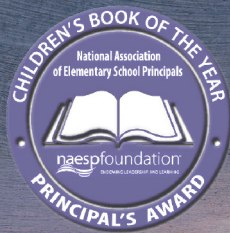


Jennifer Wolf Kam



Devin Rhodes Is  
**DEAD**



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To my parents, with much love and gratitude

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# AFTER

DEVIN RHODES, MY BEST FRIEND, is being buried in her parents' garden, two feet beneath the agapanthus, in a green ceramic urn. Just her ashes, really: charred little flakes of humanity, which bear no resemblance to her thick honey curls, faded jeans, and shimmering brown lip gloss. But she loved flowers. And while her mother's rows of budding shrubs are nothing compared to the lush gardens in Eastland Park—her favorite spot—this patch of moist, warm earth seems a fitting resting place.

Devin died over the weekend. And here's the thing: it's my fault.

Mrs. Rhodes lowers Devin's ashes into the fertilized earth.

"Good night, sweet girl," she says softly. She covers her face with her hands. Mr. Rhodes kneels beside her and pulls her toward him. They sob together quietly.

I stand slightly to the left of them. A warm sting settles into my eyes, and I feel a gorge in my stomach opening up wide. It seems impossible to imagine that the vast space Devin filled with her small, curvy body and much bigger personality is now empty. When we're fifteen, the world is supposed to be opening up to us, like the flowers that will soon bloom above



Devin. But Devin's world is gone, and without Devin, mine has closed up and shrunk beneath me.

Of course Devin's parents don't know it was my fault—my fault that her broken body was found at the bottom of Woodacre Ravine. If they knew, I wouldn't be standing here with them, watching them lay their only child to rest. The Rhodeses don't know, will never know. Only I can say for sure what happened between Devin and me—what led to all of this. Well, only Devin and I can say, which means that my secret is safe for as long as I can keep it. I grab onto the best-friend charm around my neck. It feels cool between my fingers, as it should.

Mrs. Rhodes stands up and turns toward me, her face a patchwork of red splotches, her cheeks wet. She squeezes my shoulder but keeps her eyes on the tiny brown clumps of earth beneath us. "I'm glad you could be here with us, Cass," she says.

Inside of me a scream churns slowly and pushes its way toward the surface. But whatever force moves it that far, another stronger one silences it, catching it just shy of my throat, where it lies there—a large, sour lump.

I bite on my lip. "Thanks." Here I am, playing the loyal, grieving friend when really, really . . . Devin knew the truth. When they found her she wasn't wearing the charm. She'd cast it off somewhere before it happened. I clasp my hands together and squeeze until I can see the white peaks of bone on my knuckles.

"I don't know about this, Susan," says Mr. Rhodes,

standing up. He chews on a fingernail. "This doesn't feel right."

Of course not, I think. How can it? Everything about this yells wrongful death, which were actually the coroner's words.

"Please, Ben, stop." says Mrs. Rhodes. "Don't."

"Who does this, Susan?" asks Mr. Rhodes. "Who buries their daughter in their own yard?"

Mrs. Rhodes shakes her head. "Devin loved gardens. What better garden than ours?"

"Any garden, Susan," says Mr. Rhodes, shaking his head. "Any garden but ours."

He looks like Devin at that moment, his light hair the color of hers and his face creasing the way Devin's did when she was irritated. I turn away—it's too much.

Mrs. Rhodes frowns and pushes away a stray hair from her forehead. "Let's finish this, Ben," she says. "Let's please just finish this."

Mr. Rhodes sighs and kneels down again in front of the agapanthus. He covers the urn with dirt and smoothes the dirt with his spade. Mrs. Rhodes grabs my hand, squeezing my fingers, the ones that, only a few days ago, casually strummed a new song on my guitar. The ones that tremble now when I even think about playing my guitar. My hand rests limply in hers, hoping—no, praying—that she'll let go soon.

Mr. Rhodes puts down the spade and runs his hands over the newly replaced soil. He wipes his hands, stands up, and stares for a moment at his daughter's grave. "I guess that's it." The creases gone, his face is empty, unreadable.

“Yes, that’s it, isn’t it?” Mrs. Rhodes’s eyes are rimmed in red, making their pale gray-blue color jump out even more, the way Devin’s used to. She dabs at them with a tissue.

