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Love Bernie, Your Favorite Sister

“Hey Bernie! Did ya hear about the writing contest?” Sammy plopped down on the lunch yard bench across from Bernadette.

Bernadette Clark’s best friend, Sammy Drake (named after the musician Sammy Davis Jr.) had a hi-top fade that reminded Bernadette of Gerald Martin Johanssen from their favorite show, *Hey Arnold!*, just five inches shorter, and a gap between his two front teeth the size of a dime.

During her first day at Fox Ridge, Bernadette had met Sammy at this very lunch table. He wouldn’t leave her alone about the scar on her left hand and insisted she tell him about it. Seven months later, she and Sammy had become the best of buds.

“You bet I am. I’m gonna win first place and meet Ramona J. Bernstein!” Bernadette’s frizzy, milk chocolate curls blew in the April air, a clear, blue canvas painted in the sky.

“I wish it was R.L. Stine. I would’ve kicked your butt to win that!” Sammy laughed as Bernadette tried to throw a carrot at his face. She then heard a “Bernadette Clark!” from her teacher and said, “Sorry, Ms. Fitzgerald!” hiding a giggle behind her curls.

Today, Ms. Fitzgerald, told the class that the fifth grade was participating in a story writing contest and whoever wrote the best story would win a “Best Writer and Storyteller” award. Best of all, the winner would get to meet Ramona J. Bernstein, a famous children’s

literature author. The winner also got to spend an hour with her and have their story featured in one of her upcoming books.

The *Jubilee McGee* series is her most popular and tells stories about a young African American girl named Jubilee whose adventures are greater than any 8-year-old could ever imagine. Through all the whacky twists and turns, Jubilee always has a fun time.

Bernadette's mom had read the entire series to her and Ginny, her twin sister, so many times while growing up that she could recite every story, word for word, in her sleep. Needless to say, Bernadette knew she was entering the contest the moment the words left her teacher's mouth.

"What are you gonna write about?" said Sammy.

Bernadette gulped down her sandwich and glanced at the sky, then back at Sammy and said, "My sister, Ginny."

"Really?" Sammy looked at Bernadette with a bewildered look on his face.

Bernadette glowered her eyes and shifted on the bench. "Yeah, what about it?" she spat with her eyebrows angled like a 'v.'

Sammy gulped and shrugged as if he wasn't sure whether Bernadette was going to jump across the table or not. "Nothing, I was just asking."

Saved by the bell, kids began to congregate at the door to go inside, signaling the end of lunch.

Bernadette got up from her seat and walked away from Sammy, but before she made it to the door, she saw a group of girls sashaying her way.

"Hey Beeswax, did you hear that I'm gonna compete in the writing contest?" Amber and her posy, Marcy and Tatum, blocked Bernadette's path.

A blush quickly engulfed Bernadette's face as she stood frozen in place while her breathing halted.

"I heard you tell Sammy the Snail that you're gonna write about your dead sister. You think that's gonna win?" Amber and her two friends almost choked with laughter. "Yeah, good luck, Beeswax. I can't wait to see the look on your face when *I* win the whole stinkin' contest."

Bernadette pressed her nails into the meat of her hand, prickles of pain forming. She darted around the three girls and threw her lunch into the trash can, causing a few stares and whispers from her peers, and sped away from the laughing hyenas.

The last few hours of school went by as slow as Ms. Ethel, the lunch lady, when handing out treats in the lunch line, and Bernadette spent the entire bus ride home with her head against the window.

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"Bernie, dinners ready!" Bernadette's dad set the table with two plates of chicken marsala with mashed potatoes and a glaze, and one without a glaze, two glasses of red wine, and one cup of lemonade. Hints of fresh garlic, cracked pepper, and parsley wafted in the air as Bernadette dragged her socked feet across the hardwood floors to the dinner table.

Her parents shared a quick glance at one another as they both sat down, noticing the unusual silence and Bernadette's pouty lips.

"How was school today, pumpkin?" Her mother took a bite of chicken marsala while looking at Bernadette. "How would you rate it on a scale from 1-10?"

Bernadette's fork glided across the chicken, her head resting against her elbow on the table. "It was a 10 but then it was a 2."

“What made it a 10?” her mother prompted.

Bernadette mumbled, “Ms. Fitzgerald said the fifth graders were having a competition and whoever wrote the best story would get to meet Ramona J. Bernstein.”

“That’s amazing! You love the *Jubilee McGee* series. What are you planning to write about?”

“I was thinking of writing about Ginny.”

“She would love that, Bernadette. She’d be so proud of you,” her mother said while giving a comforting smile. “What happened that made it a two, then?”

Bernadette looked down at her lap and hid behind her hair. Her mother placed her softly manicured hand on top of Bernadette’s and rubbed her thumb across her porcelain smooth hand.

