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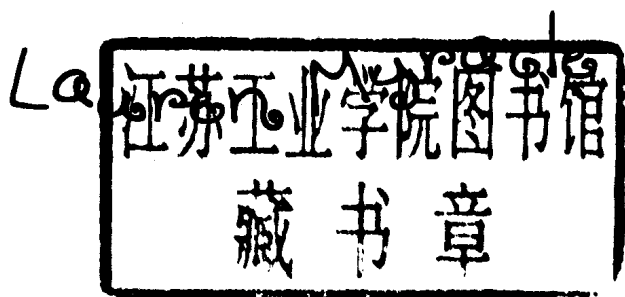
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Lauren Myracle

Eleven



DUTTON CHILDREN'S BOOKS @ New York

# For Suzybell and Julianne

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Eleven





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I love you with all my heart.



Eleven





# March

THE THING ABOUT BIRTHDAYS is that everything should go just right, at least on that one day. And so far today has been perfect, even without cupcakes to pass out during lunch. Not in fifth grade, I told Mom. In fourth grade, sure, but not in fifth. The only kid who'd brought birthday cupcakes was Dinah Devine, and that was at the beginning of the year, so she didn't know better. That's one problem with early birthdays: no one knows what'll be cool and what'll be stupid.

March birthdays are better, like mine. And this birthday in particular, because today is March 11, and today I am eleven years old. It'll only happen like this once, which is why it's especially wonderful that everything's been going so well. Waffles for breakfast, crispy but not burned. At school, a heartfelt chorus of "Happy Birthday," with me beaming at the front of the room. (Ignored Alex Plotkin's bit about monkeys and zoos.) And now, back home in our den, I get to hum and bounce on the sofa to my heart's content without Mom putting her hand on my shoulder and telling



me to relax. Not that I *could* relax even if I wanted to. Because in ten minutes or possibly less, I'll have arrived at the best part of the entire day. My party!

During art, Amanda and I had planned out the whole evening, from activities to cake to presents. Ms. Straus had let us scoot our chairs together, and we talked while we drew. Lately I've been liking to draw girls hanging by their knees off tree branches, while Amanda tends to sketch cheerleaders doing daring, fantastic jumps.

"I think you should do presents before cake," Amanda had suggested as she shaded in her cheerleader's skirt. "That way people can have time to digest their pizza."

"Plus, that means I'll get to open the presents sooner," I said. I knew that sounded rude, but with Amanda I could say anything.

"What's your top birthday present ever?" she asked. "Your very favorite thing you ever got."

"From my parents or someone else?"

Amanda switched pencils. "I already know your best gift from your parents: your CD player. From someone else."

I claimed the blue pencil and worked on my girl's shorts. "Well, I *love* the heart necklace you gave me last year."

She rolled her eyes like, *go on*.

"Other than that, I'd guess I'd say my crutches." They were old-fashioned wooden crutches with rubber tips, and they were awesome for acting out stories about brave

crippled children or amputees. I'd found them when I was helping my aunt Lucy set up for a garage sale, and she let me keep them as a thank-you-slash-early-birthday-present.

"The crutches are great," Amanda acknowledged, "but what I got you this year is even better." She grinned at my expression. "I can't wait until you see!"

I couldn't wait either, which made me think of another terrific thing about March 11. This year it fell on a Friday, which meant I got to have my party on the exact day of my birthday. Last year it fell on a Wednesday, and the following weekend I had a haunted-house birthday even though it obviously wasn't Halloween. Mom made a cake shaped like a ghost, and my sister Sandra dressed up like a witch and stirred a pot of witch's brew down in the basement. It was really a pot of dry ice we got from Baskin-Robbins, but the steam made it look spooky, and Dinah Devine screamed and got the hiccups and had to be taken upstairs. Then my little brother Ty wet his pants and started to cry.

Another good thing: Mom's paying Sandra ten dollars to take Ty to Chuck E. Cheese, his favorite place in the world. He could spend eons there.

From the window, I saw a blue Honda pull into the driveway. I scrambled off the sofa and called, "Mom, get down here!" I opened the front door and ran to greet Amanda, who was carrying a medium-size box wrapped in bright green paper. "Amanda! Finally!"

