

CHAPTER ONE

BABY RUBY?

It was the last weekend in May, and in room 618 of the Brambles Hotel in Los Angeles, Jess O'Fines was trying to zip up her new shimmery violet sundress without catching the soft flesh around her belly in the zipper.

"Too tight, babes?" her sister Teddy said.

"Are you saying I'm fat?" Jess asked, holding her breath.

"I'm just wondering if the dress is too *too* small," Teddy said from the plush rose carpet, where she was lying with her eyes closed, her feet on the bed, waiting for the electric-blue nail polish she'd painted on her toes to dry.

"You *do* think I'm fat, don't you, Teddy," Jess said matter-of-factly.

"I think you're yummy and sweet."

"Whatever that means."

"Warm blueberry muffins, delicious carrot cake. You're the best."

"Oh brother . . ."

And just then their real brother, Danny, flew into the room with Baby Ruby under his arm like a football.

“Jess,” he said, out of breath, half-dressed, no shirt, his belt unbuckled.

Jess, in that frantic way he had of announcing an emergency, as if he had just exploded all over the hall of the Brambles Hotel.

Jess didn’t even lift her head from the job of zipping — her dress *was* a little too tight in the waist, very tight around the rib cage, but she’d been able to fit into it when she tried it on at Lateda Dresses in downtown Larchmont, next door to the wedding dress store where her sister Whee was shopping.

“I have a problem, Jessie,” Danny said.

“Me too,” Jess said. “I’m trying to get dressed for the party tonight.”

All year, Jess had been waiting for this weekend in Los Angeles, for staying at a hotel with room service, something she had never done before. There would be parties before the wedding and after the wedding and dancing and a swimming pool and the Pacific Ocean hammering the beach just outside the hotel balcony.

A normal family occasion like the ones she’d read about in books ever since she could remember, or seen on television and in other families in the neighborhood, or mostly dreamed about before she went to sleep at night.

“Bad news, babes!” Danny’s plump panda-bear face was white with shaving cream. “I’ve got to have your help.”

“It’s my twelfth birthday,” Jess replied without looking up. “I *can’t* help you.”

“*Yesterday* was your twelfth birthday, Jess, and I told you I have an amazing present in my suitcase for you that you’ll love.”

He took a sniff of Baby Ruby’s diaper and made a face.

“*This* is an emergency,” he said.

Jess had zipped the dress all the way up but she could barely breathe.

“A *heart-stopping* emergency.”

Danny O’Fines often had *heart-stopping* emergencies. Squash for the baby’s lunch burning on the stove, a fire in the washing machine, his keys dropped in the trash can and lost, Baby Ruby twice slipping off the bed while Danny was shaving or searching in the closet for the *right* shirt for the day. He was a stay-at-home dad with nothing to do but take care of Baby Ruby and go on the Internet to look for jobs while his bad-tempered wife, Beatrice, called Beet, was in medical school.

“This is the deal,” Danny began, taking a diaper out of the back pocket of his dress trousers. “I had everything organized with the hotel — the babysitter was coming at six thirty to our hotel room, 642. I called from home weeks ago and they said, ‘DONE, Mr. O’Fines. A babysitter will be knocking on your door at six thirty,’ they said. Her name is something like Melinda or Belinda or Melissa. And there I am

waiting for this truant, and nobody, not even housekeeping, appears. So I check the front desk of the hotel and they tell me ‘BAD NEWS, Mr. O’Fines.’ So, the babysitter we got for Baby Ruby blew us off.”

“Get another one,” Jess said.

“There isn’t another one. I asked at the front desk.”

“In the whole city of Los Angeles?”

Jess sat down on the end of the king-sized bed she was sharing with her sisters for the weekend.

This was the kind of thing that happened to Jess O’Fines, the youngest of the O’Fines kids, the baby in the family by three years, the only child left at home with their mother, Delilah, after the divorce was final and Teddy was sent to live at the home for juvenile delinquent girls to recover from kleptomania.

Tonight Jess was supposed to be wearing her violet dress and strappy high-heeled sandals to the rehearsal dinner in the hotel’s Bay Room overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Every single other person in her family would be there. Her brother and sisters and aunts and uncles, her cousins, her mother and father, and her mother’s best friend and her father’s tennis partner. She was *supposed* to be sitting at the head table between Whee, who would be marrying Victor Treat the next day in the garden of the Brambles Hotel, and her father, Aldie O’Fines, formerly Daddy.

Jess was Aldie’s *date* for the weekend.