

CHAPTER I

“WHAT ABOUT *THE SECRET* *Life of the Teenage Amphibian?*”

I lift a hand to block the sun from my eyes. “No offense, but that may be the worst potential title I’ve ever heard,” I say.

Suzy sips very loudly on her iced latte. Her video camera sits abandoned on the picnic table between us. “You haven’t given me any better ideas, Jackie.”

“*I’m* not the filmmaker in this friendship. *You* are,” I remind her. “Plus, I’m the talent. And the talent doesn’t get paid to think.”

“Technically, you’re not getting paid at all,” she says. Right. I’m doing this out of the goodness of my heart.

This day is teetering on a billion degrees, so taking my lunch break outside of Monte’s Magic Castle during the dead of July may not have been the best idea. “I’m sweating through this costume,” I say. The pepperoni pizza on my plate is beginning to look more like soup.

“Welcome to summer in New York,” Suzy says, her gold S necklace catching the sunlight. It’s a conversation we’ve had every summer for the past ten years: I complain about the heat, Suzy reminds me that we’ve lived here our entire life and, well, what else did I expect?

And by New York, I don’t mean glamorous New York *City*, with Broadway and Michelin star restaurants, where every corner is stuffed to the brim with people’s hopes and dreams. No, no, no. We mean New York *State*, baby. Ridgewood, New York, to be exact, where our equivalent to Broadway is a run-down community theater and our top-rated restaurant is—you guessed it—a McDonald’s off the interstate.

“But seriously,” Suzy continues, “my school project needs a name. We can’t keep referring to it as ‘that documentary you’re making.’”

“I think that has a nice ring to it,” I say, staring bleakly at the mess on my paper plate. On one hand, I’m starving, and pizza soup sounds better than no food. On the other hand— Ugh, yeah. I can’t do it.

Suzy continues. “What about *The Untold Story of Jackie Myers?*”

It sounds like an episode of the crime podcast my older sister Jillian loves. “That makes my life sound like a cold case,” I say, shuddering.

Fresh out of ideas, Suzy collapses on the table. You know

what they say about art students—the *dramatics*. Sheesh. “This title is haunting me, Jackie.” She sits up abruptly, her eyes wide with a new idea. “Maybe I can talk to Jillian? She always comes up with the coolest titles.”

It’s true, she does. Jill is a journalist at *The Rundown*, a local magazine owned and run by women. And Suzy is one of the rare people she actually likes. “You can try,” I say. “She’s pretty swamped with work.”

Suzy tries again. “*Frog Fun and Freshman Frights?*”

I make a face. “Can we stop with frog-related titles?” Not to mention that everyone is starting college in September and I have yet to send in a single application. It was the result of great procrastination, living a life with no direction, and trying one too many clubs during high school and coming to the slightly disturbing realization that nothing seems to pique my interest. Not even the Culinary Club, which Suzy was certain I’d enjoy. Turns out eating food is a lot better than making it.

Suzy hides her laugh behind her drink. “How can I *not* resort to frog-related titles when you look like that?”

“Don’t come see me at work if you’re not prepared to handle all of this.” By *this*, I mean the fact that from neck to toe I am literally stuffed into a frog costume. My frog head sits next to me on the bench, taunting. Haunting. I see it in my nightmares.

Looming behind us is Monte’s Magic Castle, where I work and host kids’ birthday parties. My official job title is entertainer.

My unofficial title is Frog—one of the woodland crew. Is it my dream job? No. Is the pay good? No. Do I enjoy working there? No. Did I forget where I was going with this? Yes.

Suzy reaches for her camera and begins recording. “Stoooooooooooooop,” I groan, shielding my face with my hand.

“Just a quick clip of you in costume!”

“Ughhhhhhhhh.” I shrug off the embarrassment and let her do her thing. Who am I to question her creative vision? Not that I know what that vision *is*.

For the past month, Suzy’s been carrying that camera around every single day, recording snippets of me here and there. When I ask what it’s for, she says she’s getting a head start on a school project. When I ask what the plot is, she responds that it’s a study of the teenage American girl. As if there aren’t billions of books, movies, and television shows about that *very* unique experience. But she is my best friend, immensely talented, and I would quite literally do anything to help execute her creative vision. So.

“You know you already got into one of the most prestigious film schools in the country,” I remind her. Cornelia Film Academy has been all Suzy has talked about since she took a film class sophomore year. In a split second she found her calling: a director. When the acceptance letter from CFA came in the mail, we both cried for different reasons. Suzy cried because she got in; I cried because the school is in California, on the opposite side of *the country*.

