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opening extract from

Princess for Hire

written by

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published by

Egmont

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Princess for Hire first published in Great Britain 2010
by Egmont UK Limited
239 Kensington High Street
London W8 6SA

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Cover illustration copyright © Lucy Truman 2010

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ISBN 978 1 4052 4612 5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

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Chapter



If my life were made into a movie – *The Desi Bascomb Story Revealed* – I'd use artistic licence to make a few minor changes. Like switch the setting to somewhere besides Sproutville, home of the Idaho Potato Days Festival. And rewind back to the 40s or 50s, a time of flowing headscarves, glamour and what's-wrong-with-butter? cuisine. And cast Audrey Hepburn to play me (or a young Julie Andrews if Audrey was on another project). Oh yeah – I'd also give the director some small suggestions, just to add a little *je ne sais quoi* to the otherwise tragic script.

1. Avoid dressing me as a rodent on steroids. There's a reason models aren't sporting groundhog costumes

on the catwalk. Actually, make that one million nine hundred and thirteen reasons, all too gruesome to list.

2. Give me a cooler summer job than passing out goldfish coupons in front of a mall pet store. Literally cooler. Iffy AC plus world's worst work 'uniform' equals stinky, furry sauna.
3. Don't compromise my dignity in the presence of the popular people. Ever.

Basically, avoid portraying my actual 'life'.

But hey. There was one perk to wearing a six-pound groundhog head: while coupon-shoving and toddler-hugging and paw-waving on behalf of Pets Charming pet store, I could stare at anyone in the mall. Meanwhile, all they saw was Gladys the Groundhog's permanent smile. So my anguish was perfectly hidden when I spotted the recently crowned Miss Sproutville Spud Princess herself, Celeste Juniper, flirting by the mall fountain with my four-year crush, Hayden Garrison.

Ah, Hayden. My fourth-grade secret online Boggle sweetheart and the cutest boy in Sproutville. Even though he was over thirty feet away, the heat in my costume shot up a few thousand degrees, which would've happened even in the middle of an Idaho winter. You know the late actor Paul Newman? Way back in the day, before he was on the salad dressing labels, he had this wavy hair with steel blue eyes and a swoon-worthy smile, and . . . that's Hayden. Well, a thirteen-year-old version.

Celeste squealed while Hayden rifled through her shopping bags, which, knowing her, were filled with expensive, tacky junk, like 'Daddy's Princess' T-shirts. Laughing, Hayden dug out a pink-feathered purse that no doubt cost a flamingo its life. When Celeste's glossed lips settled into a pout, Hayden apologised and told her she could pull it off because she was the closest thing to royalty we had at Walter B. Sprout Junior High. She could even wear the purse on her delicate wrist as she waved to the masses lining Main Street for the annual Idaho Potato Days parade tomorrow.

Well, that's probably what he said. It's hard to read lips when you're battling rebellious tear ducts. Plus groundhog heads don't offer much visibility.

I looked away from the lovebirds. Winston, a bull terrier with beady eyes and foul breath, scratched the display glass and whimpered. He'd be graduating from puppy to dog very soon and still hadn't been adopted, poor guy. Sure, he wasn't the cutest doggy in the window, but he had a loyal charm. When he closed his mouth.

'Seriously, Winston. What is Hayden *thinking*?'

He cocked his head in sympathy, then noticed his tail and started chasing it.

I glanced back at the fountain. Oh no. Celeste, with her heart-shaped face and potato-fed freshness (that did not, I should add, match her less-than-sparkling personality), was headed my way! Any hope for social success next year would shrink to the size of her waist if she discovered me. I'd be lucky to reach school mascot level.

Celeste tapped her finger against the Pets Charming

puppy display window. Hayden jogged up behind her. She leaned into him and sighed. 'Aren't they soooooooo cute?'

'Not as cute as you.' Hayden instinctively flinched at his own lame line.

If he had said those words to someone else, it could have been sweet. Sweeter still if he was talking to me. I allowed myself a second to pretend he was.

'No, you're cute,' I would whisper from behind my locker door in the eighth-grade hallway where Hayden would meet me after every class.

'No, *you* are,' Hayden would say, looking sporty and gorgeous in his soccer jersey.

