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Opening extract from

Jinx

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1

The thing is, my luck's always been rotten. Just look at my name: Jean. Not Jean Marie, or Jeanine, or Jeanette. Just Jean. Did you know, in France they name *boys* Jean? It's French for John.

And OK, I don't live in France. But still. I'm basically a girl named John. If I lived in France, anyway.

This is the kind of luck I have. The kind of luck I've had since before Mom even filled out my birth certificate.

So it wasn't any big surprise to me when the cab driver didn't help me with my suitcase. I'd already had to endure arriving at the airport to find no one there to greet me, and then got no answer to my many phone calls asking where my aunt and uncle were. Did they not want me after all? Had they changed their minds? Had they heard about my bad luck – all the way from Iowa – and decided they didn't want any of it to rub off on them?

But even if that was true – and as I'd told myself a million times since arriving at baggage claim, where they were supposed to have met me, and seeing no one but

skycaps and limo drivers with little signs with everyone's names on them but mine – there was nothing I could do about it. I certainly couldn't go home. It was New York City – and Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted's house – or bust.

So when the cab driver, instead of getting out and helping me with my bags, just pushed a little button so that the trunk popped up a few inches, it wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to me. It wasn't even the worst thing that had happened to me that *day*.

I pulled out my bags – each of which had to weigh fifty thousand pounds at least . . . except my violin case of course – and then closed the trunk again, all while standing in the middle of East 69th Street, with a line of cars behind me, honking impatiently because they couldn't pass, due to the fact that there was a Stanley Steemer van double-parked across the street from my aunt and uncle's building.

Why me? Really. I'd like to know.

The cab pulled away – so fast I practically had to leap between two parked cars to keep from getting run over. The honking stopped as the line of cars that had been waiting behind the cab started moving again, their drivers all throwing me dirty looks as they went by.

It was all the dirty looks that did it – I mean, made me realize I was really in New York City. At last.

And yeah, I'd seen the skyline from the cab as it crossed the Triborough Bridge . . . the island of Manhattan, in all its gritty glory, with the Empire State building

sticking up from the middle of it like a big glittery middle finger.

But the dirty looks were what really cinched it. No one back in Hancock would ever have been that mean to someone who was clearly from out of town.

Not that all that many people visit Hancock. But whatever.

Then there was the street I was standing on. It was one of those streets that look exactly like the ones they always show on TV when they're trying to let you know something is set in New York. Like on *Law & Order*. You know, the narrow three or four storey brownstones with the brightly painted front doors and the stone stoops . . .

According to my mom, most brownstones in New York City were originally single-family homes when they were built way back in the 1800s. But now they've been divided up into apartments, so that there's one – or sometimes even two or more families – per floor.

Not Mom's sister Evelyn's brownstone though. Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted Gardiner own all four floors of their brownstone. That's practically one floor per person, since Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted only have three kids, my cousins Tory, Teddy and Alice.

Back home, we just have two floors, but there are seven people living on them. And only one bathroom. Not that I'm complaining. Still, ever since my sister Courtney discovered blow-drying, it's been pretty grim back home.

But as tall as my aunt and uncle's house was, it was really narrow – just three windows across. Still, it was a

very pretty townhouse, painted grey, with lighter grey trim. The door was a bright, cheerful yellow. There were yellow flower boxes along the base of each window, flower boxes from which bright red – and obviously newly planted, since it was only the middle of April and not quite warm enough for them – geraniums spilled.

It was nice to know that, even in a sophisticated city like New York, people still realized how homey and welcoming a box of geraniums could be. The sight of those geraniums cheered me up a little.

Like maybe Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted just forgot I was arriving today, and hadn't deliberately failed to meet me at the airport because they'd changed their minds about letting me come to stay.

Like everything was going to be all right after all.

Yeah. With my luck, probably not.

I started up the steps to the front door of 326 East 69th Street, then realized I couldn't make it with both bags and my violin. Leaving one bag on the sidewalk, I dragged the other up the steps with me, my violin tucked under one arm. I deposited the first suitcase and my violin case at the top of the steps, then hurried back down for the second suitcase, which I'd left on the sidewalk.

Only I guess I took the steps a little too fast, since I nearly slipped and fell flat on my face on the sidewalk. I managed to catch myself at the last minute by grabbing some of the wrought-iron fencing the Gardiners had put up around their trash cans. As I hung there, a little stunned from my near catastrophe, a stylishly dressed old

lady walking what appeared to be a rat on a leash (only it must have been a dog, since it was wearing a tartan coat) passed by and shook her head at me. Like I'd taken a nosedive down the Gardiners' front steps on purpose, to startle her or something.

