance says from the front of the class. He's a big man with a pointy white beard and round glasses. He wears vests a lot and looks like a cartoon version of a snowman. He walks to his desk and calls roll, like he does every single day, even though he knows where everyone sits and could just check to see if there are any empty seats. Evidently being good at chemistry does not help you be more time efficient.

I tap my pencil tip against my desk, thinking about the drawing in front of me. I barely remember to raise my hand when Mr. Vance calls my name.

I hear Camila let out a cackling laugh at something Dezirea has said. "I can't *wait* for your party," Camila whispers.

Everyone knows that Dezirea is having a party at her house tonight. It's all anyone's been posting about on ChitChat for days. Everyone *also* knows only a select few will actually get to attend. Owen won't be among the included. Neither will I. Instead, I'll probably join the masses who follow along on our screens to see exactly

what we're missing. Like the way I pick at my nail polish when it starts to chip, it's a horrible habit I can't shake. I peel off another sliver of Rover Red from my thumbnail, and return to my drawing.

FAIRY: THEN WHAT DO YOU WANT???

I look up to think about the question.

Jesse Santos glances in my direction. If popular had a poster boy it would be Jesse Santos, Fort Collins High School sweetheart. He has messy black hair, sleepy brown eyes, and tons of muscles finely honed by the football team's weight room. Jesse Santos is everything I hate about the in crowd—smug, entitled, and conceited. He walks the halls as if the crowds should magically part to let him through. The worst part is they actually do.

It makes me want to puke.

I look away first, dropping my eyes back down to the paper in front of me. I keep drawing.

FAIRY: WAIT. I KNOW. YOU WISH TO BE POPULAR!

I smirk. Sure, being popular, pretty, and skinny is the magic trifecta of high school. But evidently my fairy godmother doesn't know me at all. Or she isn't very bright. I draw a lightbulb over her head, but the bulb is dark.

Popular? Are you serious? Why would I ever want to be one of them?

Mr. Vance finally calls out Joretta Zajicek's name, waits for her response, and then stands up decisively and walks to the whiteboard, clearing his throat. The low chatter dies down.

“As you are all aware,” Mr. Vance says, “Sarah Bodington transferred into a different chemistry class last Friday.”

Sarah is a tiny blonde girl who wears a lot of purple eye shadow and sort of looks like a Pomeranian. Sometimes, she even wears a tiny pink bow in her hair, like she’s just gone to the groomer. I think of her as a fringer. She’s not quite *in* the popular group, but not completely *out* either. She was Jesse’s lab partner in chemistry, and spent most of the time in class staring up at him with a constant needy look that reminded me of my sister’s cat, Katy Purry, when her bowl is empty.

Like she had a chance.

Jesse always has some girl hanging on his arm, even though no one ever stays there long. As far as I know, Jesse’s never had a steady girlfriend, although many have tried to score that hallowed spot. He’s had dates, of course. Lots of them. Just look at his ChitChat page. It’s enough to convince anyone he is irresistible. There are probably hundreds of girls in his pics—always smiling up at him with pure adoration. And he is always looking right at the camera with a halfway smirky grin I’m sure he practices in the mirror every morning.

Mr. Vance is droning on. “I realize it’s an inconvenience so early in the semester,” he’s saying, “and this definitely isn’t the best time for a lab partner switcheroo.”

He laughs, but not surprisingly, no one else even cracks a smile.

Owen leans over and whispers to me, "Humor is often used to make light of a stressful situation."

"Except that wasn't funny," I whisper back. In the corner of my notebook page, I quickly sketch two beakers with faces, liquids bubbling out the top. One says to the other in a speech balloon, "*You're overreacting.*" I poke Owen and point silently to the picture. He nods solemnly and I know it's going into his mental joke file.

I'm hilarious.

"But unfortunately," Mr. Vance continues, "because of Ms. Bodington's departure, poor Mr. Santos has been left all alone."

"Awwwww . . ." There is collective sympathy for Jesse's solitude.

Jesse swivels around on his lab stool to face the class and makes a big fake pouty face. He even wipes away some mock tears. Laughter from his many fans rewards him.

"San . . . tos. San . . . tos." Someone behind me is chanting. Like getting a new lab partner is some kind of Olympic medal.

I realize no one even seems to care that Sarah transferred to a different class. I'd be in the same boat. If I suddenly disappeared, no one would notice. Out of sight. Out of mind.

Some other voices join in the "San-tos" chant, but Mr. Vance finally shuts them down with a wave of his hands.

"That's enough," he says firmly. His eyes scan the room.

Dezirea raises her hand with a smug smile, volunteering. Beside her, Camila looks crushed, and even I am a bit

shocked that Dezirea would abandon her best friend. *Is there trouble brewing in Popularity Paradise?*

A few other students put up tentative hands but, once they notice Dezirea is in the running, quickly lower them. When Dezirea's hand goes up in class, people pay attention. The fact that her participation is so rare makes it even more special.

Mr. Vance keeps scanning the room as though he doesn't even see Dezirea's hand. She frowns and moves it ever so slightly. Not exactly a wave, but definitely intended to get the attention she deserves in the coolest way possible.

"Maisie Fernandez?" Mr. Vance's eyebrows raise in question.