It’s then that I feel something softly brushing up against my neck. Not a breeze, but something. Something cool and constant, like air, like breathing. The hair on the back of my neck rises and sways. I shrug and shake my head.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Rhodes is staring at me, her swollen eyes barely open.

The feeling disappears, and I rub my neck with my hand. “Um, yeah,” I mumble, straightening up. “It’s nothing.” Weird, though, definitely weird.

Mrs. Rhodes puts her arm around me, a gesture that under normal circumstances would bring comfort. Instead I prickle. Her touch shoots a dull, aching pain down my arm and back.

“Thanks.” There’s nothing else I can say. Nothing except: *I’m the reason we’re here, Mrs. Rhodes.* But that’s not going to happen.

Mrs. Rhodes runs her hand down the side of my head. “Such pretty, dark hair you have, Cass. You’re so lovely inside and out.” Her voice cracks and fades to a whisper.

I want to push her hand away. But I let her stroke my hair as I clench my fists and wonder what she’s really seeing.

She pats my cheek. “All right, then. Let’s go.”

We walk together toward the house. Mr. Rhodes drags the spade behind him, and it thuds against the

flagstone walkway. *Tell them; tell them,* I hear with each clunk.

*No, no, no,* my heart thumps back.

“You’ll see, Ben,” says Mrs. Rhodes, momentarily drowning out the accusing spade. “It was the right thing to do. This way Devin’s always nearby, always close.”

Mr. Rhodes doesn’t answer. He just keeps heaving air through his body.

“You agree, don’t you, Cass?” Mrs. Rhodes looks at me, her eyes watering.

She doesn’t wait for my reply, which is good, because my tongue has glued itself to the roof of my mouth. She turns away. “It’s what Devin would’ve wanted.”

“Devin would’ve wanted to be alive,” says Mr. Rhodes.

Mrs. Rhodes grabs my hand again, and I choke on the scream that threatens to burst from my throat. I swallow again and again and again.

Mr. Rhodes drops the spade and reaches for his wife. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he says. “I’m so sorry.” He brings her toward him, and she finally lets go of my hand.

# BEFORE

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT, CASS?” Devin was stretched out beside the large lilac bush in Eastland Park. Her shirt lifted up slightly, revealing her flattened, tanned stomach. A tiny naval ring reflected the sun.

I adjusted my own shirt, aware that it betrayed the rolls of soft flesh beneath it. No navel ring for me—it would definitely drown. “Can you believe we’re almost sophomores?” I asked. “Only two weeks left as freshmen.” My guitar, worn but strong, rested next to me. I’d played since sixth grade. It was old when I got it and had seen better days.

“Freshwomen, Cass.” Devin flipped over onto her stomach, her blue eyes wide. “Real high school—not the half-assed ninth-grade version where they keep us in a separate part of the school like we’re infants.” Devin’s new persona: high-school bad girl. She’d been perfecting it all summer.

I laughed but only on the outside. “It wasn’t that bad.” I sat up and drew my knees to my chest, against my breasts, which continued to grow despite my nightly prayers to the contrary. “Tenth grade means more homework. I can wait for *that*.” I uncurled and reached for the guitar. I’d just had it restrung. I strummed a little, plucking out a few notes to test the sound.

“Homework?” she said. “That’s what you’re thinking about?” She shook her head and laughed. “Rest up, Cass. This year we’re going to have some real fun.”

I continued to pick at my guitar. I’m pretty sure that whatever she had in mind was not my idea of fun.

“Are you listening to me?” asked Devin.

“Of course,” I said, continuing to pick at the guitar. I loved the way it felt, the tautness of the strings, the way its curve fit perfectly onto my lap. “Listening but not agreeing,” I responded.

The truth was I liked ninth grade. I liked being in the ninth-grade hall, wrapped in all that was familiar. I liked not being allowed in the student commons, where the older kids smoked. I liked not having to worry about who I might run into in the girls’ room. Devin was my best friend, but there were some things I couldn’t tell her. Not anymore.

“Cassandra Lorraine Kirschner,” she said, sitting up. She studied me with those blue eyes. They were so light, so pale; they were almost like mirrors, too reflective. She shifted her weight to the side and leaned on her palm. “Are you scared of being in the big, grown-up halls?”

I looked up from the guitar. “No.” I practically spat out the word. “Of course not.” I hated the way she did that sometimes. The way she made me shrink into this tiny person she could shove into a box and stick into her jeans pocket, if her jeans weren’t so tight.

