

Deborah Kerbel

My Deal
with the
Universe



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Chapter 1



Let's just get this out of the way right off the top: My name's Daisy and, yeah, I'm *that* girl. The one who lives in the "Jungle." You know the house I'm talking about, right? The overgrown mess at the end of Bond Street? The one everyone stops and points at? The one neighbours complain about and mean kids throw rocks at? Well, that's my home. I live there with my parents, Nate and Frieda, and my brother, Jack, and our cat, Bobcat. You'd never know it, but underneath the tangled snarl of weeds and vines is a regular house.

In case you've somehow managed to miss it . . . well, if you're imagining the kind of pretty, quaint ivy-covered cottage you'd find in a fairy-tale book, I should stop you right now.

My house is not like that.

It's more like the plant version of Cousin Itt

from *The Addams Family*. That's a really old TV show, so go ahead and google it if you don't know what I'm talking about. But if you can imagine a giant, leafy, house-shaped, shaggy green blob then you're starting to get the picture. I'm pretty sure there's nothing like our house anywhere in the whole world.

Sometimes I'm sort of proud of that fact. Like those mornings when the birds nesting in the vines outside my bedroom wake me up with a chirpy serenade. Or in the fall when the leaves over my window change colour and it's like my room's been dipped in gold. But other times, like when the old couple next door yell at us and say our house is an "eyesore," I want to wear a paper bag over my head.

Mom says it's good to be unique but I'm not so sure she's right. Our neighbours hate us. Kids at school make fun of me because of where I live. They used to call me Jane (like from the Tarzan movie) and George (of the Jungle, of course). These days, they like to call me Weed — but with a really long *e* so it ends up sounding whiny, like a toddler on the verge of a really epic meltdown.

"Weeeee-eeed!"

If you knew me, you'd know this nickname's all sorts of wrong because weeds grow quickly. And I don't grow much at all. Not since I was nine and the whole trouble with Jack. But I don't want to talk about that right now.

I guess now you're probably wondering what it feels like to live in the Jungle, right? My friend Willow asks me that question all the time. Problem is, I never know how to answer. When you've lived somewhere your whole life, it's not like there's anything you can compare it to. It just feels normal.

Except my normal isn't a normal anybody else would understand.

Chapter 2



“Can we turn on the light?”

Willow’s yelling at me over the music. We’re lying side by side on the attic floor and we’re so close I can feel her breath on my face. The attic’s actually my bedroom. I guess it would freak a lot of kids out, but I don’t mind. The room’s shaped like a mini pyramid, with walls sloping over my bed and my desk. On rainy nights when the wind blows hard, you can hear it swirling around, like it’s going to lift the whole attic up and carry it away. Sometimes I fall asleep dreaming about where it could take me.

“Well, can we?” Willow asks again.

I shake my head. “Nope, not yet.”

She pokes her elbow into my side — the ticklish part right under my ribs.

“Come on, this is lame,” she yells, a little louder

this time. “It’s four in the afternoon and I can hardly see a thing.”

I don’t answer because “Paperback Writer” is my new favourite Beatles song and we’re almost at the best part and I’m trying to focus on the lyrics. This is supposed to be Junglecamp’s Music History hour. What is she doing?

Suddenly, the music disappears. I open my eyes to see Willow holding up the pair of earbuds we’d been sharing just a moment ago. She’s propped up on one elbow and she’s wearing the same don’t-mess-with-me-missy look on her face that Mom gives me when I ask for a raise in my allowance.

“I was listening to that!”

“But I’m trying to ask a question.”

“I know,” I say, reaching out to take the earbuds back.

“Really? ’Cause it doesn’t look like you heard me.”

“Of course I heard you. You were screaming in my face.” I’m grabbing with both hands now. But she laughs an evil laugh and hides them behind her back.

“So, dude — can we turn on the light? I’m gonna fall asleep here!”

I sigh loudly and let my arms flop back to the floor,

gearing myself up for a battle. Willow's my BFF and I love her like a sister, but she's one of those people who rarely takes no for an answer. Plus, she always puts on this pitiful-cute face when she wants something, like a puppy begging for a bone. Teachers *always* cave. So do her parents. Last year, it's how she ended up with the first cellphone in the entire fifth grade. Sometimes I cave too. But not today.

I turn onto my side and put my face right up in hers so our noses are almost touching. She won't have any trouble seeing me now.

