



macarons at
midnight



Suzanne Nelson

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Aviva and Isaac, with love.

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Chapter One

I knew my Valentine's Day was doomed when I glanced into the mirror and an amphibian monstrosity stared back at me. My outfit could've been a ballet costume from Cirque de Horriblé, with lime-green crinoline petals making up the sweeping, ankle-length skirt, and green and pink sequins glittering all over the leotard-like bodice. And I was going to a party in it? My social life in Whitman would never recover. I sagged against the bathroom door, then jumped when someone knocked on it.

“Elise, if you don't hurry up, we're going to be late.” The voice was high, nasally, and *annoying*. Destry. I'd only been living with my stepsister for a week, but I could already tell by her tone when she was getting irritated, or impatient, or both. “Lise, *come on!*” Definitely both.

I sighed, then opened the door onto a hallway of expectant faces.

My dad took my hands, leading me out of the bathroom, and looked from me to Destry and back again. “*Lindo maravilhoso!*” he exclaimed. “Beautiful, marvelous! Would you look at my two *anjinbos!*”

My dad is from Brazil, so I’m used to him sprinkling Portuguese words in here and there. But he’s never said “*anjinbos*”—plural—before. My stomach lurched. Since when did Dad call Destry his “little angel?” That was *my* nickname . . . not hers.

“Aaaaah, Lise.” My stepmom, Gail, smiled from over the top of her ballooning baby belly. “You’re so colorful . . . and cute!”

I smiled politely, but who was she kidding? She’d only tossed the *cute* in there as an afterthought to make up for *colorful*. Words like *colorful* and *interesting* were what people used when all flattering adjectives failed.

“That’s such an interesting mask,” Gail added. *Bingo*. She leaned forward for a closer look. “Your dad told me you made it yourself.”

I nodded. My mask was a glittered green lily pad adorned with a pink flower and tiny gold frog. It was the only part of my garish outfit I actually liked.

“She’s going as a frog,” Destry quipped, giggling. “She already *sounds* like one.”

“I’m getting over a cough,” I muttered. No way was I going to admit that she was right. I’d been hoarse for the last week. “And I’m a frog *princess*,” I corrected, stiffening.

“Of course! Very clever!” Gail tilted her head. “Destry . . . isn’t that the costume from your seventh-grade *Nutcracker* ballet?”

Destry nodded, smiling. “Lise didn’t have a costume and it’s a masquerade party.” She smoothed her own flawless white maxi dress, then adjusted her sparkling swan mask. It set off her platinum hair and fair skin beautifully. “It was the only thing I had that fit her,” she added casually. “I’m taller than she is.”

I stared at Destry, knowing that wasn’t exactly true. There had been a gorgeous teal sheath dress in her closet that was just my size. When I’d suggested adding a feathered headband to make it into a peacock costume, Destry had blown off the idea.

“Oh no,” she’d said. “That’s the dress I wore to homecoming. It’s special. I was crowned freshman princess in the homecoming court. Besides, this color would completely wash you out,” she’d scoffed.

“Lise, wasn’t that nice of Destry to loan you something?” Dad urged. “And to offer to take you along to the party?”

“Um . . . sure,” I mumbled, my cheeks flushing. “Thanks, Destry.” It was what he and Gail expected me to say. Last night, I’d overheard Dad and Gail telling Destry she *had* to bring me along.

“Lise doesn’t know anyone here yet,” Dad had whispered while I’d eavesdropped from the kitchen. “It would be a wonderful way to make her feel welcome.”

“But she’s a year younger than I am!” Destry had complained. “Freshmen don’t hang out with eighth graders.”

“At this party they do,” Gail had said firmly. “I already spoke to Becca’s mom about it. She said Becca’s brother, Kyan, and some other eighth graders will be there. So you’ll take Lise with you, or you won’t go at all.”

“Fine,” Destry had snapped.

Today, though, I sensed Destry's growing grudge like an encroaching glacier. Of course, she was smooth enough to hide it from Dad and Gail. She smiled with those round blue doe eyes. "I'm glad you're coming along," she said to me. "It'll be fun."

"Well, just look at the two of you," Gail said, beaming and patting her belly, "already hanging out together. Swapping clothes. I knew it was a good idea for you to share a room."

