

THE FROG

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I could tell from the line between my mom's eyes that something was up. She'd just picked up her phone to check a text that had come in, and as she read it, that line appeared.

She exhaled, hard. "Chloe can't come."

My dad looked up from tying his shoes. "What happened?"

"Stomach virus," Mom said, tossing her phone on the bed, where I was sprawled out, watching them get ready for the wedding. Her boss was getting married. I wasn't invited. Not that I wanted to go anyway.

They gave each other that look. The look that said *What do you think?* And then the other one that said, *I don't know, what do YOU think?*

I waited. I wasn't about to say anything that might mess this up.

I have always wanted my parents to let me stay at home alone, but they almost never do. I'm *thirteen*. It's ridiculous. They'll go to the store for 30 minutes or maybe let me stay home while they have a dentist appointment or something, but otherwise, if they're going to be gone more than an hour, they have a babysitter come over.

Of course, they don't admit she's a babysitter. Chloe is a college student, the daughter of my parents' friends, and they say she just comes over to "hang out" with me.

Chloe says it, too, but I'm not an idiot. I know what's going on.

And that night, we were supposed to "hang out" while my parents went to the wedding. But then...stomach virus!

Dad leaned back in his chair. "I could just stay home," he offered. Then he looked over at me, eyebrows raised. "What do you say, Bree? *Arthur* marathon?"

Ugh. *Arthur*? The last time I watched that show was six years ago! I must have made some kind of face, because right away, Mom warned me to watch my attitude.

I rolled my eyes. I couldn't help it. "Why can't you just leave me?"

Again, they looked at each other, then back at me. My mom sighed.

"Seriously, though," I said, sitting up. "I don't know what you guys think is gonna happen. Do you think I'm going to open the door to some serial killer or burn the house down or something? I get good grades in school and I've never gotten in trouble, but apparently I can't be trusted to *walk around the inside of my house for a few hours without causing some major catastrophe!*"

Mom crossed her arms and twisted her mouth, thinking. Dad gave her another look: This one was more like a wince, like he was saying *She has a point*.

The first thing I did when their car disappeared around the corner was put music on. I turned it up loud—they were always telling me to turn it down—and danced around the kitchen. Then I went straight for the fridge, where I grabbed a gallon of ice cream, a bottle of chocolate syrup, and a can of whipped cream. I got a spoon, crawled on top of the kitchen island, and ate the ice cream straight out of the carton, globbing on whipped cream and chocolate syrup whenever I wanted.

The next hour was more of the same: dancing, singing, eating, food on the nice couch, standing on tables, watching whatever I felt like on TV. I texted my friends, took a million selfies, even wore some of my mom's clothes. It was heaven. And it would have gone on like that all night if I hadn't spilled soda on my jeans.

I ran back to my room to change real quick, ready to continue with my party, but when I came out, I realized I wasn't alone.

He was in the hall right outside my bedroom.

A frog.

He was a brownish-gray color, and bumpy. At first I thought he might be a leaf, but I didn't remember seeing a leaf on my way back. When I took a step closer and got a better look, I was sure. He was tiny—no bigger than the little handheld pencil sharpener I kept in my backpack—but he was definitely, definitely a frog.

To some people, this may not be a big deal. I mean, frogs can't hurt you, unless they're poisonous, and we don't have that kind here. Some people in that situation would just pick it up with their bare hands and take it outside like it was nothing. Not me. I am totally afraid of frogs. We live near a creek, so we get them in our house a few times a year. But all those other times I have been able to ask my mom or dad to take care of them. That wasn't going to be an option this time.

My first reaction was to slam my bedroom door and hide. If I waited a few minutes, maybe he would go away. But then I realized that letting him wander off would be worse. He could crawl up to the top of a door frame and jump on me when I walked by. Or he could go into the bathroom and wait inside the toilet for me. Horrible. If I let him out of my sight, he could literally go anywhere and I wouldn't know where to find him. I'd spend the rest of the night freaking out. Better to deal with him right away.

I peeked under the door: In the dim hallway, his squatty little body was a silhouette in the light coming from the living room, like a buffalo wing someone had dropped on the floor. I stood up, took a deep breath, and opened the door to face him.

Heart pounding, I took one step closer and stopped. I realized I had no actual plan. All I knew for sure was that I was definitely NOT going to pick him up. I needed supplies, and they were going to have to come from my room, because I wasn't brave enough to walk past him.

In my room I emptied the small trash can and headed back into the hall. Still there. I took a step toward him. He didn't move. Another. Nothing. Soon I was hovering just above him with the trash can, so close I thought I could see that little bulgy thing under his neck pulsing as he breathed.

Do it, I told myself. Quit being such a chicken. This is not a big deal. Just drop the trash can down. Do it NOW.

I jerked forward in one swift motion, but I must have flinched, because that little sucker jumped away just in time. In four gross little hops, he got halfway to the living room, leaving me on my knees, the trash can rolling across the floor beside me.

Shaken, I stood up and tiptoed backwards into my room, not wanting to let him out of my sight. I stole a glance behind me and saw a paper shopping bag peeking out from under the bed. Maybe that would work.

It didn't. I laid the bag on its side in front of him, then grabbed a tennis racket and tried to gently nudge him to go inside. Instead, he hopped to the left and got even closer to me, causing me to drop the racket and run screaming back to my bedroom.

I stood there for a good five minutes more, just staring at him, that little green buffalo wing who was ruining my whole night. *Seriously, girl*, I thought to myself. *You're like a hundred times bigger than him. Just end this already.*

Straightening my shoulders, I marched back down the hall, snatched the tennis racket from the floor, and kept going. That's right, I walked right past him. Right to the front door, which I flung open. Then I came back, hopped over him, stuck out that racket and started pushing him toward the door. Yes, I screamed the first time—when he jumped, it startled me, okay? And yes, I screamed the second and third time, too. But every time I pushed, he jumped. I pushed, he jumped. Push. Jump. And in less than sixty seconds, he was outside and out of my life forever.

The next half hour was spent wiping the chocolate syrup and whipped cream off the kitchen island, hanging up my mom's clothes, and vacuuming the Cheeto crumbs from my bedroom floor. I changed into my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and curled up on the couch under a blanket. Instead of watching a movie, like I normally would, I found *Arthur* on Netflix. Every time an episode ended, I clicked *Next* and started a new one.

I've never been more happy to hear the sound of my parents' keys in the front door, the click of Mom's shoes coming down the hall, and the sound of Dad's voice calling, "Where's my baby Bree?"

They kissed me hello and asked how everything went. I told them it was fine. I never mentioned the frog. While Dad went into his room to change, Mom kicked off her shoes, took her earrings off, then snuggled up next to me on the couch.

"So it went okay, huh?" she asked.

"Mmhmm."

She was smiling at me.

"What?" I said, making a face.

Her eyes got all sparkly. "You're just growing up so fast."

I rolled my eyes and let her kiss my temple.

When the episode ended, she said, "We did get invited to have dinner with some friends next Friday. It wouldn't be as long as tonight, but you'd be on your own again. You think you can handle it?"

For a second, I pictured myself on the floor of the hall, the trash can on its side, that little buffalo wing torturing me for half the night. Then I glanced past her and saw the tennis racket leaning in the corner.

I looked back at her. "That sounds great."

I snuggled deeper into the blanket, lifted the remote, and clicked *Next*.