Chapter 1

The Golden Ticket

So here’s a riddle for you. What’s as annoying as an itchy sunburn and as stinky as a dirty sock? That would be my older brother.

“Lib,” Justice shouted, as his skateboard screeched to a halt in front of me. “You’re *not* gonna believe this; I was just at the mall, and—”

“You’re right,” I interrupted, “I don’t believe it, *you* inside a mall.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” He removed his baseball cap and wiped the sweat dripping from the blond waves now stuck to his forehead. “Well, I guess I won’t give you this!” He flashed a gold flyer in my face.

“What is it? Let me see!” I reached to grab it, but he yanked it away.

“You’ll have to catch me first!” Justice teased, and off he ran. I dashed after him into the house, through the living room, and into the kitchen, where our chase continued around the kitchen table. After a stare-down at the head of the table, I waited for Justice to make the slightest move. When he did, I proceeded to make *my* move by pulling one of the chairs out to stop him. Ta-da! Gold flyer.

“I can’t believe this,” I said, skimming the flyer. “Sir Frederick Prep is holding auditions for the *Royal Crown* singing competition! That’s only an hour away from us. Auditions are *this* weekend in San Francisco!

“Yeah, I know. I’m the one who gave you the flyer, remember?” Justice huffed, still trying to catch his breath.

“Gave me the flyer? Oh please, you mean you are the one who *lost* the battle for the flyer.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said with a sigh. “You owe me one.”

“Oh, thank you!” I shrieked.

I pushed the chair back and released my prisoner. “I’ll do the dishes for you tonight, Justy!” I shouted over my shoulder, taking the stairs three at a time.

I dialed my cousin Lincoln’s number trembling with excitement.

“Hey Lib, what’s up,” he said.

“Did you hear about the *Royal Crown* singing competition? Your school has opened up the auditions again, did you know that?” I leapt on my bed and started to bounce up and down.

“Actually I—”

“I wonder what happened to Fiona. She was just crowned queen of the singing competition not too long ago. Do you think she quit? Or was she *fired*? Here, I’ll read you the flyer Justice brought home from the mall.”

“Wait, what? Justice went to the mall?”

“Yeah, yeah, he graced the mall with his presence today.” I began to pace back and forth from my pillow to the foot of the bed.

“Whoa, chillax, I’m only messing with you.”

“Sorry, Linc, I’m just excited, and *you* will be, too, *if* you’ll let me read the flyer!”

I cleared my throat and then read the flyer as if I were some prime-time celebrity radio host:

**The reign of Queen Fiona is *through*.**

**The winner of the *Royal Crown* could be *you!***

**Open auditions will be held *this* weekend in San Francisco.**

**Saturday, June 11, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Pier 39.**

***Winner will receive a full scholarship to Sir Frederick Prep and an opportunity to meet with record labels.***

“Can you believe it? *Anyone* can audition! Why didn’t you tell me?” I flopped backward, bouncing as I sprawled flat on my bed, one hand behind my head.

A loud grunt came through the phone. “I was trying to tell you, but as usual, you didn’t let me get *One. Word. In*. And for the record— just because I go to school there doesn’t mean I know *everything* they do. You’re gonna audition, right?”

I sat up on my bed. “Um, no. *Weeee* are gonna audition and shake things up!”

“Oh, we’ll shake things up, all right,” Lincoln said, sounding less than thrilled.

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Saturday morning, audition day, I stood in front of my mirror, adding the final touches to my fiery locks of red before leaving for San Francisco—and seriously, what could possibly be better than *glitter*? It’s my *strongest* opinion glitter should be considered an essential accessory. Calliope, best friend and glitter sprinkler extraordinaire, was in the mirror behind me perfecting her art. Our hair … as different as our personalities. Mine is red and unruly, with a mind of its own. Calliope’s hair is brown and straight, with not a hair out of place—like the perfectionist that she is. Neat and tidy, she wore denim shorts, and her gleaming white shoes matched her collared button-up shirt.