Even now, when Suzy talks about leaving and starting a new life at CFA, it's like my emotions are split in two. Part of me is so unbelievably happy and excited for her, while the other feels like one gigantic bruise.

I am hyperaware that this summer is our final countdown. The last few grains of sand are draining through our friendship hourglass. Anything beyond August feels like uncharted territory.

Suzy brightens, in a very specific way that only happens when discussing film. "I may have already been accepted at CFA, but that doesn't mean I can't get a head start and be at the top of my class," she says.

"Well, save some storage space for our end-of-summer road trip," I remind her.

Suzy snaps the cap on the camera lens and snorts. "We have the *idea* of an end-of-summer road trip."

We've been planning it since we were kids—one summer, we'd drive straight to California. We'd have a yellow Jeep Wrangler, drive down the Pacific Coast Highway, and blast Katy Perry's "California Girls" because . . . duh. It was a dream we put off every single year—until now. This is kind of our last shot. And with Suzy heading there for college, it's the perfect excuse to make one final core memory as I drive her there instead of crying in the airport as her flight boards.

Not to mention that I've never left the state of New York. A very large part of me has the sneaking suspicion that life may

become infinitely better once I leave Ridgewood in the rearview.

“But we don’t have a car,” Suzy points out, “which is kind of crucial when planning a road trip. We’re already using the little cash I have saved up for gas, but we still need, you know, a *vehi- cle*.”

I wave my hand in the air, dismissing her concerns. “I told you what happened with my parents. I’m working on it.” Initially I asked my family if I could borrow one of their cars, and it was a hard *no*. But my parents promised that if I could save up twenty-five hundred dollars by the end of summer, they would chip in the other half so I could buy a used Nissan that’s for sale at a dealership in town.

Plus, diving headfirst into planning this road trip helps take my mind off the gigantic question mark that is my future.

Suzy clears her throat. I stare down at the table, suddenly very interested in the grains on the wood. Is this oak? Maple? Cedar? Maybe I should Google it.

“And how much money have you already saved up?”

“What was that?” I ask. “Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

I yelp when her foot collides with my shin. “Answer the question, woman. How much money?”

“That’s confidential.”

“More than a thousand?”

“Suz, I get paid to dress up as a frog. What do you think?”
Whoever said money can’t buy happiness was insane. Like, I’m

pretty positive I'd be *quite* happy with a few million dollars lying around. Or even just twenty-five hundred dollars, to be exact.

"I can't believe our dream of a yellow Jeep is turning into a beat-up Nissan." She groans.

Picking my phone off the table, I pull up the *iDiary* app. My blog loads, and I type out a quick text post: *anyone know any good get-rich-quick schemes?* I post it to my two hundred followers. I pretty much use my blog to shitpost whatever thoughts come to my head. I mean, my account name is @shitjackiesays, so it can't be taken *too* seriously.

"What are you doing?" Suzy leans across the table to peek at my phone. She shakes her head like a disappointed mother. You're way too obsessed with that app." She undoes her long black braids and begins retying them as I watch with envy. My wild brown curls could never do that.

"Am not," I say, attention back on *iDiary*. I refresh my activity section, checking if there are any new notifications—comments, followers, messages, that kind of stuff. There's nothing. Typical.

"I got a notification last night when you posted at three a.m.," she says matter-of-factly.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Yes, because you're on your phone all night."

"I have two older sisters and parents who regularly enjoy shoving their noses in my business. I don't need any additional judgment, thank you very much," I say. As I'm about to close the

app, the alarm I set goes off, signaling that my lunch break is over.

“That extra-long break went by oddly fast,” Suzy says, slurping the final dregs of her latte through the straw.

Technically, my lunch breaks are a short fifteen minutes. But my manager, Monte Jr., is so laid-back he’s practically a beach chair. Well, that, and he’s carrying the weight of running his family’s business on his shoulders. The man is so perpetually stressed, I swear he develops a new wrinkle every week. On the bright side, he’s so busy running around that he barely has time to actually, you know, *manage* his employees. It’s been said that we may take advantage of it.

Which is why tomorrow being his last day is soul crushing. (And why I need to make the most out of my extra-long breaks while I still can. For example, today’s fifteen has turned into a forty-five.)

“You know how Monte Jr. is,” I say. “He won’t even notice I was gone.”

“I wasn’t talking about Monte Jr. I’m talking about Wil—”

I cut her off before she can so much as speak his cursed name. “We don’t talk about *him* on break. Remember?”

Suzy smirks. “How could I forget. Sorry.”

Ignoring that, I stand up, dust the crumbs off my costume, and tuck the frog head under my arm.

Suzy pops the lens off the camera. “Let me get one last shot of you walking inside.”