Back in Hancock, if a person had seen someone else almost fall down the stairs – even someone like me, who nearly falls down the stairs every single day – they would have said something like, 'Are you all right?'

In Manhattan, however, things were clearly different.

It wasn't until the old lady and her pet rat had passed all the way by that I heard a click. Straightening – and finding that my hands were covered in rust from where I'd gripped the fence – I saw that the door to 326 East 69th Street had opened, and that a young, pretty, blonde girl was peering down at me from the top of the stoop.

'Hello?' she said curiously.

I forgot about the old lady and her rat and my near pavement-dive. I smiled, and hurried back up the steps. Even though I couldn't quite believe how much she'd changed, I was so glad to see her –

And was so worried she wasn't going to feel the same way about seeing me.

'Hi,' I said. 'Hi, Tory. It's me.'

The young woman, very petite and very blonde, blinked at me without recognition.

'No,' she said. 'No, I am not Tory. I am Petra.' It was then I noticed that the girl had an accent . . . a European one. 'I am the Gardiners' au pair.'

'Oh,' I said, uncertainly. No one had said anything to me about an au pair. Fortunately, I knew what one was because of an episode of *Law and Order* I saw once, where the au pair was suspected of killing the kid she was supposed to be watching.

I stretched my rust-stained right hand out towards Petra. 'Hi,' I said. 'I'm Jean Honeychurch. Evelyn Gardiner is my aunt—'

'Jean?' Petra had reached out and automatically taken my hand. Now her grasp on it tightened. 'Oh, you mean Jinx?'

I winced, and not just at the girl's hard grip – though she was strong, for someone so little.

No, I winced because my reputation had so clearly preceded me, if the au pair knew me as Jinx instead of Jean.

'Right,' I said. Because what else could I do? So much for getting a fresh new start in a place where no one knew me by my less-than-flattering nickname. 'My family calls me Jinx.'

And would continue to do so forever, if I couldn't turn my luck around.

2

'But you are not supposed to arrive until tomorrow!' Petra cried.

The tight ball of worry in my stomach loosened. Just a little.

So they really *had* just mistaken the day.

I should have known Aunt Evelyn wouldn't let me down.

'No,' I said. 'Today. I'm supposed to arrive today.'

'Oh no,' Petra said, still shaking my hand up and down. My fingers were losing all circulation. Also, the places I'd skinned grabbing the wrought-iron fence weren't feeling too good either. 'I'm sure your aunt and uncle said tomorrow. Oh! They will be so upset! They were going to meet you at the airport. Alice even made a sign . . . Did you come all this way by yourself? In a taxi? I am so sorry for you! Oh my goodness, come in, come in!'

With a heartiness that belied her delicate frame – but matched her handshake – Petra insisted on grabbing both

my bags (leaving my violin to me) and carrying them inside herself. Their extreme heaviness didn't seem to bother her at all, and it only took me a couple of minutes to find out why, Petra being almost as big a talker as my best friend, Stacy, back home: Petra had moved from her native Germany to the United States because she's studying to be a physical therapist.

In fact, she told me she goes to physical therapy school every morning in Westchester, which is a suburb just outside New York City. When she's not in class, she has to lift heavy people and help them into spas, then teach them to use their arms and stuff again, after an accident or stroke.

Which explains why she is so strong. Because of all the lifting of heavy patients and all.

Petra lives with the Gardiners, paying for her room and board by caring for my younger cousins. Then, while the kids are in school every day, she goes to Westchester to learn more physical therapy stuff. In another year, she'll have her licence and can get a job in a rehabilitation centre.

'The Gardiners have been *so* kind to me,' Petra said as she carried my suitcases to a third floor guest room as if they didn't weigh more than a couple of CDs.

It didn't even seem like it was necessary for Petra to take a breath between sentences, despite the fact that English was not even her first language.

Which meant she could probably speak even faster in her native tongue.

'They pay me three hundred dollars a week too,' Petra went on. 'Imagine, living in Manhattan rent free, with all your food paid for as well, and someone giving you three hundred dollars a week! My friends back home in Bonn say it is too good to be true. Mr and Mrs Gardiner are like mother and father to me now. And I love Teddy and Alice like they are my own children. Well, I am only twenty, and Teddy and Alice are ten and five, so I guess they could not be my children. But my own siblings maybe. Here now. Here is your room.'