“Don’t be so sensitive.” She smiled, her teeth white and straight and perfect. “Gotta grow up sometime, right, Cass-girl?”



“Uh, *yeah*,” I said, tugging out a few blades of grass. “I saw the puberty movie in fifth grade, too.”

She laughed, tilting back her head as if she were in a shampoo commercial. Her newest move. “You’re funny,” she said. “That’s why I keep you around.”

“Ha, ha.” I smiled back, but I thought something very bad. I thought, or more, I wondered, what it would be like if Devin weren’t around anymore. I didn’t wish for it; I just thought about it. Thinking it was bad enough.

Devin didn’t know this. I would never have told her, and lately, she hadn’t been too interested in my thoughts. Sure, she asked me things, told me stuff, but it was just conversation. Small talk. Snippets of invisible nothings. It wasn’t the way it used to be with us—when we told each other everything, stayed up late, lolled on the dry summer grass, stared up at the stars, shared our diaries. We were filling space—that’s all. It didn’t mean anything anymore.

“Lighten up, Cass. It’ll be great.” She pushed some blond hair behind her ears.

I tugged on more blades of grass. “I never said it wouldn’t be.”

She got up and plucked a lilac from the bush, then sniffed it and twirled it in her hand. “God, I love the way these smell.”

Devin went on and on about tenth grade, as if I hadn’t already made it clear that I didn’t want to talk about it. I nodded a lot and raised my eyebrows and said, “Um-hmm.” I threw in a few knowing smiles, too. It was like how our seventh-grade chorus teacher

once told us that if we were too nervous to sing in the concert, we could mouth “watermelon” over and over again and it would look like we were singing even if our stomachs were tied in shoestring knots and our mouths tasted like cotton.

“And the guys in high school,” Devin said, and whistled, which finally got my attention. I liked boys but hadn’t dated yet, although I’d definitely thought about it. Devin had dated, if you could call what Devin did dating, though I didn’t think anyone would. The ample rolls under my shirt might have been part of the reason I didn’t date. Another reason might also have been Devin. It wasn’t easy being her best friend, especially when guys were around.

“*Guys*, Cass, not boys,” she continued, her pale eyes darting around like flecks of light. “Men almost. Can you imagine?” She chewed on her lip, the way she did when she talked about the opposite sex. I knew that look well—she’d been boy crazy since the fifth grade. Since Jared Tomassi kissed her in the woods behind school. It had been manageable for a while, but each year it had gotten worse. A string of wrong choices, bad boys, or “practice,” as Devin called them. Stepping-stones until she reached Prince Charming or something like that. Devin went after boys with the same intensity she did everything. They loved it—and I got dragged along like an overweight pull toy.

Devin nodded and closed her eyes. “The guys are the best part of high school.”

I placed the guitar gently back down on the grass.

Then I rolled over onto my stomach and faced her. My shirt had ridden up again, and the grass scratched at my skin. I didn't bother to fix it this time. "That's really all you think about, Devin, isn't it? Guys?"

Devin lay down again on her stomach and stretched out across from me. Our faces were close, and a soft spring breeze moved between us. Devin's lips curled into a smile.

"Mostly," she said. Her teeth were even whiter in the sun.

## AFTER

DEVIN'S PARENTS SIT SHIVAH at their yellow and white colonial a few blocks away from my own yellow and white colonial. Mrs. Rhodes isn't Jewish, but the Rhodeses were Rosenbergs once upon a time in Austria (says Mr. Rhodes), and shivah is how Jewish people mourn. The mourners tear their clothes, cover their mirrors, sit on boxes, and, well, eat. Usually there's smoked fish and *babka*. I know this because I'm a quarter Jewish, thanks to my grandfather.

My mother opts out with a migraine. "Send Susan my condolences," she says.

"Sure you don't want to come?"

She sighs, and there's a definite hint of melodrama. "I'm sure. I feel bad, of course, but she was your friend. I don't belong there."

Everyone belongs there, I think. Who doesn't pay respects when a fifteen-year-old girl dies? But then that's my mother. Since the divorce she avoids social obligations.

"Okay," I say.

"I'm sure Susan Rhodes will have plenty of company." She hands me a bakery box with a chocolate *babka* in it, and I leave.

Even though Devin was my best friend, our mothers never had much to do with each other. My mom's life

trajectory went south—her Perfect Life Mission failed. She hates happily married people. My father left the state almost two years ago, which nixed any opportunities for male bonding between our dads. Susan Rhodes’s life will now never be anything close to perfect. My mother should realize that.