Amanda twisted away with her present, which I was trying to wrest free. “Hands off,” she said.

“What is it?” I begged.

“Oh, like I’m going to tell you.” She poked my shoulder. “My mom wants to talk to your mom.”

“Why?”

“She just does.”

We went inside, and I leaned on the railing of the staircase while Amanda put her present in the den. “Mom!” I yelled. “Mrs. Wilson needs you!”

“Winnie, please,” Mom said. “I’m right here.” She clopped down the stairs in her low-heel shoes. “Hello, Amanda. I like that shirt you’re wearing.”

I looked at Amanda’s shirt—white with purple stripes—and for a second I wished I’d worn something other than my McDonald’s shirt with a picture of a Big Mac on the front. *Oh, well.* Another car pulled into the drive, and Amanda and I dashed back out.

“It’s Chantelle,” Amanda said. She waved. “Chantelle, hi!”

Chantelle is Amanda’s and my second-best friend. We met her on the first day of third grade, when Mrs. Katcher tried to guess what everyone’s name was. Mrs. Katcher kept frowning at Chantelle and trying new names, until finally she put down her roll book and said, “Sweetheart, I give up! There aren’t any more boy’s names left!”

Amanda and I found Chantelle during morning recess

and told her Mrs. Katcher was crazy. Didn't she know girls cut their hair short, too? We told Chantelle she looked sophisticated, like a model, and Chantelle smiled and lifted her head from her arms.

Now Chantelle's hair reaches almost to her shoulders, and today she held it back with a big, silver barrette that matched her silver earrings. She handed me a small box wrapped in shiny red paper and said, "Here. Happy birthday."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll put it inside with Amanda's."

Chantelle bumped Amanda's hip. "Is it . . . you know?"

"Is it *what*?" I demanded.

"Yes, but shhh," Amanda said. To me, she added, "And don't try to worm it out of her."

"Hi, everyone!" called Dinah Devine as she struggled out of her dad's station wagon. She wore a bright pink party dress, and her hair was pushed back with a matching plastic headband. Her smile stretched too wide across her face.

"Here," she said. "Happy birthday." She held out her present, a lumpy package tied with yarn.

"Thanks," I said. Dinah is somebody I try to be nice to at school, but I wouldn't have invited her to my party except Mom said I had to. Her dad works with my dad, which in Mom's mind meant Dinah should be included.

But along with her too-wide smile, Dinah is one of those people who laughed too late when someone makes a joke, or too loud, or too long, like, "Ha, ha! That was so

hysterical!” even when the joke was really dumb. And if someone says something mean, like “We weren’t talking to *you*,” or “You don’t even get it, do you?” Dinah never says anything back. Although one time she told our teacher, which was a mistake. Then the kids called her a tattletale, too.

Dinah’s mom died when Dinah was a baby, which was really sad. I try to remember that. But sometimes the whole mess of it wears me out.

A car horn honked, and Dinah jumped. We moved to the edge of the driveway, and Louise’s mom pulled up with Louise and Karen in the backseat. Louise and Karen are best friends, the kind who wear matching outfits to school and loop identical friendship bracelets around their wrists. Today Louise had on blue overalls and a white shirt, while Karen was wearing white overalls with a blue shirt. Karen trailed Louise up the driveway and smiled as Louise said hello for both of them.

“What now?” Louise said after we went inside and deposited their presents with others.

“Well,” I announced, “we have very exciting plans. *Shockingly* exciting. Right, Amanda?”

“Shockingly,” agreed Amanda.

I glanced from face to face. “I am pleased to inform you that tonight we will be performing a play written by yours truly. It is a dreadful and chilling play. It’s called *The True Tale of Sophia-Maria: A Tragedy*.”

Louise frowned.

Dinah looked concerned.

“Who’s Sophia-Maria?” Karen asked.

“Sophia-Maria is a girl exactly our age,” I said. “She has lustrous black curls and violet eyes, and she never did anyone a moment’s harm. But sadly, she is snatched from her home and taken to France, where she becomes a scullery maid for a horrible baroness.”

“A scullery maid?” Karen repeated.