With a dreary breath, Bernadette hesitated, “Well, Amber, the mean girl, made fun of Ginny, a-and she said she was better than me. She made me angry, but I just walked away like you told me to.” Bernadette slowly became red in the face.

Bernadette’s dad reached across and brushed her curls from her face. “I’m sorry, Bernie. We know this has all been so overwhelming and we’re so sorry you have to deal with this at such an early age.”

“And we know how hard it is without your sister,” her mother’s feathery voice trembled, “Your father and I miss her every second. But we know she’s watching over all of us, making sure we’ll all okay, because no matter what, she will always be our daughter, and she will *always* be your sister. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I just miss her. A lot.” Bernadette got up from her chair and fell into her parent’s arms.

For the first few months after the car accident, Bernadette never shed a tear. One day she'd talk about how much she wanted to play and watch movies with Ginny, and the next, she wouldn't mention Ginny at all. She then began having random outbursts and would pick at her scar till it was puffy and red. Bernadette's parents became concerned and wanted her to visit a therapist.

When she pulled away, Bernadette asked, "If I write this story, will it feel like Ginny's still here, like before?"

Her parents shared a quick glance and her mother let out a soft exhale. "She'll always be with you, Bernadette. Always." She rubbed Bernadette's arms before continuing. "Do you remember what your doctor friend said? How writing can help you process your feelings? Do you remember how much it helped after the incident?"

"Yes." Bernadette met her mother's eyes.

"You've written so many great stories, and you can just add this one about Ginny to the list. Ginny would be so proud of you and your father and I think it's a really wonderful idea." Bernadette's mother cupped her round, rosy cheeks and planted a firm kiss on her forehead. "Do you think you want to try and see another doctor here in Fleetwood? You can just talk to this doctor like you did with Dr. Jordan."

Bernadette liked Dr. Jordan because he let her draw and write during their session. Maybe, she thought, this person will too.

Bernadette opened the window by her desk and gladly welcomed in the warm, fresh April air. She tied her hair back from her face and centered sheets of paper on her pink desk. Two black pens sat to her right and she grabbed one and touched it to the paper. On the top line she wrote “Beasty Girl.”

“Ginger Gordon...was like...any 10-year-old...except she could transform into...any animal,” Bernadette said to herself while she gripped her pen and her tongue poked out of her mouth.

“One day...she went with her family...to the zoo. Her favorite animals...were the...lions,” Bernadette whispered, her cheeks brightening with the rising temperature in her room.

Twenty minutes went by and Bernadette’s hand flew across the pages as the story she had drew in her head transferred effortlessly from pen to paper. “Just then, the evil Dr. Alligator...busted from his cage...and tried to attack Beasty Girl’s dad.”

Within an hour, Bernadette had created her masterpiece, and she knew Ginny would be as happy with this story as she was. She could picture Ginny now, giving her hugs and high fives, saying, “Way to go, Squirt!” which was Ginny’s nickname for her.

Beasty Girl had saved the day and most of all her family, and Amber Jones wouldn’t see this great of a story coming if it hit her in the nose.

She placed the cap back on her pen and gave herself a pat on the back.

“Bernadette! Dinner!” shouted her mother.

She jumped up from her chair and skipped to the dinner table. Her favorite was on the menu tonight: thin crust pizza with sausage. Bernadette rubbed her stomach and licked her lips.

The three of them sat down and enjoyed their pizza while saying “How was school?” and “Oh wow, the pizza is even better this time.”

After dinner, Bernadette put the dishes in the sink and dried them after her mother washed them, only breaking one glass cup this time.

Afterwards, Bernadette walked back to her room to do her math homework, which was thankfully only 10 problems since Ms. Fitzgerald was feeling generous. But when she walked inside, her eyes popped out of her head and she stood frozen.

“No, no, no” Bernadette rambled. She ran to her desk and her mouth dropped to the floor. She had left her window open.

Bernadette couldn't believe it. *How could I be so stupid*, she thought, tears beginning to trickle down her rapidly warming face. She began to take erratic breaths and lazily fanned her face.

Her parents paced to her room, “What is it?”

“My-my story is gone,” she cried.

“What happened to it?” breathed Bernadette's mother.

“I left the w-window open,” she huffed out.

In this moment, she didn't think Ginny would be too happy with her. She was stupid, stupid, stupid. Now Amber Jones might win the contest, and it was all Bernadette's fault.

“Well, let's go see if maybe it got caught in a bush,” Bernadette's mom waved at her and her father.

The trio spent an hour looking for Bernadette's story before the rain began to pour, her tears becoming indistinguishable.

When she got into bed that night, Bernadette stared at the stars, her eyes feeling sore. She spoke into the quiet space of the room and said, “how am I gonna enter the contest now, Ginny?”