I glance at the garden, at the disturbed patch of dirt. Underneath is what’s left of my best friend. I suck in some air and rub my hand on my pants. I ring the doorbell. It takes a moment, a long moment during which I almost turn around and run back home. But then Mrs. Rhodes greets me at the door. Her eyes are rimmed in smudged dark mascara. She’s dressed entirely in black.

“Oh, Cass,” she says, her voice strained into almost a whisper. “You’re here.” She puts her arm around me and leads me into the living room, as though I’ve arrived at a macabre dinner party.

I play with the bakery box string. It’s the closest I’ve been in the past few days to a guitar string, which isn’t close at all. I can’t even think about playing—every time I try, it takes me back to that day. To the last time I played and what happened next. I tuck the bakery box under my arm.

Mrs. Rhodes turns me toward her guests. She clears her throat and says, “Cass Kirschner.” Her voice doesn’t carry; it’s too drained, too hoarse. So only a few nearby hear her say, “Devin’s best friend.”

*Devin’s best friend.* My ears burn, and I stand there, numb, as the guests murmur greetings. I thrust the *babka* at Mrs. Rhodes.

She tries to smile and licks a tear that’s dribbled down her face onto her lips. Her eyes are tired. “Thank you, sweetheart.” She removes the string and peeks inside the bakery box.

“It’s a Jewish cake,” I say.

“Yes, it is.” She nods and clears her throat again. “Send my thanks to your mother.”

“Sure.”

She gently pushes the box toward me. “Please. Just leave it on the table.” She swallows and dabs at her eye with a finger. “I’ll be right back with a cake plate.”

I place the *babka* on a nearby coffee table. Now what? My feet are planted to the dark chestnut floor. The house is filled with Sylvias and Morrisises and smells like the fragrance department at Macy’s.

A woman I don’t recognize brushes past me. “Sit—have something to eat.” She hurries off into the kitchen.

I walk a few feet and find myself staring at a tray of smoked fish, the centerpiece to a large assortment of food carefully arranged on a long table that’s not usually there. For once the abyss in my stomach isn’t looking to be filled with food, but I take a plate and a fork and obediently lift a few slivers of sable off the tray.

An elderly friend or relative of the Rhodeses frowns at me over the top of her red bifocal glasses, her head a helmet of bluish hair.

She turns to her friend. “Devin had such a lovely figure.”

Something bubbles inside me, hot and acidic. Right, I think, because the only thing tragic about Devin's death is that she had a great figure. Worse still, the fat girl lives.

Mr. Rhodes moves past me toward the door. "Jim," he says to another arriving guest. "It's kind of you to come."

He's shaking hands with Mr. Cordeau from Cordeau Jewelers in town. The Rhodeses get all their jewelry from him.

"I'm so sorry, Ben," says Mr. Cordeau. He wipes a thick hand across a shiny forehead. "I don't even know what to say."

"Thank you," says Mr. Rhodes, although he barely looks at him. "Have something to eat, please."

"Oh, I'm fine," says Mr. Cordeau. "You just take care of yourself and the missus."

Mr. Rhodes is gone almost before Jim Cordeau finishes his sentence. I'm glad. Mr. Rhodes reminds me too much of Devin. Everywhere there are reminders of what I've done.

Some kids from school are across the room. I want nothing more than to avoid them, blend into the crowd. My heart prickles—Gina and Lizzy are there. Gina waves to me. We used to be a foursome—Lizzy, Gina, Devin, and me—but that ended forever ago. Or at least a few months ago, which really is the same thing. I can't actually believe that Gina and Lizzy are here, after everything. Jack and Samantha are new friends of theirs and dating each other, I think.

I walk toward them; I have no choice, really. Better this way. Better to act natural—as natural as I can be when everything about this is so unnatural.

Lizzy moves toward me first. "Cass," she says, shaking her head sympathetically, "I'm so sorry. I know you and Devin were still close."

*Close?* She has no idea. No idea how close two people are when one is responsible for the other's death. How entangled they become. "Thanks," I say. "It's really hard." That sounds so dumb, so shallow. But I'm not lying. Even though—well, I'm not.

Gina puts her arm around me, and I stiffen. "It's so awful," she says. "I can't imagine anything worse." There are genuine tears in her eyes. Lizzy and Gina are best friends, just like Devin and I were best friends. I know they're each thinking how devastated they would be if one of them were standing there mourning the other. They probably can't believe I'm even there, dressed, having a conversation, stuffing my face with fish. They probably notice how dry my eyes are.

