

Chapter One

The stage lights are in my eyes. I'm so nervous my knees are shaking. But when I clutch the mic in both hands, my voice soars.

I *love* to sing. I've been performing onstage since I was ten. Now, at seventeen, I'm thinking of making it a career.

The high school theater is full of people watching me at this talent show. Mom and my little sister, Ella, are in the first row, smiling up at me. While I'm dressed in black, my favorite color, they both wear bright summer dresses and sandals.

The seat beside Mom is empty. Dad said he would be here. But he isn't, as usual.

I finish my song, and everyone claps. A man in the second row steps into the aisle and tosses roses onto the stage at my feet. Weird. I don't know the guy. He's about Dad's age, balding, wearing all black.

I pick up the flowers and take a bow. Everyone stands as they clap. Mom looks so proud of me, her eyes shining.

I grin as I climb down the stairs to take my seat next to Mom. Before I get there, Ella runs up and hugs my waist. "Jen, you were so good!" she says. Then she looks over her shoulder. "But who is that man?" she asks. "The one who threw the flowers?"

"I have no idea," I say. But I hold up the roses to him, saying thanks.

At that, my mom turns and finally sees the guy. For a moment her smile fades. But then she grins again as I sit beside her. "Jen, that was wonderful," she says. "You sang so beautifully."

I nod at the man in the second row. "Do you know who that guy is?" I sniff the flowers. "Why would he give me these roses?"

“No,” she says. “I don’t know him.” But I can tell she’s lying. She looks worried.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

She shushes me as an all-girl hip-hop act starts dancing on stage.

I glance over my shoulder at the man. He’s not watching the dancers. He’s watching *me*.

I lean into Mom. “Seriously, who is that guy?” I ask her.

“Yeah, who is he?” Ella says too loudly.

Mom puts a finger to her lips to get us to be quiet.

I turn back to the stage, to the girls dancing. But I can feel the stranger watching.

Finally the dancers take a bow, and I clap along with everyone else. Then it’s time for

the judges to select the winners of the talent show. I sit forward, barely able to breathe. I know I did well. People stood up to clap. But there were so many other great acts.

And then my music teacher says my name, Jen Baker. I’ve taken third place! Mom hugs me, and so does my sister. I race up to the stage. My music teacher hands me a trophy and an envelope containing a cash prize. “Congratulations!” she says. I would have liked first place, but taking third is great. I placed! I just wish Dad was here to see it.

As everyone claps, I look down at Mom, then at the man who gave me the roses. He’s the only one standing as he claps. Even though he’s smiling, he looks sort of sad.

Then he turns and heads up the aisle. He's leaving!

I trot down the stairs and run after him. "Excuse me," I call out. But he doesn't turn around. He only walks faster.

I finally catch up to him as he reaches the doors. "Hey, who are you?" I ask. "Why did you give me these roses?"

The man looks past me, at my mother in the front row. She's standing now, facing us. Everyone else is watching the stage as the second-place winner is announced.

"Is that your sister?" the man asks. "Ella, right? How old is she now? Eight?"

Nine, but I don't bother to tell him that. "You know my mom," I say to the man. It's clear she knows *him*.

He nods, still looking toward the front row. "I used to know Sara," he says. Then he turns his gaze to me. "I'm Mike. I—" He stops, like he's not sure he should continue. But then he does. "Jen, I'm your dad."

Chapter Two

I step back and shake my head at Mike. “What are you talking about?” I say. “You’re not my dad.”

“I’m sorry your mother didn’t tell you about me,” he says. “But I *am* your father.”

I peer at him. He’s wearing black jeans and a leather jacket like mine. There *is* something

strangely familiar about him. But I know I haven't seen him before.

Onstage, my music teacher announces the first-place winner. As the crowd applauds, Mom rushes up the aisle. She must have told Ella to stay put, because my sister is still in her seat. And I know that look on Mom's face. She's mad.

As Mom arrives, Mike hangs his head, like he knows she's going to yell at him. "Hello, Sara," he says.

"What are you doing here?" she asks him.

She *does* know the guy.

Mike waves a hand at the stage. "I saw on social media that Jen was performing tonight. I wanted to see her."

"You follow me online?" I ask.

"Only so I know how you're doing," Mike says.

Mom points a finger at Mike. "You promised you would stay away," she says.

"I did stay away, while Jen was small," Mike says. "But she just turned seventeen. It's time we told her the truth."

"You know when my *birthday* is?" I ask.

"I celebrate every one of your birthdays." He glances at my mom before adding, "I just wish I could have spent some of them with you, Jen."

"We had an agreement," Mom says to Mike.

"You can't expect me to stay away forever," Mike says. "Jen is my daughter."

Mom crosses her arms and looks away. But she doesn't deny it.