I've been embarrassed enough today. "Not a chance. Stop profiting off my misery."

"But it's so fun," she whines.

I make it halfway to the door when she calls, "Jackie—put the frog head on!"

With nothing else to lose, I do.

CHAPTER 2

FRIDAYS ARE OUR BUSIEST day at Monte's. There are three birthday parties booked, and it's a zoo of screaming kids running around, fighting over the arcade games, leaving a trail of tickets all over the floor, and eating too much pizza before throwing it all up. I pose for a photo with Anita, my coworker, who rocks a very adorable squirrel costume, and the birthday girl, who just turned six and wears a bubble-gum pink dress with puffy sleeves and a hemline covered in ruffles.

"Can we get one with just the frog?" the mother asks, her face half hidden behind a very expensive camera.

Anita whispers, "Clearly she finds you *ribbiting*," and giggles as she walks away.

I snap a couple more photos before I'm finally released. I spot Anita hovering near the air hockey machine, watching two young boys locked in a very intense battle.

“Don’t go into the break room,” she immediately says without tearing her eyes away from the match.

“Why?”

“Justin and Margaret are making out.”

It’s not the first time Monte’s prince and princess have been caught in a compromising situation.

“That’s not very royal of them,” I say. One of the boys scores and lets out a scream.

“If I have to see that girl’s boob one more time, I’m calling HR.”

“We don’t have an HR team,” I remind her.

She turns to me and says, dead serious, “Then I’m calling the police.” Anita tucks a few pink hair strands beneath her costume.

“Maybe our new boss will have less of a tolerance for rule breaking.” A bit ironic, coming from the girl who sneaks away every thirty minutes to smoke.

“Speaking of . . .” I say. “Who do you think it will be?”

“No idea,” Anita says. “Before Monte Jr. stepped in, his brother ran this place. Before him, it was their dad. I wonder if they’ll try to keep it in the family.”

I’ve heard the story too many times to count. Seven years ago, Monte Sr. passed away unexpectedly of a heart attack. He had built this business from the ground up, named it after himself and everything. After he passed away, his eldest son took over. Then it got passed on to Monte Jr., who’s been running it ever since. It’s practically been a Ridgewood staple for decades. As much fun as

it is to poke fun at it, there isn't a child who hasn't celebrated at least one of their birthdays at Monte's Magic Castle.

"I wonder if our new boss will give me my old job back," I grumble.

Long story short, I started working here as a waitress last summer. The tips were decent and the job was fairly easy, since our menu consists of maybe ten items that are all deep-fried. Then six months ago, the world collapsed around me as I was demoted to frog duty.

Those waitress tips would really help with this car dilemma. And solving the car dilemma would really help get me out of this town.

"How long are you stuck in frog purgatory?" Anita asks. "It feels like forever ago when that whole situation went down."

Just the brief mention of my villain origin story conjures up memories of *him*. Shaggy brown hair and a stupid, perfectly ironed button-up shirt. The storage room in the back of the building, where I was perched on a stool, hiding away on my phone instead of working. And *him*, barging through the door, catching me red-handed, and ratting me out to Monte Jr. That day, I lost my job and gained an enemy.

Anita lets out a low whistle, giving me a look. "My bad," she says, her hands up in surrender. "I should know better than to mention Wil—"

"Please don't say his name," I beg.

"Fine. Let's change the subject— How's your hot sister?"

This topic is somehow worse. “My *what?*”

“Your hot sister,” Anita repeats casually. “I saw her drop you off at work today. What’s her name?”

“First of all, gross. Second, I have two sisters.” “Well, which is the hot one?”

“You must understand why I can’t answer that.”

Anita just laughs. “She had a shaved head and was blasting old rock music.”

“Oh, that’s Jillian,” I say. “Is she single?”

“Anita, you’re not dating my sister.”

“Who said anything about dating? Dating sucks,” she says. “After I broke up with my ex, I swore to myself there’d be no more commitment until I hit thirty-five. Maybe even fifty.”

Since I grew up with two older sisters who dished out their fair share of heartbreak, that sentiment comes as no surprise to me. I was nine years old, tucked into bed with Julie and Jillian, listening to the ins and outs of their relationships—and believe me, there was a new one every week. When it comes to dating, there really isn’t much that can surprise me now. What I lack in dating experience, I make up for in secondhand knowledge.

“Jillian’s the same,” I say. “She’s not the dating type.”

Anita grins, like that’s exactly what she wanted to hear. “Interesting.”

I’ll ignore that. For now.

When the air hockey match ends, Anita turns her large squirrel

head to me. "I'm going for a smoke," she declares, undoing the Velcro strap of her squirrel head and marching outside.

