

Petdemonium

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Chapter 1

Imagine That

Brenna figured she was crazy.

Not crazy like Ms. Morgenstein who collected everything cat, but had an eye-watering super-sneezing fit anytime a real one came anywhere near her. Also not crazy like Hairy Harry whose wrinkled clothes merged with his wrinkled face as he slept on the park bench and drooled into his scraggly gray beard. More like a seeing-things kind of crazy.

Because for half a second, that stray puppy across the street had looked like something else; something with a face instead of a muzzle; something with hands instead of paws; something blue instead of brown; something super weird.

Brenna hugged her knees to her chest. *Its okay*, she told herself. This was her porch, her creaky steps, her droopy potted daisies, and her home. She was safe here. She had to be. She glanced at the dog and then quickly away, because she didn't want to see what she thought she saw.

But she could still feel those big brown puppy eyes staring at her. So she couldn't help it. She looked again.

The puppy wagged its tail. Then it grinned in a dog slobbery way almost like it was reassuring her that it was just a simple ordinary little dog. Or maybe it was laughing at her.

If she told Mom about the dog, she'd probably laugh, too. Not at Brenna, but with her, in a secret family joke kind of way, because Brenna had what Mom called an over-active imagination.

As a really little kid Brenna had used that imagination to make up stories. Like when she said the vase was broken because she had to throw it to scare away the

burglars. And like when she said she hadn't washed behind her ears because the extra dirt trapped noise and helped her to hear better. And like when she said she kept her room messy to confuse the nightmares so they couldn't find her in her dreams.

Mom said Brenna had to learn the difference between telling a story and telling a lie.

Brenna was older now, almost twelve, and she'd grown out of all that make-believe nonsense. Well, mostly. Until lately. Until today.

"I just imagined it," she said out loud to convince herself it was true.

Baxter plopped down on the porch steps beside her. "Imagined what?" he asked as he passed a soccer ball between his orange-sneakered feet.

Brenna twisted a strand of hair around her finger. Baxter's make-believe talents were a close second to hers. It's what made them friends. It's also what got them into all kinds of trouble. But if anyone would understand, he would. "It's that stray dog."

Baxter nodded toward the grinning puppy. "That one across the street? What about it?"

"I don't like it," Brenna said.

"You don't?" He stopped soccer-ball-bouncing in surprise. "But you love all animals."

It was true. The more Mom and Dad laid down the no-pets-allowed-in-this-house law, the more Brenna ached to own one. "Well, I don't love this one," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Stare at it."

"What for?"

"You'll see." Or maybe he won't. Then what?

"You want me to have a staring contest with a dog?" He laughed.

Brenna crossed her arms and scowled at him. "I'm serious."

"Okay. Okay. A staring contest it is," he said, but a small grin still curled the corners of his mouth. "Betcha I can win." Elbows on his knees, he cupped his chin in his hands and fixed his eyes on the dog. "Say 'go.'"

She might have, just to make sure he kept staring, but she didn't have to.

Because he quickly flinched and pulled back. "Whoa!" He rubbed his eyes. "What

was that?”

Brenna leaned forward. “What’d you see?”

Baxter glanced at her and then at his hands. “You say first?”

She twisted her hair tighter and tighter around her finger. “I saw a thing with narrow green eyes, blue spiked fur, and hands and feet instead of paws.”

Baxter nodded.

The dog’s grin faded. It cocked its ears toward them and stepped into the street.

“It’s like one of those pictures where if you look at it long enough you see another picture hidden inside it,” Baxter said.

“Or like a mirage,” Brenna said. “You think you see something, but it’s all wavy and blurry and you can’t quite make it out. And just when you think you can...” She snapped her fingers. “It’s gone.”

The dog’s eyes narrowed. It crept closer and glanced up at the mailbox. Its lips moved like a kindergartner reading to itself.

“So are we seeing things?” Baxter asked.

“Both of us? The same thing?” Brenna shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

The dog stalked across the lawn, lowered its head, and growled as if they’d just stolen its favorite toy.

Baxter picked up his soccer ball. “I think we better go inside,” he whispered.