"So do they have any leads yet?" asks Jack, pouring himself some soda.

"Nope," says Samantha. She takes a bite of a cracker, which she's slathered in port-wine spread. "Just another unsolved case."

I don't know Samantha too well. The thought of her talking about Devin like she's some crime statistic while cracker crumbs fall onto her baby-doll top makes me want to shove her face into the port-wine spread. I am loyal, if nothing else.

But I can't call more attention to myself, so instead I politely nibble on my fish. The piece of sable slides down my throat, leaving a salty aftertaste. Samantha and Jack look at me, probably wondering how I can shovel fish into my mouth when my best friend is dead.

"I mean obviously someone pushed her," says Samantha. "Or brought her down there, you know what I mean?"

"Cass, do you think? I mean, that night—" Gina looks at me, really looks at me, and I know what she's thinking. But the less I say, the better.

I shrug. "I don't know," I say.

"Let's hope they catch whoever did it, and soon," says Jack. He puts his arm around Samantha. "I don't want my girl out with some maniac running around." He squeezes her tight.

"Maybe it was an accident," says Gina. "Maybe she just, I don't know, *fell*."

"Right," says Lizzy, shaking her head of shiny black hair. "Devin accidentally fell into Woodacre Ravine in the middle of the night." She reaches for a cracker. "Why was she out there in the first place? She had to know better. Although with her, who knows?"

"Well, what happened after everything, Cass? Was she still upset?" Gina runs her hand over her chin. "Do you think she, you know, jumped?"

My heart pounds. I think over and over again about the last time I saw her, the last time Devin and I looked at each other, really looked at each other. The

last thing I read in her face. What was it? If only, *if only*. . . .

"Anything's possible," says Lizzy. "But I'm thinking not."

Samantha shivers dramatically, clearly for effect. "The whole thing creeps me out," she says.

Everyone nods, including me. "They'll catch the bastard soon enough," says Jack, running his hand through the ends of Samantha's hair. "They always do."

"How do you know it was a guy?" says Samantha.

"It's *always* a guy," says Jack.

"I can't believe it," says Gina, shaking her head. "I mean, we *just* saw her. We—" She starts to whimper, and it's painful to watch. Lizzy touches her shoulder, but me, I'm frozen, my fingers squeezing the fork. "I just hope"—Gina takes a deep breath—"I just hope she didn't suffer." Lizzy grabs onto her, and the two of them sob together. It's what best friends do.

Just then a familiar figure enters the room, and I swallow a gulp of air. He's in a blue button-down shirt and khakis, possibly for the first time in his life. The blue shirt looks incredible against his olive skin, and despite my pain, I get a tickle in my insides. He nods and shakes hands with Mr. Rhodes. Even though he'd never met Devin's family, it makes sense to me that he's here. That Marcus is here right now, because he was there that night with me. The night it all happened.

"Hey, Cass," says Lizzy. "Isn't that the guy from the mall? The one you were with? What's his name?"

"Um, yeah." I chew on my nail. "Marcus."

# BEFORE

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend,” says Samantha, stuffing more crackers into her mouth.

“I don’t,” I snap. Who cares if I’m rude? Samantha barely knows me anyway.

“Sor-ry,” she says, rolling her eyes at Jack.

I want to see Marcus, so I can’t help myself from watching him. It’s like the first time I realized that I could watch him forever. Then—oh, God—from across the room our eyes meet and I’m back there—back in that moment when everything went wrong.

A pain, an awful pain, slams into my head. It thumps against me and spreads to my temples. The feeling grows, strengthens, and my head sinks. Instinctively, I grab onto the charm on my necklace.

“WE NEED NEW CHARMS,” Devin said. We were walking down Birchtree Lane in town, which for some reason was lined with elms and sugar maples.

“Why?” I asked. We were just going for a walk, and suddenly we’re buying new best-friend charms.

“Because we threw out the old ones.” Devin said it so matter-of-factly, as though we didn’t also throw out our friendships with Gina and Lizzy, our friends since second grade. Tossed out like gum wrappers. Several weeks before we’d had the fight to end all fights.

“No way,” I said. “I’m saving up for a new guitar.” I was done with those charms anyway. They were a little juvenile, if you asked me.