Louise sighed in a very loud way. “No offense, but could we *please* not put on one of your plays? You always get to be the heroine, and the rest of us get stuck being butlers or ladies-in-waiting.”

“I get to be the heroine because I made it up,” I explained. “But you can be the horrible baroness if you want. She’s hunchbacked from riding camels, and she lisps.”

“I don’t want to be the baroness,” she said. “I don’t want to be anything.”

This was a problem with Louise. She could be extremely difficult. I tried to appear agreeable while at the same time indicating with my tone that Louise was being a spoilsport. “Well, what *do* you want to do?”

“We could give each other makeovers,” Chantelle said.

“Karen’s mom won’t let her wear makeup,” Louise said. “Not until she’s in junior high.”

“Maybe that telephone game?” Dinah said. “Where

everybody whispers something into the next person's ear and it comes out all silly?"

"Wait," I said, sensing my plans slip from my grasp. "In the play there's a plague, did I tell you? Sophia-Maria gets horrible boils, and—"

"I know!" Louise said. "Do you still have that electric chair? The one that old lady used to use?"

"What old lady?" Karen asked.

"Mrs. Robinson," I said. "The lady who lived here before us. But—"

Karen's eyes grew big. "She had an electric chair?"

"Not *that* kind," Louise said. "Not where you get electrocuted. Tell them, Winnie."

I told them how Mrs. Robinson couldn't move around very well because she was, like, ninety years old, so she had an electric chair installed in the back staircase. It's an ugly vinyl chair connected to a steel track, and under the arm of the chair is a button, kind of like a doorbell. When you press it, the chair travels up the track. Or down the track, if you start at the top.

"It's not that exciting," I finished.

"It's better than doing a play," Louise said. She headed for the kitchen, and the others followed. By the time I caught up with them, they were crowded around the foot of the back staircase with Louise perched on the cracked vinyl seat.

"Everyone watching?" Louise asked. She punched the

“start” button, and the chair lurched up the stairs, motor whining. We heard a thunk when the chair got to the top, and Karen shrieked.

“It’s okay,” Louise called. “It always does that.” The motor whirred and down came Louise, sitting proudly like a queen.

“Now you,” she said to Karen.

Karen hesitated, then climbed onto the chair. “Like this?” she said. She pressed the button and squealed as the chair started back up the stairs.

“Mrs. Robinson?” I said, raising my voice to be heard over the motor. “The lady who lived here? She was so old she *died* in this house. My sister Sandra was afraid to move in because of ghosts.”

That wasn’t exactly true. Sandra was just trying to scare me.

“I *think* she died in the electric chair,” I said even louder.

“Ooo!” everyone cried.

“Karen, you’re sitting on a ghost!”

“Karen and ghostie, sitting in a tree!”

“Hey, I want to sit on the ghost!”

“Me, too!”

“Hurry up, Karen! You’re squishing the ghostie!”

Karen climbed down, and Chantelle and Amanda got on to do a partner ride, with Amanda sitting in the seat of the chair and Chantelle balanced on one of the arms. Then



Karen went again, although she still didn't have the hang of it. She kept letting go of the "start" button, making the chair stall out. She giggled each time, and the others yelled, "Karen! Push the *button*!"

Louise reclaimed the chair, and I sat down on the lowest step, wrestling with my disappointment. It wasn't that I wanted to be the boss of everyone, but I'd worked hard on *The True Tale of Sophia-Maria*. I'd seen in my mind how it would be performed, and how afterward, as everybody congratulated me, I would blush modestly and say, "It was nothing. I just like to make stuff up."

And it *was* a heart-wrenching story. Sophia-Maria lost three fingers due to the plague, and the baroness cast her into the street with nothing but a tattered gray shawl. She had no friends, and she wandered the earth singing mournful songs. Finally she was killed by a pack of wild javelinas, and when everyone found out, they felt terrible for not treating her more nicely. The last line of the play, to be delivered by the butler, was, "For the welfare of all children, for the consideration of poor, innocent girls and boys, and for the bettering of your community as a whole, I beg you: BE KIND TO A STRANGER TODAY!"

Louise clunked to a halt at the bottom of the staircase. "That's how you do it," she said to Karen.

"Can I have a turn?" Dinah asked.

"No," said Louise.

"Why not?"