They rose to their feet as if pulled up on a string. Move slow. Don’t startle it. Walk backwards. Intimidate it with a powerful glare. No. Staring had started this weirdness. Lay down and play dead. No. That was for bear attacks.

Baxter decided for her. He grabbed her arm, yanked her inside, then slammed and locked the door behind them.

Brenna parted the blinds and peered outside.

It was leaving in a happy-puppy tail-wagging lope.

Then for half a second the tail was a spiky stub.

The lope was a waddle on short legs.

And its soft brown puppy fur bristled into pointy blue quills.

Brenna blinked. No stubby tail. No blue quills. Just a cute little brown puppy.

“Is it gone?” Baxter asked.

Brenna nodded.

Baxter sighed. “Good. Do you think we’re safe in here?” he asked.

“Of course we are. Dogs can’t open doors.” Then Brenna had a sudden shivery thought. Dogs had paws. But that other thing, that thing they’d glimpsed, it had fingers, thumbs, and hands.

Dogs can’t open doors. But maybe *it* could.

Chapter 2

Not a Dog

“What was that thing?” Brenna asked.

Like maybe Baxter had access to a Wikipedia guide to the wacky and weird that she didn’t. “I don’t know,” he said, picking up the phone. “And I don’t want to know.”

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He tapped the talk button. “Calling my dad to come get me.”

“But you only live two blocks away.”

“I know, but if I walk home that thing might follow me. And if it finds out where I live, it might... Hello, Dad. I’m at Brenna’s. Can you come pick me up?”

It might what? Brenna’s imagination kicked into hyper watched-too-many-horror-movies mode. *Don’t be ridiculous*, she scolded herself. But the rising goose bumps on her arms refused to be rubbed away.

“Why can’t I walk home? Well, I...” Baxter gazed up at the ceiling in full excuse-making mode. “I hurt my ankle.” He shifted his weight to one orange sneaker as if that could make it true. “And it hurts to put weight on it.”

Baxter ‘okayed’ a couple of times. Then he hung up, hugged his soccer ball to his chest, and stared at the door. They both did for five silent minutes. Apparently not talking about creepy spiky creatures meant they couldn’t talk about anything else.

When the doorbell rang, they jumped, then pretended like they hadn’t.

Baxter peeked through the window. “It’s my dad,” he said with a relieved smile.

He limped first on one foot and then the other as he followed his dad to the car, but his dad didn’t seem to notice.

After they drove away, Brenna clenched her fists and gave her predicament a few seconds of careful thought. That bristly creature was somewhere out there. She could either hide in her room forever, or be brave and go about her business, or move away,

far far away.

She was pretty sure Mom and Dad wouldn't go for the whole moving far far away thing and she was too young to move by herself. Large bugs and dark corners crept her out, so bravery was not exactly what she did best either. Hiding in her room seemed like a good idea until she tried it. First of all, with the door shut she couldn't see if that thing was coming for her. Way spooky. Second of all, after the first couple of hours it was super boring.

Third of all, Mom wouldn't leave her alone.

"Brenna, are you okay?"

"Brenna, it's too beautiful a Saturday to spend it inside."

"Brenna, dinner's ready."

Okay, so there was a fourth of all. She was hungry and hungry beat creeped-out every time.

She opened her bedroom door. No dog in the hallway. She peeked into her parent's room, into their study, even into the bathroom. No dog anywhere in the house. Not surprising. Every month for the last six years, she'd asked Mom and Dad for a pet.

"Pets are a huge responsibility," Mom said.

"We can't afford one," Dad said.

"They shed and poop everywhere."

"They chew up furniture and toys."

"You'll just get too attached to it, and then it will run away or get sick and die."

Parents could be so cheerful sometimes.

And then there was the ultimate parent argument. She couldn't have a pet because they said so.

So Brenna fed peanuts to Nubby, a half-tailed squirrel who lived in the park. She snuck meat scraps to Caper, the gray neighborhood cat. And she put out string in the spring for Squawker, a blue jay who nested in their tree.

And then the next month came. And she asked for a pet. Again.