Then I would toss my suddenly bouncy hair and tilt my head at a flirty angle. 'We're perfect, aren't we?' I'd ask.

'Yes we are.'

'Ex-cuse me?' Celeste interrupted my daydream with a sharp finger-snap in my face. Well, in Gladys the Groundhog's face. 'Are these puppies for rent?'

'Don't you . . .' I coughed and tried again in a

squeakier, hopefully unrecognisable voice. 'Don't you mean for sale?'

Celeste rolled her eyes, yet the clumps in her mascara managed to stay put. 'No, I mean for rent. For like a month.' She scrunched up her nose. 'I hate it when puppies grow into big, nasty dogs. Like that.' She pointed at Winston. 'Why can't everything just stay little and cute?'

What an ageist load of bunk. Winston could totally hear her! If only he could breathe on her. 'Umm . . . no. We only *sell* puppies,' I said. 'No rentals, though you might want to try Toy Warehouse. I hear they got a new shipment of Mr Potty Puppies. Mr Potty Puppy never turns into a dog. But he never gets potty-trained either.'

Hayden's laugh came out in staccatoed tsk-tsks.

Celeste chewed her bottom lip. 'You're just cranky because you're stuck in that stupid chipmunk costume that isn't even long enough and your job stinks.'

'Chipmunk? It's a groundhog,' I said loudly, my anger getting in the way of my judgement. 'Don't you know your rodents?'

'Rodents. Hmmm. You remind me of someone.'

Oh no. I tugged my head on tighter and turned towards Winston, like hiding Gladys's face could possibly save me at that moment.

'This pathetic girl who's always trying out for the school plays, but of course she never makes it because she's just too . . . awkward. Know her?' She glanced at Hayden, then pinned her eyes back on me. 'We call her Ditzy.'

My face burned behind Gladys's smile. Desi. My name is Desi. And you know that, Celeste. Or you did, back when we were best friends. Back in elementary school when we had Alfred Hitchcock film marathons and accidentally dyed each other's hair orange and read our darkest secrets to each other and buried them in my backyard. Before you won a beauty pageant and turned into Princess Popular.

Before you completed Operation Crush Desi's Heart by going after Hayden.

'Wait, who's this?' Hayden asked.

Never mind. NOW my heart is officially crushed.

Celeste tossed her highlighted curls. 'You know her. She makes her own T-shirts that say stupid things no one understands just so she can prove she's smart. Big forehead . . .' Celeste sneered at my shoes. 'Big feet.'

Oh man, oh man. Please don't do this. Please don't embarrass me in front of Hayden. Send me to the stocks if you have to. Bleach my hair orange again. But leave Hayden out of this.

'Oh yeah.' Hayden yawned. 'Her shirts are cool. Daisy.'

'How do you know Desi?' Celeste asked.

'Desi. Right. We sit by each other in English. I copy off her paper sometimes.' Hayden stuck his hands into the pockets of his blue Bermuda shorts. 'Let's go. I wanna get a smoothie.'

Yeah, one more poke in my barely beating heart. Copy? I tutor! OK, so maybe sometimes I get frustrated when he doesn't get it and just hand over my paper. But he plays soccer like EVERY night, and that has to be exhausting. And it's only for big tests. And quizzes. And some worksheets . . .

Didn't someone once say copying is the highest form of flattery?

'Yummy. A smoothie.' Celeste smacked her gum. 'And thanks for your help. Oops! It looks like your head is crooked.'

I grabbed the groundhog head. 'No, it's fine. Er . . . thanks.'

'Let me just . . .' Celeste yanked it off, confirming my identity. Steam poured out of the suit. My hair stuck to my face. Tears stung my eyes.

Celeste blew a tropical-fruit-scented bubble in my face. It popped, just like my hopes for ninth grade.

Hayden kindly shifted his gaze to Winston. 'Whatever, Celeste. I'm getting a drink.' He gave me a quick nod of acknowledgement, like *that* helped right now, and headed to the Smoothie Shack a few shops down.

I wanted to scream at Celeste. To ask her how someone who used to be so nice could act so cruel. Tell her that for a teen princess, she had zippo class. But all I got out was, 'Why?'

'Wait for me,' she called to Hayden. 'Oh. Here's your dome back, Ditzy.' Celeste shoved the head against my chest. 'Guess being a rat runs in the family.'