I stared at the floor, not wanting my face to give me away. The fact was I hated sharing a room with Destry. She had a wardrobe to rival the Princess of Wales that constantly spilled over onto the floor and my bed. Plus, she had decorated the room to look like one enormous purple feather duster. When I'd tried to hang up my poster of "The Greatest Newspaper Headlines of All Time," Destry had said, "I'm not so sure that goes with our décor, are you?" Not wanting to pick a fight, I'd stuck the poster under my bed. Nothing about the room felt like me. Each time I set foot in it, I was trespassing on Destry's territory.

Dad held up his camera. "Okay, who's ready for a Kodak moment?"

“Dad, please. No pictures,” I moaned. “We’re already late.” I definitely did not want my hideous outfit immortalized in the annals of the Santos family history.

“Lise is right,” Destry said as a horn honked from the driveway. “That’s Mrs. Michaels and Heidi now. We’ve got to go.” She headed for the front door.

“All right,” Dad said, making a show of putting down the camera in exasperation. He kissed me on the forehead. “Have fun. I’ll see you in a few hours!”

Fun. My insides quaked nervously. Fun would be a long shot, but I promised myself to give it a try.

“Sorry we’re late,” Destry said to her equally glamorous friend Heidi as we climbed into the minivan. “Lise took forever to get ready.”

I gaped at her. “You were in the bathroom for two hours before you let me have it for fifteen minutes!”

Destry shrugged. “You didn’t need as much time. I had to straighten my hair, do my makeup. You never bother with any of that.”

Heat swept my cheeks. Sure, I usually stuck with a more au naturel look. But tonight I’d actually brushed on some light

mascara and lip gloss, and tucked my mane of thick espresso-colored hair into a knot. It was the best I could do with so little time, but apparently it hadn't done much at all.

I sank back, wishing I'd just opted to stay home tonight. I'd been in the small town of Whitman, Massachusetts, for a week, but it seemed like an eternity since I'd said good-bye to the cozy fifth floor walk-up I lived in with Mom and Bill in Boston.

My life had been going along perfectly. I was a mostly A student, editor-in-chief of the school paper, and I had a close-knit circle of friends I'd grown up with in the city. I'd even been glad when Mom married Bill a few months ago. I liked him, he loved Mom, and I loved seeing her so happy. It had been working out great . . . until Bill took a six-month work assignment in Switzerland, and Mom decided to go with him.

"It'll be fine," Mom had told me as I tried not to cry. "Your dad's been wanting to spend more time with you anyway. You can live with him this spring, finish out the school year, and then visit us in Switzerland for the summer."

Part of me had wanted to move to Switzerland with Mom and Bill. I'd always lived with Mom, and I barely knew Dad's new

family. Before he remarried, he used to come into Boston every other weekend to see me, and during baseball season, we'd gone to almost every Red Sox game together. But since he married Gail, I hadn't seen as much of him. He'd invited me to Whitman over and over again, but I'd only visited a few times, feeling awkward around Gail and Destry. Still, though, the practical part of me argued to move in with Dad. Next year, I'd be starting high school. That was huge. But it meant I had to finish up eighth grade first, and it made sense for me to stay in the US to do it.

So here I was, in Whitman, dressed like a tulle-covered tadpole, being dragged to a Valentine's party, missing Boston more with each passing second.

"Here's the deal," Destry said when we arrived and climbed out of the van. "I'll introduce you around, but I'm not going to babysit you. I want to have fun with my friends tonight. Got it?"

"No problem," I said, trying to make my voice as cool and casual as possible. I climbed out of the van, gazing at Becca's lit-up house. A heart garland hung on the door. My own heart tossed uneasily in my chest. I hated parties; I hated small talk; I hated meeting new people. This was going to be a disaster.



I flattened myself against the heart-festooned wall of the living room, feeling invisible. True to her word, Destry had introduced me to some people, and then disappeared. There were other eighth graders at the party, but apparently Becca's brother, Kyan, was hiding in his room (I was jealous), and the other kids who were my age didn't seem interested in becoming my BFF.

Now, I watched as an eighth-grade girl named Vivika (Viv for short) stood in the center of the crowd, beautiful and model-tall in her Cinderella-esque gown.

"I can't believe you're doing a photo shoot for *Tween Glam* next week," one of the other girls was saying to Viv. (So she *was* a model. I'd nailed it.) "I sooo want your life. You probably get to meet such cool people."

