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THE
Princess
AND THE page
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*Sleuthing 101: Walk on the balls of your feet.
Bare feet are best for silence and speed.*

WEDNESDAY (MERCREDI) JANUARY 15TH

None of this would have happened if Mom had just made macaroni and cheese for dinner. After all, it's got grain and cheese in it. That's two of the five food groups! But no, Mom went on this health kick ever since Dad's doctor told him he had to watch his blood pressure.

"It's time this family got healthy," Mom announced, taking the saltshaker from Dad's hand. "No more eating fast food and frozen dinners."

And that's how it began. The crazy grocery lists, the printed recipes scattered about the kitchen, and her cooking—or should I say burning?—exotic dinners. After last night's near fire fiasco, Mom decided, to our relief, to order our dinners from Healthy Meals Delivered.

"It's the perfect solution," Mom said.

Dad and I agreed.

But tonight as I stare at the dinner menu, I'm thinking charcoaled chicken might not be so horrific.

“This looks great!” Dad kisses Mom on the cheek before filling in the time he arrived home from work on the Lists and Charts Wall. Last year, Mom bought a wall-size whiteboard that she dedicated to keep track of everything we do. When I asked her why, she said it relaxed her.

It’s annoying how Dad always goes along with Mom’s crazy schemes. Like the charts and graphs and endless non-sense lists and rules. And especially the No Writing Stories rule because apparently stories are a waste of time. Or the craziest one, No Pens in the House rule. Who on this planet has rules like those?

No one. (Oh, wait, no one except *my* family.)

The doorbell rings. Healthy Meals Delivered delivering right on time. I march to the front door, not caring that I’m tromping through the house in my soccer cleats, and fling it open.

A large man wearing all black and holding two square boxes fills the doorway. A green baseball cap covers most of his brown curly hair, and the bill is pulled down so low I’ve no idea how he can even see.

“Good evening,” he says in a gravelly voice. “I have a meal for the Harding family from Healthy Meals Delivered.”

“Thanks.” I take the boxes.

I push to shut the door, but his boot blocks the path. The man peers past me, assessing the house. I frown, now able to see the man’s face clearly. A jagged scar runs from the corner of his eye across to his ear. A trail of chills courses down my back. There’s something off about this guy.

“Your foot is in the way,” I point out.

“Ah, so it is.” He chuckles and then pulls it free from the doorframe. “Enjoy your food. And sweet dreams.”

Sweet dreams? What a weirdo. I secure the lock and head to the kitchen. Dad opens the boxes while Mom goes through

her list, double-checking the order. After she proclaims the meal satisfactory, we sit down to eat.

But I can't.

"There are green balls on my fish." I pick one up with the edge of my fork.

"Don't be silly, Keira." Mom says, nibbling on something that resembles a weed. "That's a caper. They're delicious."

Visions of creamy macaroni and cheese dance about in my head, causing my stomach to growl. I decide to make the best of this moment and practice my sleuthing skills. While Dad shows Mom his latest data-crunching report, I covertly slip the slimy tomatoes into my napkin and shove them under the edge of my plate.

I'm flicking my capers one by one over my shoulder as inconspicuously as possible, when Dad's fork and knife clatter to the table. His shoulders droop, and then he tumbles off his chair, crashing in a heap on the floor. Mom screams. She bends down, reaching for him, but then she, too, collapses, dropping at his side.

"What are you guys doing?" I say, completely mystified. "Is this a new game or something?"

They don't answer. I set down my fork and peer under the table. They both are so still. As if they were passed out. Or dead.

"Dad! Mom!" I jump out of my chair and dive under the table.

I kneel and grab Mom's hand, searching for a pulse. My breath catches in my throat and it's hard even to breathe, let alone concentrate on what to do next. My ears ring as I press my fingers to Mom's wrist to find a pulse. That's what they trained us to do in PE class. But I can't find her pulse. Every fiber of my being flies into a numbing panic.

Until Dad starts snoring. I pause, confused, and stare at

him. His chest rises and falls. Suddenly, my throat opens up and I'm able to breathe. Beneath my fingers, the gentle thump of Mom's pulse throbs, telling me she's going to be all right. A slight smile curls on her lips and her long blond hair lies about her as if she's pretending to be Sleeping Beauty and having the most wonderful dream.

"You're sleeping?" I say in a choked voice.

I shake Dad and yell in his ear, trying to wake him, but he continues to snore. What is going on? I don't understand why they're sleeping. I lie on the cold linoleum floor between them, burying my face in my hands, my mind whirling.

The front door squeaks. Footsteps clomp through the living room toward the kitchen. Someone is sneaking through our house! My eyes flutter open and I clutch Mom's hand so tightly it nearly turns ashen. I don't move. Through the kitchen chair legs, two sets of boots appear at the kitchen's entrance. My eyes trace up the figures. The boots belong to two men, both dressed in black, one wearing a green baseball cap. My chest stutters and I clamp my eyes shut. I should run, hide, but it's as if my body has forgotten how to move.

"They're out cold," one of the men says in a thick accent I don't recognize. Then he says something in another language to the watch on his wrist. "Let's move. We've got ten minutes max."

The boots tromp back into the living room. I quietly dig through Dad's pockets in hopes of discovering his phone. It's not there. He must have left it on his dresser to charge.

The men begin opening drawers, rifling through them. Papers flutter through the air. Pillows are slashed and feathers scatter about like snow. Picture frames are torn to splinters and lamps are shattered across the ground.

I lick my lips and focus on Rule #12 for sleuthing: "Walk on the balls of your feet. Bare feet are best for silence and speed."