My room? I peered around the door frame. Judging by the glimpses I'd had of the rest of the house on our way up the stairs, I knew I was going to be living in the lap of luxury for the next few months . . .

But the room in which Petra set my bags down took my breath away. It was totally beautiful: white-walled with cream and gilt furniture, and pink silk drapes. There was a marble fireplace on one side – 'It does not work, this one,' Petra informed me sadly, like I had been counting on a working fireplace in my new bedroom or something – and a private bathroom on the other. Sunlight filtered through the windows, making a dappled pattern on the light pink carpeting.

Of course, I knew right away something was wrong. This was the nicest bedroom I'd ever seen. It was a hundred times nicer than my bedroom back home. And I'd had to share that bedroom with Courtney and Sarabeth, my two younger sisters. This would, in fact, be my first time sleeping in a room of my own.

EVER.

And never in my life had I so much as entertained the idea of having my own bathroom.

This was just not possible.

But I could tell from the casual way Petra was going around, flicking imaginary dust off things, that it *was* possible. Not just possible, but . . . the way things were.

'Wow,' was all I could say. It was the first word I'd been able to get in since Petra had begun speaking, down at the front door.

'Yes,' Petra said, straightening. She thought I meant the room. But really I'd meant . . . well, *everything*. 'It is very nice, yes? I have my own apartment in this house, with a private entrance – downstairs, you know? The ground floor. You probably did not see it. The door is underneath the stoop to the townhouse. There is also a back door to the garden. It is a little private apartment. I have my own kitchen too. The children come down at night sometimes, and I help them with their homework, and sometimes we watch the TV together, all snug. It is very nice.'

'You're not kidding,' I breathed. Mom had told me that Aunt Evelyn and her family were doing well – her husband, my Uncle Ted, had recently gotten a promotion to president of whatever company it was he worked for, while Evelyn, an interior decorator, had added a couple of supermodels to her client list.

Still, nothing could have prepared me for this.

And it was mine. All mine.

Well, for the time being, anyway. Until I messed it up, somehow.

And, me being me, I knew that wouldn't take long. But I could still enjoy it while it lasted.

'Mr and Mrs Gardiner will be so sorry they were not home to greet you,' Petra was saying as she went to the side of the king-sized bed and began fastidiously fluffing the half-dozen pillows beneath the tufted headboard. 'And they'll be even sadder that they got the days mixed up. They are both still at work. Teddy and Alice will be home from school soon, though. They are both very excited their Cousin Jean is coming to stay. Alice has made a sign to welcome you. She was going to hold it at the airport when they greeted you, but now . . . well, perhaps you could hang it on the wall here in your room? You must pretend to be pleased by it, even if you are not, because she worked very hard on it. Mrs Gardiner did not put anything on your walls, you see, because she wanted to wait to see what you are like. She says it has been five years since they last saw you!'

Petra looked at me in wonder. Apparently, families in Germany lived a lot closer and visited one another a lot more often than families in the US . . . or *my* family, anyway.

I nodded. 'Yes, that sounds about right. Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted last came to visit when I was eleven . . .' My voice trailed off. That's because I'd just noticed that in the massive bathroom, the fixtures were all brass and shaped like swans' necks, with the water coming out of the

birds' carved beaks. Even the towel bar had swans' wings on the ends. My mouth was starting to feel a little dry at the sight of all this luxury. I mean, what had I ever done to deserve all this?

Nothing. Especially lately.

Which was why, actually, I was in New York.

'What about Tory?' I asked in an effort to change the subject. Better not to think about why I was here in New York and not back in Hancock. Especially since every time I did, that pesky knot in my stomach clenched. 'When does she get home from school?'

'Oh,' Petra said.

This 'Oh', however, was different from all the others Petra had let out. I noticed right away. Also, whereas before Petra had been speaking with undisguised enthusiasm, now she looked down and said uneasily, with a shrug, 'Oh, Tory is home from school already. She is in the back, in the garden, with her friends.'

Petra pointed towards one of the two windows across from the bed. I went over to it, gingerly pushing aside the filmy white curtain liner – it was as fine as a spider's web – and looked down . . .

. . . into an enchanted fairy garden.

Or at least, that's what it looked like to me. And OK, I'm used to our backyard in Hancock, which is completely filled with my younger brothers' and sisters' bikes and plastic toys, a swing set, a dog run, Mom's motley vegetable patch and large piles of dirt, dumped there by Dad,

who is forever working on a new addition to the house, which never quite gets done.