"You know the rules," I say in my best robot voice. "Not un-til af-ter din-ner."

She giggles, and robot-voices me back: "But how would your dad know an-y-way? We are up in the attic. And he is a-sleep down-stairs!"

That's not a joke. My dad's a security guard for a shopping mall. He works at night and sleeps during the day. He'll probably wake up in time to make dinner for me and Jack before heading back to work for his next shift, which starts about an hour after Mom's shift at the restaurant ends. Sometimes she makes it home to see him for a bit before he leaves. But if traffic is bad, they miss each other completely.

“I don’t know *how* he’d know . . . he just would,” I reply, ditching the robot voice so she knows I’m being serious. It’s the truth anyway. Maybe it’s because he’s a security guard, but Dad’s got bizarre radar for sneaky stuff like that. And I don’t want to have to lie about it, just in case he asks. I’m the world’s worst liar. Mom says I’d be pathetic at poker. That’s the game where the best liar wins all the chips — except they’re not actually potato chips, so who even cares?

There’s an ant crawling up the inside of my arm. It’s heading straight for my pit. I squirm as the tickle gets stronger, but resist the urge to flick it away. We have a be-kind-to-bugs rule in this house. Enjoy them, ignore them or catch and release them. No exceptions. That rule was Jack’s idea, so we all go ahead with it. Nobody in our family argues with Jack.

Sitting up on her knees, Willow opens her eyes wide and clasps her hands together under her chin. Her smile glows brightly against the murky shadows of my bedroom. She looks like an angel in a Shawn Mendes T-shirt.

“Pleeeeeeease turn on the light?” she puppy-begs. “I’ll be your best friend.”

“You already are,” I reply, giggling as the ant reaches

my armpit. We've been BFFs since the day of my and Jack's eighth birthday. That was not long after he was diagnosed, and Mom and Dad decided to throw us a party to cheer us all up. They invited every kid in our class over for cake and cheesy party games. The whole thing was an epic fail. I can still hear the crying and screaming like it happened yesterday. Let's just say it was the last party my parents ever tried to throw here. All the kids were terrified of the Jungle. And the vines weren't even *that* bad back in those days. Most of the kids never made it up the front walk. A few of them got to the porch but turned and bolted before they could make it inside. Everyone except Willow. She smiled when she saw the vines. She squealed at the sight of all the little snails hiding under the leaves. And she actually happy-clapped when a baby squirrel poked its face out through the tangle of ivy covering the top of the entryway.

"Your house is fun," she said, breezing through the door, black braids flying behind her, grinning like she just won a free ticket to Disneyland.

Even though it was just the three of us, we played all the party games and shared the prizes. Willow told us to think of a perfect wish, then we stood side by

side and blew out the candles on our birthday cake — Mom’s homemade carrot cake with whipped cream icing. After Jack went to lie down, Willow and I sat at the table and ate the whole thing by ourselves. By the end of the afternoon, we were sick to our stomachs and promising to be best friends forever.

Even to this day, she’s the only kid I know brave enough to come into our house. Willow’s not afraid of anything. Gotta give her serious props for that.

“Okay, fine,” she huffs, handing me back the earbuds. Her puppy face droops into a pout. I feel bad. With all the vines covering the windows, our house is pretty dark. Unless someone turns on a light, of course. But we’re not exactly rich, plus Mom and Dad are big on energy conservation so they won’t let us use electricity until after dinner. I know, it sounds medieval, right? Like if my brother and I were characters in a book, we would probably be living off crusts of bread and sleeping in a dungeon. But it’s one of the few rules our parents give us, so Jack and I just deal with it.

Willow’s family *is* rich, so she doesn’t have to worry about things like that. I’m always offering to hang out at her house after school instead. But she never wants

to. She says she prefers the “aura” of the Jungle. FYI, she totally learned that word from my mother. Frieda and Nate don’t like labels, so technically they reject the term hippie — but that’s what they are. Solstice-celebrating, incense-burning, barefoot-loving, tie-dye-wearing middle-aged tree huggers. They’re all about communing with nature and saving the earth and living off the land and stuff.

“All right,” I say, sitting up. “We can cut Music History short today. If you want.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. I’ll admit, I get a bit weird about staying on schedule. But that sad-puppy face is hard to resist. And it’s only five minutes anyway.