I freeze, pencil in hand. This isn't supposed to happen. I work too hard to stay out of the spotlight.

Dezirea whips her head around to stare at me, shocked he didn't call on her instead. Camila leans over and whispers something in Dezirea's ear.

"Ms. Fernandez?" Mr. Vance repeats.

"Yes?" I ask. *Please not me. Please not me.*

"Will you join Mr. Santos at his lab table?" Mr. Vance looks at me expectantly. Someone boos from the back of the room. Probably one of Dezirea's friends.

It's a question, right? Please let it be a question.

I shake my head and plant a hollow smile on my face as an apology. "I didn't volunteer."

Mr. Vance doesn't give up. "I realize that, Ms. Fernandez, but I think you'd be the perfect match for Mr. Santos."

An undercurrent of giggles immediately spreads across the room.

I'm mortified. The space around me seems to tighten and grow closer.

Mr. Vance nods at Owen. "Besides, Mr. Carpenter is quite capable of completing the lab assignments by himself. Unlike Mr. Santos."

Jesse mimes a knife stabbing him in the heart. More laughter.

Mr. Vance isn't asking me to move. He's telling me.

My throat constricts and something sour drops into the pit of my stomach. But there is no choice. I close my notebook and tuck it under my arm. Then I push the lab stool away from the table and the sound it makes on the linoleum floor mimics the screeching inside my brain.

My breath is ragged and quick like I've been running. Everyone watches, bodies freezing in place and all conversation stopping. I slide off the wooden stool. My face is perfectly still. Blank. I'm sure all of his friends will be commiserating with Jesse after class about this, but none of them will get the satisfaction of seeing me react.

I pick up my book bag, hoisting it to my shoulder. It feels like I'm throwing myself on the train tracks that run through the middle of Old Town. The train's horn

is blowing louder and louder as it rumbles closer to my destruction.

The empty stool next to Jesse is under a window on the far left wall of the room, a million miles away. I pass a huge wall poster of the periodic table and almost knock a pile of books off the case under the windows with one hip.

“Timber,” someone yells as the bookcase wobbles wildly.

Jesse stares straight ahead, no expression on his face, but I’m sure he’s screaming in his head, *No. No. No.*

I haul myself up on the free stool and drop my backpack on the floor with a thud. I was perfectly happy in my own little world at the back of the room. Now the weight of everyone’s eyes adds another unwanted ton to my body. I swallow hard, glancing over at Jesse. Remembering.

One day, back in middle school, Jesse passed by our table in the cafeteria, where Owen was eating cereal. Jesse had sneered.

“Hey, Froot Loop,” he called.

Owen laughed. He didn’t even get that Jesse was making fun of him. But I did. And in a flash, I stood up and Jesse was wearing that bowl of cereal. I remember exactly how that chiseled jaw looked when he wiped the milk off his face and glared at me. A crowd of awed bystanders gathered to eagerly watch what happened next.

“It was a joke,” Jesse told me.

I stood facing him, my chin stuck out defiantly. Somehow, I felt lighter. At that moment, I wasn’t afraid of

Jesse Santos or anyone else. There was a ripple of nervous laughter from the crowd, but I didn't back down.

"Oops," I said defiantly. "Sorry."

"Whoa," said a boy from somewhere near the back of the crowd, and I felt the stakes rise. I didn't say anything. I just waited.

Jesse blinked but didn't flinch. I held my breath, the blood pounding in my ears. Then, surprisingly, he just turned and stalked off, leaving behind sighs of disappointment from the bloodthirsty crowd.

I might have impressed a few people, but I couldn't stop the nickname train from rolling through the student body. Name-calling sticks and spreads in strange ways. Especially in the formative middle school years. So, after that day, Owen and I were forever linked. *The Froot Loops*. Sort of like a really uncool band name. Owen says it's like a superhero's origin story and owns it like a badge of honor.

Me? Not so much.

And that was just the beginning, too.

I shake my head, back in the present day. High school. Chemistry class. Staring down Jesse Santos. Again.

He nods at me. So smug. So sure of himself. "Hey, Froot Loop," he says.

Hey, Idiot.

Mr. Vance is busy setting out equipment. I see Jesse take out his phone and text something under his desk. I give a quick side-eye and catch a glimpse of a cow, pig, and elephant emoji on the screen. *Whoosh*. Sent.

Across the aisle, Dezirea raises a perfectly waxed eyebrow and looks down at her phone. Her fingers move rapidly to send a response. Jesse sneaks a peek at his phone, then laughs.

Seriously. Can't he be a little more imaginative? Pigs? Cows? Elephants? Don't you think fat girls have seen all that before?

I open my notebook. My winged creation waits impatiently for me to complete the story, her imaginary texts unanswered.

FAIRY: YOU GOT THREE WISHES, GIRL. PICK SOMETHING!

FAIRY: SKINNY?

FAIRY: PRETTY?

FAIRY: POPULAR?

FAIRY: WHAT DO YOU WANT? I'M NOT GOING TO HANG OUT HERE FOREVER.

I lean forward and fill in the waiting blank square. The truth is I would take all three fairy wishes and a million more—pack them tightly together into the palm of my hand like a fluffy snowball—and throw them all at just one thing.

I write the ending to my strip in block letters—the only thing in the final frame.

MAKE ME NOT CARE.

But I do.