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Piglike dinosaurs called entelodonts roamed the earth approximately 16.3 million years ago.

When I saw the sticky note tucked in my stepdad's desk drawer, I felt a prickle of excitement. The note read: "Peak Veterinary Clinic." I'd found dozens of yellow sticky notes all over Mr. Pine's house since Mom and I had moved in. Some of his notes were reminders like "Change the furnace filter" or "Pick up laundry from the dry cleaners." Others were more random: the name of a series he wanted to watch on Netflix or the date of an upcoming meteor shower. However, not one of the other notes had been anywhere near as intriguing as this one.

My stepdad's sticky note obsession seemed slightly out of character considering he was such a neat freak. But Mom said organization wasn't the point of all his notes. She thought he

developed the habit because he'd lived alone too long—which I found troubling. If things had been so boring that sticky notes had counted as conversation, well, it was no wonder I was causing such a disruption to his life. Mom thought it might help us get used to each other if I called him “Nathan” or “Dad,” but since I couldn't see me or my stepdad ever feeling comfortable with that, I'd stuck with “Mr. Pine.”

“Did you find one?” Mom's voice rang from down the hall and I sprang back. It felt like I'd been caught in the act, but I hadn't been snooping. Mom had sent me rummaging through my stepdad's desk in search of a red pen.

“Not yet,” I called absently. My thoughts were still on the sticky note. There were no pets in the house, not even a goldfish, so why would Mr. Pine have the name of a vet written down? My heart thundered in my ears as I peeled back the first note and found a second one beneath: “Appointment—December 27, 11:00 a.m.”

An appointment. At a veterinary clinic. Two days after Christmas. It could only mean one thing—I was finally getting a dog! In less than a week, there would be a cuddly four-legged companion waiting for me beneath the Christmas tree.

A squeal threatened to burst from my lungs, but I didn't want to ruin the surprise, and I didn't want to alarm Mr. Pine, who was sleeping right down the hall. I managed to swallow

it back, but something like a whimper escaped my lips.

This was going to be the most spectacular, most amazing, most extraordinary Christmas ever. Not only was there snow in the forecast, for the first time in my life, Mom and I were living in a house instead of an apartment—which meant we had a yard. A *big*, canine-friendly yard. Mom’s standard excuse for why we couldn’t have a dog had been erased when she got married two months ago and we moved in with Mr. Pine. Unlike our cramped apartment, his larger home had a fence all the way around the property.

“Grace?” Mom’s footsteps sounded on the hardwood right outside the office. I flipped the sticky notepad over and slid it back inside the drawer barely a second before Mom peeked her head around the corner and said, “Grace?” again.

I flashed her an unnatural smile.

Mom sized me up. She was dressed for work in a smart pantsuit and was holding a stack of holiday cards for all my teachers. She wanted the cards to have a festive feel—hence the need for a red pen. “Are you feeling all right?”

She stepped closer and placed a hand on my forehead. Her touch was warm and smooth. It quieted the bubbles fizzling inside me, and I felt my smile relax into something more normal. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just anxious for winter break, that’s all.”

Mom nodded, clearly relieved. She glanced down at the

open drawer and fished out a blue ballpoint pen before ramming the drawer shut. “This will have to do.” Then she quickly scribbled names on all the cards before handing me the stack. “You better get going. You’ll miss the bus.”

I took the cards, pecked her on the cheek, and bounded out of the room. Hopefully, she attributed the extra spring in my step to the fact that I was mere hours away from the freedom that came with winter break and didn’t suspect that I’d uncovered the best Christmas surprise of my life.

Mom asked me to make a Christmas list every year. For the past seven years—ever since I learned to write—the number one thing on my list had been the same—a doodle dog. Labradoodle, Goldendoodle, Dalmadoodle, Sheepadoodle, Great Danoodle—I’d take any one of them. Really, I’d take any dog, but I knew a doodle dog would be hypoallergenic, and that was important because Mom had an intense sneezing reaction to anything with fur.