To my left, a child throws up.

If there is one thing this job has given me, it's killer reflexes for moments like this. I jump back before the spray hits my costume. The boy who lost the air hockey match is wiping vomit off his mouth with his shirtsleeve.

I should call for help. I should grab a mop. I should most definitely help this kid find his parents. But today's vomit count is a mind-blowing four, and I still have three hours left in my shift. So instead of helping, I run in the opposite direction and hide.

Monte Jr. finds me minutes later, crouched behind the ball pit. "Sorry, Jackie." He visibly winces as he hands me a mop. I take one glance at the stressful shade of red blooming on his cheeks and the permanent frown lines on his forehead. His hairline has receded so far it looks like it too is running away from this place.

Tomorrow, he'll finally have a taste of freedom.

The mop hangs between us.

"I've cleaned it three times today," I whine.

A baby's scream pierces my ear. Monte Jr. cringes. There is a flash of something in his eyes. Regret? Terror? The sudden desire to sell this place to the highest bidder? He blinks, and the usual exhaustion is back. He holds the mop higher.

"Please," he begs. "No one cleans vomit quite like you do." The worst part is that he's right. No one does clean vomit like I do. I wear my vomit-cleaning talent as a badge of honor.

Then I remember what Anita said about my frog purgatory. This could be my last chance to leverage my skills for a promotion. To reclaim what was once rightfully mine and get my old job back before Monte Jr. is no longer in charge.

I grab the mop. "I'll clean it—" "Oh, thank *God*."

"On one condition. I want to talk about this," I say, gesturing at my frog costume. "I've been stuck in this costume for two months now. I want to be a waitress again."

"Oh," Monte Jr. says. He scratches the top of his head. "I thought you were enjoying this new role."

"Uhm, what on earth made you think that?" Does the permanent scowl on my face radiate joy?

"Look, Jackie." He looks behind both shoulders, scanning the area before lowering his voice. "You're aware there is going to be some . . . restructuring happening within the company. New management is being announced during that private event we are hosting tomorrow. I won't say too much for now, but I'm sure we can discuss altering your job title."

Like the sky after a storm, the clouds over Monte's Magic Castle part and sun bursts in through the windows. I hear birds chirping, angels singing. I envision a future where the color green ceases to exist and I never have to wear this horrific costume again, a future where I'm making enough money to give Suzy the send-off she deserves, road trip style.

Altering your job title.

And just like that, the chaos quiets for a moment and life feels exciting again.

“Sounds good,” I tell Monte Jr., flashing him a rare smile.

“Vomit’s in the dining area. You got this!”

I locate the mess and begin cleaning the floor with a new vigor. Wait . . . Am I *actually* excited for work tomorrow? That has never—

“Why are you smiling?”

Ughhhhhhhhhh. I’d rather clean vomit indefinitely than deal with him.

I focus intensely on the floor, hoping that, if unacknowledged, Wilson will go away, kind of like a bumblebee.

“I know you can hear me,” he says.

If there is one thing Mr. Bossy Know It All hates, it’s being ignored.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I say. Prepared to tear through this entire interaction as quickly as possible, I meet Wilson’s gaze. He is seated at an empty table, spawning there like the devil himself and flipping through an enormous book.

“*Employment for Dummies?*” I ask.

As usual, he doesn’t crack a smile. Instead, he watches me with that intense, steely glare, his pristine white shirt buttoned all the way up to his neck. Today he wears his green Monte’s Magic Castle vest over it. My attention snags on his name tag: Wilson, Assistant Manager.

There has never been a title so wrongfully given.

Wilson slams the book shut and shows me the cover. *Understanding the Ins and Outs of Corporate America*. So just some light reading. Lovely.

“Hate to break it to you, but this job is the furthest thing from corporate America,” I say. “Plus, don’t you learn about that at your fancy business school?” When he isn’t spending his summers haunting these four walls like a poltergeist, Wilson goes to a business school in New York City. I’m not sure which, but I suspect it has a very high acceptance rate.

He straightens up in his seat. Going to business school is practically Wilson’s entire personality. “I do,” he says proudly.

“It’s summer break,” I point out.

“I’m aware,” he says.

Understanding that this conversation’s pulse has flatlined, I continue scrubbing the vomit off the floor. Actually, I sort of forgot that’s what I was doing to begin with. Now, the water in the bucket has turned a murky brown, and it’s beginning to smell. At this point I’m basically making a bigger mess.

“Why are you studying in the summer?” I ask. Just then I remember the half-eaten Twix I shoved into my pocket earlier today.