Last summer at the end of seventh grade, Calliope, Lincoln, and I started a band. We named our band Nevaeh. It’s heaven spelled backward.

The sound of chanting drew my attention away from my now-shimmering locks of red. I pulled the curtains back from my window to see where the noise was coming from. My mom and dad stood next to their Volvo, holding good luck signs and chanting, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the best band of all? Nevaeh, Nevaeh, go-oooo, Nevaeh!”

I smiled on the inside but rolled my eyes in their direction for dramatic effect.

“Go-ooo, Liberty!” my dad hollered.

“Woohoo!” my mom squealed before leaping into the air and executing a cheer jump.

“Did your mom just do a *herkie*?” Calliope asked.

I furrowed my brow, “Yep, it looks that way. And *don’t* encourage her to do it again when we get downstairs! You hungry?” I asked, trying to quickly change the subject.

“Naw, I’m too nervous! My stomach’s doing more flips than an Olympic gymnast.”

I handed my guitar and our sheet music to Calliope, shoved my feet into my Converse shoes, grabbed my sweatshirt, and headed to the kitchen to grab something to eat.

My mom walked in from outside and headed toward the sink to wash the evidence of colored marker from her hands. “What are you looking for, Liberty?” she asked.

“Something to eat. I’m starving.”

“I can make you a turkey sandwich.”

“Mom, you know I’m vegan now. I don’t eat anything that once had a face.”

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying.”

“I was thinking, you know how my two favorite foods are peanut butter and dill pickles?”

“Yes …,” she replied hesitantly.

“Well, since I love them both, will you make me a peanut butter and pickle sandwich? It’s gonna be delicious!”

“Liberty, that’s *not* going to taste good at all.”

“Um, Mom—yes, it *will*.”

“Okay, if you say so,” she said with a smirk.

I handed her the peanut butter and grabbed the pickles I’d found in the fridge. After making the sandwich, she handed it to me and leaned against the counter to watch me eat it. I could not wait to prove her wrong. I took a bite and began to chew—and realized almost immediately the sandwich was horrid. However, I would not let Mom have the satisfaction of knowing this. So I did my best to pretend I was eating chocolate cake with hot fudge on top. After another detestable bite, I said, “Thanks, Mom!” Then, with an expression I hoped would say “de-lish,” I fled the kitchen, Calliope in tow. *Success,* I thought. *Point, Liberty.*

As we made our way out of the house toward the car, I threw the rest of the sandwich away in one of the outside garbage cans. Calliope made a funny face and stuck out her tongue. “It was gross, wasn’t it?” Before I could answer, we heard Justice shouting from the car.

“It’s about time!” He pointed to his watch. “Gil’s been waiting for me to be dropped off at his house for—*forever*. He’s probably old and gray by now.” Gil is Justice’s best friend. He’s *totally* swoon-worthy.

“Well, he’s not going anywhere fast, then,” Calliope teased.

Laughing, we piled into the car and waited for my parents. Once they finally made it to the car, we headed off to pick up Lincoln at the law office.

My mom passed me a paper bag. “I made you a snack, just in case you get hungry.”

“Thanks.” I stuffed the sack into my backpack. “So why are we picking Lincoln up at Dad and Uncle Blake’s law office?”

“Lincoln’s saying goodbye to Uncle Blake. He’s headed out of town for a couple of weeks to work on another high-profile case.”

“Oh, got it.”

“Duh,” Justice joked, elbowing me in the ribs.

“Ouch!” I said.

“That didn’t hurt.”

“Yes, it did.”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Oh boy, here we go again,” Calliope whined.

My dad adjusted the rearview mirror and then shot us the look that said, “if you don’t knock it off, I’m gonna pull the car over.” I quickly shut my mouth and made a mental note to get Justice back later. After we picked up Lincoln and dropped Justice off at his best friend Gil’s house, we headed across the Golden Gate Bridge to our destination, San Francisco. My dad prayed God would give us the desires of our heart. Little did I know the desire of my heart would come at such a high cost.