Viv nodded, but the tiniest flutter of frustration crossed her face. "It's okay," she said, with less certainty than I'd expected. Could a reluctant model actually exist? "But I have to make up all the schoolwork I miss, and most of the time I'm actually just waiting around . . ." Her voice died as the girls looked at her in disappointment, and I guessed they'd probably hoped to hear

some story about a celeb sighting instead. Then Viv's face brightened. "But I *do* get to keep the clothes! There's this dress that'll be perfect to wear to winter formal. Trent will love it."

Immediately, the girls erupted in twitters of excitement, and Viv's smile widened as she reclaimed her audience with a description of the dress. I thought about contributing a *cool* or a *wow* to get my foot in the conversational door, but just as I opened my mouth, Viv and her followers disappeared into the kitchen. I sagged against the wall, relieved that they were gone but also frustrated that I'd missed yet another chance to be social.

I scanned the room for Destry but didn't see her among the pink and red balloons and streamers. I knew Dad was coming to pick us up at eleven—it was nine-fifteen, and I didn't know how I could survive almost two more hours. I headed for a chair in the corner, weaving through the maze of masqueraders.

As I sat, I studied the room, and instantly saw a half a dozen headlines in front of me. My best friend from Boston, Simone, always joked that I couldn't turn off my journalist brain, and maybe it was true. Right now, the model-girl Viv seemed to be having a heated argument with the boy I could only assume

was her boyfriend, Trent. Destry's BFF, Becca, was busy flirting with some boy dressed as Zorro. From the looks of things, there were at least two break ups happening, three crushes starting (CUPID'S ITCHY TRIGGER FINGER), plus a chocolate-eating contest (TOP TEN WAYS TO EAT YOUR HEART OUT THIS VALENTINE'S DAY!) at the snack table. I pulled my cell phone out of my clutch and texted Simone.

Me: Breakings news. LISE SANTOS HEADS FOR SOCIAL SUICIDE.

Simone: LOL. Quit headlining. Ur not trying hard enuf.

Me: EZ 4 u 2 say. Ur eating ice cream & watching vampire romance right now.

Simone: It's chocolate & zombies. Miss u.

Me: U 2

Suddenly, I heard the word *frog* float through the room, and I glanced up from my cell.

"I feel sort of bad for her, being Destry's Step and all," Viv was saying, not two feet from where I sat. Her back was turned to me, and I guessed she didn't have a clue I was within earshot. "She'll never get out from under Destry's shadow.

Especially dressed like that, poor thing. That tutu is the color of . . . of pond scum!” Laughter erupted around Viv, and even though I couldn’t see her face, I was sure she had to be reveling in it.

I stared at her back. So now I didn’t even have a name besides Destry’s Step?! I leapt up, prepared to defend myself even if it meant making a scene in front of a room full of strangers. But the front of my skirt caught on something, and I heard a loud rip. I glanced down in time to see Viv slide her foot out from on top of my hem. Several of the crinoline petals on Destry’s dress were torn and dragging along the floor.

“Oh no,” I moaned, lifting the skirt to assess the damage. Destry was going to freak when she saw it. “It’s ripped,” I said helplessly, glancing at Viv.

Viv gasped, her cheeks blushing bright pink, and a flicker of dismay crossed her perfect features. “Oh . . . I’m . . . I didn’t see you there.” For a split second, she looked ready to apologize. But then Trent snickered from where he was standing a few feet away.

“Oblivious as always, Viv,” he said. “All beauty, no brains.”

Viv's blush deepened as she frowned at Trent, her lip trembling slightly. Then she straightened, glancing back at me. "It's your fault," she said matter-of-factly. "You weren't paying attention." Then she turned away.

"But . . . you . . . I mean . . ." The words died in my throat as my pulse roared, and suddenly, tears of humiliation were stinging my eyes.

I lifted my torn skirt and pushed past Viv, heading for the front door. I couldn't stay in this house a second longer. I didn't care what Destry did or didn't do. I was getting out of here.

I grabbed my jacket from the coat hanger and threw open the door, stumbling into the icy night air. I'd written a lot of articles for my school paper back home about the worst Valentine's Days ever, but there was no doubt about it. This one took the cake.