Devin was nothing if not persistent. “Cordeau will cut us a good deal. Especially since,” she grinned at me, “he likes my mom.”

“Everyone likes your mom,” I said. It was true. It was hard to be more likable than Mrs. Rhodes. Perfectly coiffed and made up, stylish even in sweats (although I’d never seen that) and kind as can be. Real-life storybook princess. My mother hated her.

“No,” Devin said, grinning, “he *likes* her likes her.”

“What are you talking about?”



"You know," she said, "he's always giving her those big eyes and getting a little too close. He practically drools when we walk into the store. 'Well, hello, Susan,'" she said, mimicking Mr. Cordeau. "'Don't think I have anything in my store as beautiful as you.'"

"That's gross."

"Beyond," she said. "But true. Can you even imagine them—?"

I cover my ears. "La, la, la, la, la!"

She laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. "Okay, okay. It's repulsive—but definitely worth the discount. Besides," she said, grinning, "my parents will probably pay for the charms anyway."

I was uneasy, and I felt it everywhere. "We're getting the same ones?"

She looked at me. "Well, yeah."

"Don't you think that's a little weird?"

"Halves this time, *not* quarters." She put her hand on her hips. "Unless you want a third of it for your guitar. Or is the guitar your *best* friend?"

"You're so funny," I said. "Okay, fine." But then I added something: "I want the half that says 'Be Fri.'"

She wrinkled her eyebrows. "What difference does it make?"

I shrugged. "I just like it." I did. I liked the way it almost looked like "Be Free." Almost.

"Whatever," she said. "The important thing is that we ditched those two losers." She made a face and stuck out her tongue. "Thank God."

I winced at the word *losers*. "That's harsh." Gina and Lizzy weren't losers. They just weren't.

"You're not still upset about it, are you?" she asked. "No." I sucked on my lip. "Don't you think it'll be strange once school starts? I mean, seeing them?"

"You are still upset."

"I didn't say that."

"You're not thinking of making up with them, are you?" She frowned. "You better not, Cass. You're not leaving me alone."

"Relax," I said. "I wouldn't do that." Actually I couldn't. I was pretty sure that after our fight, Gina and Lizzy would never speak to me again.

"Good," she said. "Don't be upset. You're lucky—you stuck with the right quarter of the friendship pie." She smiled, then linked her arm in mine. "We're lucky," she added, leaning against me. "Right?"

I was buoyed by her change of heart. It was a sign of the old Devin. The one I met at the first-grade cubbies. The one who shared her snacks with me and invited me to play with her dollhouse every day after school. She's the one I stuck it out with despite everything, because, well, that's what best friends did. I uncurled my hand.

"Come on," she said. "It'll be fun." And just like that we were off to see the jeweler.

We walked into Cordeau Jewelers, onto a soft blue carpet that was so plush our footsteps were silent. A gentle bell at the door sent Jim Cordeau, the jeweler, hurrying out.

"Devin Rhodes!" he said, smiling. He was large and friendly. His bald head glowed under the bright lights of the store. "How's your mom?"

Yup, totally gross. I shot Devin a look, and somehow she grinned with just the corner of her mouth.

“Well?” he said. “Does she love her tennis bracelet?” Mr. Cordeau had a lot of bracelets, too, thick and gold, which dangled from his wrists. I’d never seen a man his age with so much jewelry. I guessed that’s what happens when you actually make the jewelry.

“You know my mother,” said Devin. “She likes anything that glitters.” And I swear, at that moment, Devin was sparkling, too.

Mr. Cordeau laughed—a big belly laugh, à la Santa Claus sans the beard. “She sure does,” he said. “I’ve got some wonderful new pieces I think she’d like. Do tell her to stop by when she has a chance.”

Devin shot me an I-told-you-so look. “I’ll let her know,” she said to him.

Mr. Cordeau smiled and leaned on the jewelry counter. “So, what can I do for you girls today?”

“We’re looking for best-friend charms,” said Devin.

Mr. Cordeau raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t I make some of those for you last year?”

Devin nods. “We had to toss them,” she said. “No offense, Mr. Cordeau, but the other two quarters were given to the wrong people.”

Mr. Cordeau nodded sympathetically. “Jewelry is forever,” he said. “Not so much friendships, eh?”

“We like the one we had before,” I said.

“We just need it cut in half this time instead of in quarters,” said Devin.