Wilson watches me eat with nothing but sheer disgust on his face. “How can you possibly eat that while you’re cleaning up vomit?”

My teeth sink into the chocolate-caramel goodness. “Look where I work, Wilson. If I struggled to eat near gross smells, I

would have died from starvation months ago." I peel off the wrapper and attempt to fling it at Wilson's head. It lands about eight feet to his right.

He sighs.

"You didn't answer my question," I say to distract from my terrible aim.

His fingers skim through the textbook pages. "I'm not studying. I'm reading this for fun."

"That's what you read for fun?"

"Yes, Jackie. Not all of us are illiterate." Wilson stands, tucking in his chair by lifting it off the ground so it doesn't make a scratchy noise. With his book in hand, he takes a few steps toward me.

Accepting that the floor is not getting any cleaner, I stop mopping. "I'm not illiterate. I can read your name tag easily." I tap the cool metal pinned to his shirt. "Wilson Monroe, Assistant Dickhead."

He makes a big show of examining my costume head to toe. "Right. And you don't wear a name tag, because you're a frog."

"Actually, it's because it clashes with my look."

"And what look is that?" he prods.

"Amphibian chic," I say, squaring my shoulders like one dignified lady.

"Not the word I had in mind."

I have to actually force myself to breathe out through my nose so I don't combust from anger. And he knows it, too. From

the way that stupid grin splits across his ridiculous face, Wilson knows *exactly* how to get under my skin. The easiest way? Mentioning the costume. Why? Because I am staring at the man who did this to me.

You see, two months ago Wilson walked through the doors of Monte's Magic Castle with a briefcase in hand and a mission to ruin my life. And actually, what nineteen-year-old carries a briefcase? Like, just say you've never been kissed, and—

Anyway. Wilson is Monte Jr.'s nephew, hence he was able to strut in here with a cozy little job title and an ego the size of a freaking blimp. On day one, he was bossing people around. It was "clean the bathroom" and "try to look a little happier when talking with guests." How about you try to remove my foot when I shove it up your—

What was I saying? Oh yes. That first day. Wilson was not a fan favorite around here with the other employees. He just didn't fit in.

Like, everyone who works here is bonded by two things: a deep hatred for this business and the fact that we are broke teens struggling for a minimum wage paycheck. So for Wilson to not share any of those qualities? Yeah, he stuck out like a sore thumb. But *whatever*. That's cool. Hey, it's not your fault you were born into generational wealth. I would have been all fine and dandy to coexist with him, sharing the occasional glare and "good morning" grunt.

Wilson, on the other hand, had something much different in mind.

Treachery.

He was a treacherous little traitor.

Only a month after he started working here, he caught me doing what he refers to as “time theft.” It was the day that Julie and her fiancé, Massimo, got engaged. My phone was blowing up—missed call after missed call. I was in the middle of serving four tables, but I couldn’t focus. In an anxiety-ridden rush, I hid in one of our storage closets, perched myself on a stool, and *finally* checked my messages. I quickly realized the good news and sent appropriate—and slightly unhinged—memes to the family group chat and a long text to Julie about how happy I was for her, adding that I absolutely refused to wear a pink bridesmaid dress. Then the storage room door burst open. There stood Wilson, looking ten different shades of angry. And there I sat, tucked away in the corner of this darkened room on my phone, having completely lost track of time.

Long story short, Wilson ratted me out to Monte Jr., saying that I wasn’t fit to be a waitress.

Apparently, my four tables all complained and threatened to never return.

Apparently, I was the worst waitress in the great state of New York.

In an extremely hasty decision, Monte Jr. stripped me of my apron and sentenced me to amphibian jail. The next day I was given my new costume and job title: entertainer. Every day since, Wilson has had the satisfaction of seeing me like this—parading

around kids' parties in this green outfit, carrying my shame day after day.

I've contemplated quitting, but we are too far into the summer season now for me to find a new job. New positions won't open until the holidays, and I can't possibly go that long without a paycheck, not with Suzy and our road trip on the line.

"What are you doing?" Wilson asks.

Snapping back to reality, I realize I've been glaring at him while leaning against the mop. "Thinking," I say.

"Huh, didn't know you could do that."

I clench my jaw, breathing out through my nose like a furious dragon ready to blow flames. "And I didn't know you could read," I grit out. "When'd you learn that?"

"Shortly after I became assistant manager and you turned green," he says.

And then he does the most insane, humiliating thing possible. Wilson pats the top of my froggy head with his hand, all while his face is home to the most bloodcurdling smile I've ever seen.

As he walks away, there is one thing I'm certain of: in a world with infinite timelines, I hate Wilson Monroe in every single one of them.