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## *Attack of the Mini Beauty Queens*

**A**pplying butt glue to my sister's backside is, without question, not the first way I'd choose to spend a weekend.

However, getting up close and personal is just one of the many glamorous tasks that are involved in being on Team Mackenzie. My sister's a beauty queen, and she's owning this room. I can't help but feel a small sense of pride while watching Mac strut onstage in her (non-riding-up) bikini in front of an audience.

I do realize how pathetic this makes my life sound.

Sometimes I can't believe that Mackenzie and I are related. Even the middle-aged man next to me currently taking photos of her gave me a

*yeah-right* look when I told him we were sisters. Not like I care what he thinks. *He's* the creepy one here.

Mac is one of those girls with shiny hair and gorgeous skin. You know the ones that I'm talking about.

I'm currently surrounded by them.

Even the most self-confident girl (who, to put it politely, does not possess any of the above mentioned characteristics) can feel a little down spending an entire day with the Beauty Bots.

There Mac is in the spotlight, smiling away as her (mostly fake) blond-highlighted hair bounces in the air. She twists and turns to the music blaring during the swimsuit competition. Her tanned legs (done in the hotel room bathroom last night) hit the mark as she shows off her white teeth (also fake) to the three judges in front of her. She bats her lashes (well, *some* belong to her) flirtatiously to the one male judge. Her red-sequined two-piece suit (I spent all week trying to get her to sit still for me to take it in) sparkles in the spotlight. It took two spa visits, one salon appointment, a hair and makeup stylist, one pageant coach, one seamstress sister, and one very stressed-out mother for her to arrive at this moment.

The music ends and she gives one final bow before she struts off stage.

"Wow, she's phenomenal," the guy next to me says.

I give him a look that makes it clear that I'm beyond disgusted by his interest in my sister.

Oh, did I forget to mention that Mackenzie is seven years old?

Yep. *Seven.*

I walk over to the side of the stage. Mom's suffocating Mac with a giant hug of congratulations.

"Oh, sweetie, you were incredible. I'm so proud of you!" Mom wipes the sweat off her brow. She spent Mac's entire routine behind the judges, duplicating the moves. I used to be right by her side, but now I prefer to watch from the back. It's enough that I'm wearing a GO MACKENZIE! shirt with Mac's latest glamour shot on it. While this new one doesn't have glitter all over it like the others, her two eyeballs line up at a very unfortunate place on me.

"Wasn't this the best you've seen her, Lexi?" Mom blasts me with her overexaggerated smile.

"You were great, Mac," I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. I once gave Mac a huge hug after one of her routines and a bobby pin got caught on my sleeve. When I pulled away, half her hair went with me. I learned a very important lesson that day: Hands off the talent.

"We've got to get you back into your gown for crowning!" Mom grabs Mac's hand as we walk out of the room. Mom turns her head to me. "I've got it from here, Lexi."

I stop as I watch them get into the elevator without me.

While I should be grateful to have a few moments to myself to recover from the last several hours of constant running around, I can't

help but feel like I'm being left out of some quality mother-daughter time. But today's Mackenzie's day.

I turn around and head to the hotel lobby. I sit down on an overstuffed chair, close my eyes, and remember a different, simpler time. A time before pageants. A time before Miss Mackenzie came into our lives.

I was an only child for the first nine years of my life. I remember being little and wanting to have a baby brother or sister (or a dog), but then the fighting started. At first, my parents would hardly speak. I remember thinking something was wrong. We'd be at the kitchen table and it'd be silent. Not the good, peaceful quiet, but the unnerving kind. I'd attempt to shatter the silence barrier by telling them something I learned in school — the name of the fifth president, the capital of Wisconsin, the meaning of *onomatopoeia*. All I'd get in return was a strained “that's nice” between bites.

I started to relish the quiet once the yelling began. I would sit in my room and put my head under my pillow, pretending that I was part of one of those perfect families I'd seen on TV. Then something weird happened. Mom and Dad suddenly started to act all lovey-dovey around each other. I thought everything was going to be back to normal. Then I found out Mom was pregnant. I guess they thought having another kid would save their marriage.

Several months later, Mackenzie was born. But Dad left anyway. Mac wasn't even a year old.

So there's a nine-year age difference between Mackenzie and me. I do my best to be the caring and fun older sister. I also wanted to make up for the fact that Dad wasn't around. And selfishly, I thought having a little sister would fill the emptiness I felt in our family.

Mom found something else to fill that void.