

PARKER →

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Powder-Blue Rabies

It had taken all afternoon to set up, but it only took five minutes for the dog to destroy everything.

As soon as everyone else had left the house on errands, Parker Pitts had hustled like mad, trying to make everything perfect for the farewell party for his big sister, Billie. He'd vacuumed, tidied, and dusted the whole downstairs (much more thoroughly than Mom ever had). He'd festooned the dining room with blue streamers, party hats, and musical notes cut from shiny golden paper.

Heck, he'd even gotten their neighbor Mrs. Johnson to drive him to pick up the cake from the bakery. It was powder blue (Billie's favorite color), decorated with musical notations and an edible microphone on top (all his idea).

The cake sat on the table. His mom would pick up the Thai takeout on her way home.

All was perfect—just the way Parker liked things to be. Restless, he readjusted the place settings he'd made from

SWITCHED

Dad's scratched vinyl records and repositioned the bass clef centerpiece just so. He was ready. Everything was set to make Billie's send-off for her semester abroad a truly magical experience.

As six o'clock struck, his mom's and dad's cars pulled into the driveway almost simultaneously. That alone made it a red-letter day. Parker couldn't remember the last time they'd both been home for dinner together.

Gee, and all it took to make this rare event happen was one of their kids leaving town.

At the *thunk-thunk* of car doors and the happy chatter of everyone coming up the walkway, Parker smiled. He loved how his family was a rainbow of color, from his mahogany-skinned dad to his wheat-skinned mom, with he and Billie falling somewhere in between. His grandma used to be on the walnut-colored end of that spectrum, but—

With an effort, he forced away the thought of her. What you didn't think about couldn't hurt you.

The front door swung open. "We're home!" his mom called.

Right away, the *clickety-clack* of doggie toenails scabbled on the entryway's wooden floor. Thunderous footfalls and thuds from bumped furniture marked the progress of Boof, Billie's shaggy goldendoodle.

Parker gritted his teeth.

That dog.

He burst into the dining room like a dirty-blond hurricane. Making straight for Parker, the dog reared up on his hind legs, planted two massive paws on Parker's chest, and bathed his face with a tongue funkier than fifty weeks' worth of dirty gym socks.

Parker staggered back.

"Yuck!" Twisting away from the creature, he swabbed at his slimy face with a forearm. Now he'd have to go wash again. "Bad dog! Down!"

Nothing he said seemed to sink in. Of course, that wasn't surprising, given that Boof had flunked out of the Perfect Puppy Academy and that Billie rarely bothered to reinforce the few commands the dog did learn.

Boof jumped up again. This time, one of his sharp toenails caught on Parker's shirt pocket. When Parker tried to shove the dog away, the fabric tore with a loud *r-r-r-rip*.

His favorite *Star Wars* T-shirt, wrecked.

Parker's face flushed hot. "Bills!" he cried. "Get this thing away from me!"

Bored of jumping, Boof thrust his nose into Parker's crotch and took a loud, deep whiff. Parker raised a knee, spinning away.

“Billie!”

Gliding into the room like a long-necked princess in ripped jeans and an explosion of curls, Billie patted her thighs. “Come here, Boofie-Boof. Is the widdle puppy bug-ging my widdle brudder? Is he?”

The mop-haired dog thwacked his tail back and forth, knocking paper party hats off the chair and onto the floor. Amber eyes shining, he padded over to Billie and licked her face up one side and down the other.

Parker shuddered. “*Little* puppy? He weighs almost as much as I do.” He collected the hats, wondering if they’d been contaminated by dog germs. Could you sterilize paper hats?

Just then, Billie noticed the decorations. Her mouth fell open in an O, and her hazel eyes widened. “For me?”

Parker nodded.

“Oh, P-man, you’re the best!” She beamed so broadly her eyes disappeared into slits. Rushing forward, Billie gave him a fierce hug. “I’m going to miss you, bro.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Parker, ducking his head.

His throat tightened. Though she was four years older and technically his half sister, that didn’t matter. Ever since Grandma Mimi had helped them bridge their differences five years ago, Parker and Billie had been pretty tight. He was really going to miss her.