This backyard, however, looked like something from a TV show. And *not Law & Order* either, but something along the lines of *MTV Cribs*. Walled on three sides by moss-covered brick, roses were growing – and blooming – everywhere. There were even rose vines wrapped around the sides of a small, glassed-in gazebo over in one corner of the garden. There was a wrought-iron table, surrounded by chairs, and a cushioned chaise longue beneath the sweeping branches of a newly budding weeping willow.

But best of all was a low fountain, which, even with the windows closed, three storeys up, I could hear burbling. A stone mermaid sat in the centre of the two-metre wide pool, with water shooting up out of the mouth of a fish she was holding in her arms. I couldn't be sure, being so high up, but I thought I saw a few flashes of orange within the pool. Goldfish!

'Koi,' Petra corrected me when I said it out loud. Her voice was getting back to normal now that we weren't discussing Tory, I couldn't help noticing. 'They are Japanese. And do you see Mouche, the Gardiners' little cat? She sits there all day long, watching them. She has not caught one yet, but she will, one day.'

I saw the sudden flare of a match being struck beneath the glass roof of the gazebo. You couldn't really see in, because the glass was frosted. Tory and her friends must

have been inside, but I couldn't see them, just their shadowy movements, and the flame.

It appeared that Tory and her friends were smoking.

That's all right though. I know plenty of people our age back in Iowa who smoke.

Well, OK. One.

Still, everyone had told me things were really different in New York. Not just things, but people too. People my age, especially. Like, people my age in New York are supposed to be way more sophisticated and older for their age than people back home.

And that's OK. I can handle that.

Although my stomach, judging by the way it had suddenly turned back into a knot, seemed to disagree.

'I guess I should go down and say hi to Tory,' I said . . . because I felt like I had to.

'Yes,' Petra said. 'I suppose you should.' She sounded like there was something she wanted to say but, for the first time since I'd met her, she went mute instead.

Great. So what was up between her and Tory?

And what did you want to bet that, with my luck, I was going to walk into the middle of it?

'Well,' I said, more bravely than I felt, letting the curtain liner drop back into place. 'Would you mind showing me the way?'

'Of course.'

Petra, it appeared, wasn't the type of girl to stay quiet for long. As we went down the stairs to the second floor, she asked about the violin. 'You are playing it long?'

'Since I was six,' I said.

'Six! Then you must be very good! We will have concert some night, yes? The children will love it.'

I kind of doubted this, unless my cousins were really different from the kids back home. Nobody I know in Hancock likes listening to me play. Except maybe when I do 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia'. But even then, they kind of lose interest, unless I sing the words. And it's hard to sing and play at the same time. Even Patti Scialfa, Bruce Springsteen's wife, who can play the violin and sing, never really does both at the same time.

Then Petra asked if I was hungry, and told me about the cooking class Mrs Gardiner had paid for her to go to, so that she could learn to make American food for the children.

'I was to make filet mignon for your arrival tomorrow, but now you are here, and I think for dinner tonight we are having Chinese food from Szechuan Palace! I hope you are not minding. Mr and Mrs Gardiner have a benefit they have to attend. The Gardiners are very kind, giving people, and are always going to benefits to raise money for worthy causes . . . there are many of these in New York City. And Chinese food here is very good; it is authentic – Mrs Gardiner even says so, and she and Mr Gardiner have been to China for their anniversary last year – Oh, here is the door to the garden. I guess I will be seeing you then.'

'Thanks, Petra,' I said with a grateful smile to her.

Then I slipped out the glass door that led to the patio

overlooking the garden, and went down the steps to the garden itself (clinging carefully to the wrought-iron rail to avoid a second near-disaster with a set of steps).

Here the sound of the fountain was much louder, and I could smell the heavy scent of roses in the air. It was weird to be in the middle of New York City and smelling roses.

Although intermingled with the rose smell was the scent of burning tobacco.

I called out, 'Hello?' as I approached the gazebo, to let them know I was coming. No one responded right away, but I was pretty sure I heard someone say the F word. I figured Tory and her friends were scrambling to stamp out their cigarettes.

So I hurried to enter the gazebo, so I could say, 'Uh, don't worry. It's only me.'

But of course I found myself speaking to six total and complete strangers. My cousin Tory wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Which is, you know. Just my luck.