“Great.” Willow turns off her iPod and shoves it in her pocket before I can change my mind. “Boggle?” she asks, nodding at the collection of games I keep under my bed. Word games are my thing. I’m obsessed with crossword puzzles too. They sell big books of them at the corner store and I buy one every month with my allowance. I work on a puzzle every night to help me fall asleep. I’m probably the only twelve-year-old in the world with pencil marks on her pillow.

Shaking my head, I point to the white dry-erase

board hanging beside my bedroom door. Flicking the tiny ant out of my armpit, I scramble to my feet. There's just enough light to make out the next activity. If I squint.

"Not now," I say, tapping my finger on the four o'clock slot. *Nature and Environment*. "It's time to go outside and check on the raspberries."

Now I guess if you want to get technical, we don't really have to go outside to study nature. We could just go down to the basement where the scary things hang out. But the sun is shining today and we won't have to argue about turning on a light in the backyard. Willow nods and jumps up. It's only the beginning of June and she and I both know the raspberries won't be ready until July. But it's on the schedule, so we have to do it. No skipping out on activities! The two of us agreed to that when we signed up for Junglecamp. Willow's the head counsellor but I'm the director. The director's the boss. I made us sign contracts and everything.

It's funny, at school Willow's the one who's always in charge. But here in the Jungle, it's the exact opposite. I'm not exactly sure why. I'm not sure Willow does either. But we both like it that way.

I grab my puffer and we head down two flights of stairs, tiptoeing so we won't wake up Dad and holding hands tightly like they're superglued together. Outside, I blink as the daylight needles my eyes and I clutch my puffer hard.

"Just a quick check, okay?" I say. Pollen season's in full swing, and unless it's sitting on a pancake, maple is not my friend.

Bobcat's on his leash in the yard, curled up lazily under the chestnut tree. We need to keep him tied up whenever he's outside, to stop him from eating Jack's chickens. And also from attacking the neighbourhood dogs, who all think our house is a giant bush and go out of their way to use it as a community toilet. Truly. Every day, dozens of local dogs trek over to our house for their daily pee. It drives Bob crazy. If he weren't tied up, I'm sure he'd be off on a revenge spree. There wouldn't be a dog alive for blocks.

I keep a safe amount of space between us, just in case he's awake and feeling grumpy. Technically, Bob is my pet. My parents got him the year Jack and I turned nine. Jack got a pair of chickens and I got Bob. They called him a birthday present, but I knew better. The only reason they bought him was for pest

control. They were freaked out after that one time I woke up screaming when a mouse scampered across my pillow. Jack says I must have dreamed it 'cause it's been years since he's seen a mouse in the house. But it's a true story. Cross my heart and hope to fly.

Fluffy and black with a long, sleek tail and dainty white paws, Bob had my heart from the second I saw him. But he's never, ever loved me back. He hisses every time I get close enough to pet him. Jack's the one he loves best.

Of course. Jack's the one everybody loves best.

The backyard is an obstacle course of overgrown weeds and stained patio chairs. Last week's laundry is still hanging on the line, waiting for someone to remember it. I make a mental note to bring it in later. If I don't do it, it'll probably stay out there till winter.

Standing on my tiptoes, I peer over the weeds and the vegetable patch and Jack's chicken coop into the perfectly manicured yard to the left. I breathe a sigh of relief. No Pitts in sight. Those two are so grouchy they make Bob look like a pussycat. In all the years we've lived beside them, I don't think I've seen either one of them crack a smile. And they definitely don't like kids — especially me and Jack. Pets, noise and

vines also seem to be on their hit list. Dad says there must be a good reason for all their grumpiness. Just wish I knew what it was.

Turning back to face my own yard, I hold my breath and squint my eyes. And just like that, the weeds and clutter and smelly compost heap are gone. In their place is a campground. Lots of open space and rolling green hills. There's even a little lake in the distance. With a rainbow and a couple of fluffy white clouds.

It's perfect.

I take Willow's hand and pull her over to the raspberry bushes.

"After Nature and Environment, we have half an hour of free time before camp ends. So if you want to go back and do Arts and Crafts, that would be okay. Or we could play Bananagrams."

Willow shrugs. "Maybe both."

And that's how great a friend she is 'cause she doesn't even like playing word games. But she goes along with it for me. And I know it's not because I'm the director and she's just head counsellor. It's because she's the nicest person I know. And also the bravest.

But I already told you that.

I wish I could be more like her.