And her parents said "No. Because we said so." Again.

But today, just this once, she was glad for the no-pets-allowed rule.

Brenna settled into her chair at the dinner table. Her family never ever ate in front of the television. No 'gadgets' allowed at the table either. It was a "Mom" rule.

Mom sat to Brenna's right. Dad sat to Brenna's left. Mom was a pediatric surgeon. Dad was a cop. If Brenna got hurt, Mom could fix it. If something came after her, Dad would throw it in a cage or shoot it. What could be safer than sitting between her parents?

So, halfway through the meal, Brenna took a chance. "Mom, Dad, I saw something really weird today."

"Yes, dear. Would you like some more potatoes?" Mom asked.

"It was in our front yard this morning," Brenna said.

"That's nice, honey," Dad said. "Pass the meat, please."

"Baxter saw it, too," Brenna said.

"Uh, uh," her parents said.

Brenna pushed her peas around on her plate. This was getting her nowhere. Years of her imaginative stories had dulled her parents' willingness-to-believe receptors. And it probably wasn't the best idea to use Baxter, another known overactive imaginer, as a witness.

She tried again. "There was this stray dog right outside, and when I stared at it I saw—"

"Was it running in circles or foaming at the mouth?" Dad asked.

"No, but—"

"Are you thinking it had rabies?" Mom asked.

"It's the right time of year for it." Dad's trigger finger twitched.

Mom shifted into worried doctor mode. "Never touch a stray," she scolded. "They're full of germs and ticks and fleas."

"I didn't touch it, Mom, but it was—"

"In our front yard?" Dad got up and opened the front door. Hands on hips and feet apart in his cop stance, he glared around the yard. "Where is it?" He waited a couple of seconds, but when the yard didn't come clean, he rounded on Brenna. "Can you describe it?"

"He was little with brown fur and big brown eyes. But that was only on the outside. On the inside—"

"You dissected it?" Mom asked, with a mixture of horror and my-daughter-might-be-following-in-my-footsteps pride.

Dad's eyes narrowed as if he were sizing up a future serial killer.

“I didn’t hurt it,” Brenna said before her dad slapped on the cuffs. “It was just a little brown puppy, but then Baxter and I stared at it and—”

Mom suddenly pointed out the window. “Is that it?”

Brenna chanced a glance. “Yes.”

And then they were both staring right at the dog.

Brenna bit her lip. Now she won’t have to tell them. Now they’ll see for themselves. They’ll know what she knows and figure out a way to get rid of the spiky-haired thing. But the staring went on and on, for seconds, for minutes, for way too long. “Do you see it?” she finally asked.

They both nodded like synchronized bobble heads.

“Chase it away,” Brenna said.

Dad’s trigger finger didn’t flex, not even a little bit. “He looks harmless.”

“It probably has rabies or loads of diseased fleas,” Brenna said.

“He looks clean,” Mom said.

“But if he hangs around,” Brenna said, “he’ll make a mess and poop in our yard.”

“You won’t mind cleaning it up, will you, Brenna Dear?” Mom said.

‘Brenna Dear’ was a warning and a warm-up to another because-we-said-so. But Brenna wasn’t giving up. Not yet.

“But I—”

“After all, you’ve always wanted a dog.”

“But it—”

“They’re such lovely creatures.” Mom gazed at her with glazed eyes. “I can’t imagine why we’ve never gotten one before.”

Without looking at each other, Mom and the puppy nodded in unison.

“But you... but I... but it...” Brenna sputtered in frustration.

“Now, Brenna Dear,” Dad said.

Uh oh. A double ‘Brenna Dear.’ This could not be good.

And it wasn’t.

Dad turned. He looked at her with the same glazed-over eyes as Mom. “Owning a pet will be good for you. It will teach you responsibility.”

“But I don’t want to be responsible.” Brenna pointed at the brown puppy on the sidewalk. “And I don’t want a dog. Especially not that one.”

“But we need a pet,” her parents said at the same time. Then the puppy, Mom, and Dad did the bobble-head nod in unison. “Every human on Earth needs a pet.”

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