“Ah, of course,” said Mr. Cordeau. He walked over to one of the glass counters, pulled out a tiny key from his pocket, and unlocked the door. He carefully lifted out two little gold half-moon charms. They were like tiny glittering pebbles in his giant hand.

“Perfect,” said Devin.

“Remember, I get the half that says, ‘Be Fri,’” I said. Devin rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything.

“Wait here while I get some chains for you to try on.” Mr. Cordeau walked over to another counter, humming something familiar that I couldn’t place.

“I’m so glad we’re doing this,” said Devin. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

“Me, too,” I said. And, to my surprise, I was, a little. I’d missed the feeling of the cool chain around my neck. I still reached for it sometimes, and it was weird that nothing was there. It was weirder, though, that Gina and Lizzy were gone, too. But I couldn’t buy them back at Cordeau Jewelers.

“Here we go,” said Mr. Cordeau. He put mine on first. His hands were heavy on my neck, and he breathed in and out quickly through his nose. I imagined his forest of nose hair blowing in a musky breeze. “How’s that feel?” he asked.

The chain was cool against my skin, as it always feels. A small part of me liked that Devin was so insistent about getting new charms. Part of me, though, felt a little like it was a dog collar: If Lost, Please Return to Devin Rhodes. “Good” was all I said.

Mr. Cordeau smiled. His smile was large like the

rest of him and spread across his face. "Excellent," he said. "Your turn, Miss Rhodes."

Devin grinned and held up her hair in the back. Mr. Cordeau walked behind her and gently pulled the chain on. "How's that, hmm?"

Devin did the shampoo commercial thing with her hair. "Fabulous."

Mr. Cordeau laughed loudly again. "Your mother's daughter!"

Ew and double-ew. I grinned at Devin, and she grinned back.

"Let's take these off and wrap them up," he said, reaching for my clasp.

"We want to wear them home." Devin looked at me. "Right, Cass?"

"Sure," I said. Why not?

"Alrighty, then," said Mr. Cordeau. "I'll ring you up and send you on your way." He made his way to the register. "Cash or charge, dear?" he said to Devin.

She smiled, showing her white teeth. "My mother said to put it on her account."

I nudged her. I knew she hadn't asked her mother. She ignored me and kept smiling at Mr. Cordeau.

He looked at the two of us. "Everything okay?"

Devin was smiling at me now, but her eyes said something else entirely.

"Yes," I said. "Everything's fine." I wasn't going to argue as long as I didn't have to pay for it. I was still three months away from having enough cash for a new guitar, which was like forever in high-school time.

"Lucky girls!" he said. "Soon enough your boy-

friends will be buying you all sorts of sparkly things." He winked again.

Devin tilted back her head and laughed. "Not the boys we know."

I shrugged and smiled. "Definitely not." Not for me. Devin had a chance if she stopped going after jerks.

"Too bad," said Mr. Cordeau. He worked on the calculator. "Pretty girls like you." He used the plural, but for a very, very quick second his eyes lingered on Devin. He looked down so quickly, I wasn't even sure she noticed. But I did. It was always Devin. Even with an old bald guy like Mr. Cordeau.

"Here you go," he said, looking up again. "Wear them in good health!"

"Thanks," I said.

"You're the best," said Devin.

"Oh, my pleasure," said Mr. Cordeau. "Be sure to give my regards to your mom."

"Sure will," she said, then turned to me and stuck her finger in her mouth in a gag-me kind of way. It was impossible to not giggle.

Devin and I walked out of the store together. The late summer sun beat down on us and warmed me from the outside in. I got a jolt of good feeling, and it lifted me. "You were right," I said. "I'm glad we got these. They look good." And at that moment, it was like it always had been, Devin and me, me and Devin, best friends forever. For real.

"Better than a dumb guitar, hmm?" she said.

The feeling was sucked right out of me. "My

guitar is not dumb,” I said. “Just because you don’t play—”

“Sorry,” she said. “I just mean this is pretty special—that’s all.”

“Fine,” I said, still irritated. “Leave my guitar out of it.”

When we reached the sidewalk, she stopped and shot her hand up across my chest.

“What?” I asked.

She faced me and put her hand on top of my gold charm. Her manicured fingers just barely scratched my skin, but her hands were warm and soft. “Best friends forever, Cass,” she said, “means forever.”

“I know.”

She pressed down harder, her hand pushing at my heart. I took in a quick breath.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “Gina and Lizzy forgot.”

I nodded and exhaled slowly. Devin’s hand, still on the charm, moved with me.