

Chapter One

“Knock-knock!” Teeny Nelson called through a knot-hole in the high wooden fence that separated the Nelsons’ yard from the Bishops’.

Melody pretended not to hear. She was on a mission. She had a serious sweet tooth and her personal candy fund was running dangerously low. That morning at breakfast her father had offered to pay her a nickel for every dandelion plant she could pull out of the lawn. Her plan was to try to earn enough money to buy herself a pack of Wild Berry Skittles – maybe even two.

“For your information, when I say ‘Knock-knock,’ you’re supposed to say ‘Who’s there?’” Teeny instructed.

“For *your* information,” Melody told her, “I’m busy.”

“Doesn’t look like you’re busy,” said Teeny, putting a big blue eye up to the knothole. “Looks like you’re picking dandy-lions. Can I help?”

It was a Saturday morning in May. The weather in Royal, Indiana, had been unseasonably warm for weeks, and the promise of summer hung in the air. A pair of cardinals was busy building a nest in a rhododendron near the northeast corner of the Bishops’ house, and somewhere down the street a lawn mower droned like a giant bumblebee.

“You’ll need to use the weed fork,” Melody’s father had explained. “You have to get out the whole root, otherwise the dandelion will grow back.”

The good news was the front yard was chock-full of dandelions. The bad news, Melody quickly discovered, was that she had significantly underestimated how stubborn a dandelion root could be. She had already been out in the yard for half an hour when Teeny showed up, and had yet to successfully pull out a single plant with the root still attached.

“*I said*, can I help?” Teeny repeated.

She had scrambled up the fence and was hanging over the top now. Her round face made her plump pink cheeks look like two dinner rolls sitting on a plate.

Melody sighed.

“Maybe your mother needs help with something at *your* house,” she hinted.

One of the many annoying things about Teeny Nelson was that she couldn’t take a hint. Another was that she asked too many questions.

“How come you’re wearing gloves?”

“Because I don’t want to get my hands dirty,” Melody answered.

“How come your hair’s so short?”

“’Cause I like it that way.”

“Aren’t you scared people will think you’re a *boy*?”

“I don’t care what people think,” Melody said.

Teeny Nelson had on a white tank top with pink lace trim, and her long blond hair was pushed back off her forehead with a sparkly plastic headband. Melody didn’t own anything sparkly. She wore jeans in the winter and cutoffs in the summer, sneakers year-round, and on top, either a T-shirt or one of her father’s old button-down shirts, untucked with the sleeves rolled up.

Melody jammed the weed fork into the ground beside a large dandelion as Teeny taunted, “I know something you don’t know.”

“Good for you,” Melody told her as she worked the weed fork back and forth to loosen the root.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what it is?”

“No.”

“It’s about *you*,” said Teeny, hoping to entice her.

“Still no,” said Melody. She couldn’t imagine what Teeny Nelson could possibly know that would be of any interest to her.

“Mama says you don’t have a mama,” Teeny blurted out, unable to hold it in any longer.

Melody snorted.

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I’m just saying,” said Teeny. “Mama says you don’t have one.”

Melody set down the weed fork and looked up at Teeny.

“Not that it’s any of your beeswax, but my mother died when I was born. So I *did* have a mother, I just don’t anymore.”

It was not a particularly sensitive subject for Melody. The fact that she didn’t have a mother was simply that: a fact. She and her father were very close, and it had always been just the two of them.

“Do you miss your mama?” asked Teeny.

“How could I?” Melody answered. “I never even met her.”

“Who cooks dinner for you?”

“My dad.”

“Who tucks you in at night?” asked Teeny.

“No one,” said Melody. “I’m too old to be tucked in.”

“Guess how old I am.”

“I don’t have to guess. I know how old you are — you’re six.”

“No I’m not,” insisted Teeny. “I’m *going on seven*.”

Melody gathered a handful of leaves and began gently pulling, trying to ease the dandelion plant out of the ground without breaking off the root. No such luck.

“Impudent weed,” she muttered, throwing the broken plant down on the lawn, which was already littered with a salad of leaf bits and decapitated yellow dandelion heads. Melody was aware that most ten-year-olds didn’t use words like *impudent*, but her father was a high school Humanities teacher. She couldn’t help it if she had an unusually large vocabulary for someone her age.

“Why don’t you pick the flowers instead of trying to pull out the whole ding-dong thing?” Teeny asked.

Melody didn’t feel like having to explain the dos and don’ts of pulling dandelions to a six-year-old.

“Are you sure your mother doesn’t need you for something at home?” she asked Teeny.

Teeny crossed her eyes and made a rude noise with her tongue, then let go of the fence and dropped back down into her own yard with a soft thud. Melody heaved a sigh of relief. With Teeny out of her hair, she could turn her full attention to her work. If things didn't pick up soon, she wouldn't be able to afford a single Skittle, let alone two packs of them.

Not long after, Melody's father came out to check on her progress.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Let's put it this way," she told him. "The dandelions are winning."

Her father laughed. "I'm going to walk down to Wrigley's to pick up a few things," he said. "Want to come along?"

"Absolutely, Boris," said Melody, jumping up and pulling off her gloves.

"As in *positively*, Doris?" her father asked.

"As in *affirmatively*, Boris," she shot back.

"As in *unequivocally*, Doris?"

It was a silly word game they'd invented called Boris and Doris's Thesaurus. Melody quickly racked her brain for another synonym.

"As in . . . *unilaterally*, Boris?" she said uncertainly.

Her father shook his head.

“Nice try, Mel. *Unilaterally* means something done without the agreement or participation of other people it might affect,” he said. “Come on — I’ll race you to the end of the driveway. Loser has to do the dishes tonight.”

Melody was pretty sure her father let her win the race, but she didn’t care. Lately he’d been so distracted he burned everything he cooked, and with all the pots and pans that needed extra scrubbing, doing the dishes had become a real chore. And his tendency to burn things wasn’t the only unusual thing she’d noticed about his behavior lately. He’d been whistling “You Are My Sunshine” pretty much nonstop for weeks, and just that morning he’d let the bathtub overflow for the second time. More than once Melody had walked into a room and caught him staring off into space with a goofy-looking grin on his face. When she’d asked him what was going on, he’d acted like he had no idea what she was talking about. But Melody knew her father better than anyone. Something was definitely up.