

Chapter One

Jen loved this time of day, when everyone was still asleep and the house was silent except for the sound of the clock ticking in the living room. The sun was coming up, painting the sky in shades of pink, purple, orange and red. The colors matched the paint she had loaded on her paintbrush. She studied the canvas propped up on the easel by the window.

She created some of her best work in the early hours of the morning when everyone else was asleep.

As the sky slowly got brighter and brighter and the birds outside got louder and louder, Jen added the finishing touches to her painting. Happy with the final result, she stretched her back with a low groan.

“How long have you been up?” her mom asked from the studio doorway. Jen’s dad had converted the sunroom for her so she had somewhere to work and store all the art supplies that used to clutter every available surface.

Jen yawned. “I don’t know—since five thirty maybe?”

Her mom stepped into the room. She leaned over Jen’s shoulder and studied the painting. “You finished!” she said, taking a sip of her tea.

“Yeah. What do you think?”

“I think it’s beautiful, honey.”

“Thanks. I wanted to get it finished before my art school audition today.”

Her mom looked at Jen over the rim of her teacup. “Which pieces are you choosing for your portfolio?” she asked.

Jen looked around the room and frowned at the canvases propped up against the walls and the drawings tacked to every surface.

“I’m not sure yet. A couple of paintings—and I still want to do a multimedia piece with the feathers you gave me. Some of my drawings...” She sighed. “How am I supposed to know which ones the judges will like?”

Her mother smiled gently and blew on her tea before taking another sip.

“Choose the pieces that speak to you the loudest. The ones that show others who you are. Those are the ones that will get you into that school.” Then Jen’s mom left the room as quietly as she had entered it.

The sun had fully risen by the time Jen started flipping through the canvases, trying to decide which ones to include.

A grape bounced off her head and rolled under her easel.

“Hey!” Jen looked up to see her brother, John, standing in the doorway, holding a bag of grapes. He grinned at her and popped one into his mouth.

“Whatcha doing, pest?” he asked.

“How am *I* the pest in this scenario?” Jen laughed. Her brother was annoying—like all brothers were. But if she was being honest, she had to admit that he was one of her favorite people. They always had each other’s backs.

John came into the room and held out the bag of grapes. She took one and looked around the room.

“Which ones do you think I should bring to my audition?” she asked, waving her arms wildly. “I can’t decide! Can you help?”

John popped another grape into his mouth and threw an arm around his sister’s shoulder.

“Let’s take a look, little sis,” he said, steering Jen toward a pile of watercolor paintings in the corner.

Chapter Two

After about fifteen minutes of wading through the various pieces scattered around the room, Jen had a nice pile of art for her audition.

“I like this one a lot,” John said, holding up a watercolor that Jen had added beadwork to. It had taken ages to get the beading right, and she still had a bruise on her finger from poking it repeatedly with a needle. But the work was one of her favorites.