But this year, she hadn’t asked me to make a list. I thought it was because she’d been too preoccupied with all the traveling she’d been doing since her big promotion at work. But the notes in Mr. Pine’s desk drawer revealed the real reason. She hadn’t needed me to. Mom already knew what I wanted.

Now that I’d uncovered the secret, it would kill me to hold it in until Christmas morning. I had to tell someone, and my

best friend, Sydney, immediately sprang to mind. Most days, I didn't see her until lunchtime at school. Today, I needed to find her before first period. This was too important to wait.

I walked on air to the bus stop and was so fidgety while waiting that I might as well have been dancing. When the bus pulled up, I accidentally made eye contact with Liam Rossi through one of the rectangular windows. He wiped away a thin layer of fog with his shirtsleeve, and his lips quirked into a goofy smile. I immediately felt self-conscious. Thankfully, it was only Liam who had witnessed my silly behavior. He was a little on the weird side, so I doubted he'd be one to judge me for acting strangely. Still, I reined in my Muppet arms and boarded at once.

I slid into my usual seat next to Jana. Unlike Liam, Jana was too wrapped up in her own anticipation to notice I could hardly sit still. Her family was traveling to New York City for the holidays. They had tickets for two Broadway shows and, "more importantly," to see the Rockettes in Radio City's *Christmas Spectacular*.

With Jana babbling about her trip, I managed to bottle up my own excitement for the entire bus ride. Really, it was for the best. Sydney would not be happy if I told Jana something this big before I told her.

As soon as the bus arrived at Riverbend Middle, I shot from

my seat and raced down the sidewalk and through the glass doors. Once inside, I immediately began scanning for my best friend. I hated not being able to walk to school with her now that I rode the bus.

Last year, when Sydney and I were in fifth grade at Riverbend Elementary, we were both in the same homeroom and we hardly spent a moment apart all day long. Now that we were in middle school, we only had two classes together. They were both in the afternoon. The first day of middle school had been sheer misery when I realized I wouldn't see her all morning. Three different elementary schools fed into Riverbend Middle. So, many of the faces in my classes had been new. I didn't automatically have the status of being Sydney's best friend. And the students I didn't know, even some of the teachers, had treated me differently. My jokes weren't as funny; at least I didn't get the same responses. When I spoke, no one seemed to care what I had to say. Nobody was clamoring to be with me for group work. Without Sydney, I wasn't as bright or smart or worthy.

Apparently, luck was still on my side. Right away, I spotted Sydney at the end of the main hallway. She was hard to miss. She was beautiful, in a glowing, fresh-faced sort of way—the kind of pretty that adults especially seemed to cherish. Even her posture made her stand out. Just about everyone in middle school had slouching issues, myself included. Not Sydney,

though. Her head was always high, and her shoulders were back, like she assumed she was being watched. Which, most of the time, she was. With her sleek chestnut-colored hair, graceful movements, and pretty face, she was always turning heads.

A few more minutes and the hallway would be too packed to reach her. I took off sprinting, dodging bodies left and right as I went. When she started to move around the corner and out of sight, I loudly yelled, “Sydney!” She spun and then froze with an unreadable expression on her face. No matter—I knew she’d be thrilled when I told her the good news. But with just a few short steps left, Mr. Houshmand moved his hulking body between us. I was forced to come skidding to a stop.

“There’s no running or yelling in the halls, young lady,” he scolded. I knew this. I also knew that breaking not one but two rules could get me written up and result in an email being sent home—a thought that deflated my excitement faster than a withering balloon.

Sydney scooted around Mr. Houshmand and looped an arm through mine. “We’re sorry,” she interjected sweetly. Sydney was every teacher’s dream. She was super composed and respectful, not to mention that she always earned straight As.

I felt the instant boost of having my best friend beside me. And the thing about Sydney was that some of her glow naturally radiated to those around her.