But in the back of her head, she also wondered if it was ever going to be possible to feel normal again, as if her sister never left, before drifting off to a restless sleep.

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Bernadette and Ginny had just shimmied their way into their twin sized beds, one with a lilac duvet and the other with a baby blue duvet. Everything was brightly colored and neat to a T in their room thanks to their mom.

When tucked in, they looked at their mother expectantly.

“Ready?” asked their mother as she sat in the pink faux leather recliner.

Both girls nodded fervently and smiled with a couple of missing teeth as the tooth fairy had made 5 visits within the past week already.

Bernadette and Ginny’s mom smoothed her hand across the hardcovered book entitled “Jubilee McGee: Jubilee Gets a Guinea Pig.”

“Jubilee McGee is my name, and you’re not going to guess what I’m getting today.”

As their mother read the story, both girls’ mouths moved in tandem with their mothers as she read the words on the page, little whispers echoing behind her. This story was the girls’ favorite because of the sticky situation Jubilee gets herself into when she leaves the front door open and Wanda, Jubilee’s new pet, happens to think it’s a wonderful day to go exploring.

Bernadette’s heavy eyelids began to droop as a wide yawn consumed her face.

Her mother’s voice began to drift in and out, lulling her to sleep as her eyes and body finally gave in.

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Another scrapped piece of notebook paper with half-written recollections was crushed in Bernadette's hand. She signed heavily as she flung her pen across the room.

For the last two days, Bernadette went to school, came home, ate dinner, and sat at her desk, hoping the details from her first story would come to her, but she had no such luck.

She tapped her pen against her forehead for an hour, gasping when tiny details came to her, but she couldn't remember if they were right.

After a while, Bernadette's parents gathered outside of her room, meeting each other's furrowed eyes before knocking. "Sweetheart, can we talk?" her dad spoke.

Bernadette's eyes continued to burn a hole through the stack of blank paper, but she slowly shook her head. They both walked in and sat down on her bed.

"Tell us how you're feeling." Her dad reached out a hand and slowly shifted her to face him.

"I don't have a story now because I was a dummy and left my window open and I can't remember what I wrote and the story is due in two days and I'm not gonna get to meet Ramona J. Bernstein and I hate it," Bernadette breathed out in one breath. She wished the ground would just open and swallow her whole.

Bernadette's mother ran her hand through Bernadette's curly ponytail, strands shooting from all directions.

"I really, really messed up, mom." Bernadette's eyes rose for emphasis when she said 'really.'

"Why don't you use one of your other stories that you've already written? Or better yet, what if dad and I help you write another?!" Her mother thought this was the greatest idea.

“It’s not the same. This one is about Ginny, so it has to be new and special or else it won’t work,” Bernadette whined.

“What won’t work?” her mother’s eyebrows rose quizzically.

Bernadette shook her head as if to shake the words away. “Never mind. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Oh honey, it’s going to be alright. No matter what you write, we know it’s going to be amazing.” Bernadette’s mother gave her a comforting hug.

Bernadette always thought her mother was right, but in the back of her head, she thought for once, her mother might be wrong.

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“Hi Bernadette, I’m Dr. Kirby. How are you feeling today,” she questioned very cheerfully.

“I’m okay.” Bernadette sat in a comfortable red chair that she sunk into a couple of times, and the room was surrounded with art supplies, toys, shelves of books, and a desk that occupied a third of the room.

Dr. Kirby was a very pretty and thin woman with short, burnt red hair, and with long painted French nails. Her teeth were perfectly straight and white, and she had a British accent.

“Your parents tell me you’ve started at a new school this past year, dear. How do you like it?”

“I didn’t at first, but I do now. I have a best friend named Sammy, and we live in the same neighborhood, so we play a lot after school.”

“How old is Sammy?”

“He’s 11.”

“Is he a good friend?”

“Yeah, he’s fun to play with and sometimes he shares his rice krispy treats with me, which are his favorite. That’s how I know we’re good friends.”

“What a lovely friend! When did you move?”

“Seven months ago. There was a car accident and my sister Ginny got hurt and it made my parents sad.” Bernadette shifted in her seat and looked elsewhere.

“How long ago was the car accident?”

“Last summer.” Bernadette stretched her neck upwards as she saw Dr. Kirby scribble something on a yellow pad of paper. “What are you writing?”

“I’m just taking some notes, is that alright with you?”

She nodded her head and relaxed back in her chair.

Dr. Kirby finished her note and flashed a comforting smile at Bernadette. “I see you rubbing your hand across a scar on your left hand. Do you mind me asking where you got it?”

“I was born with it, just like my sister Ginny.”

“Does it make you feel closer to Ginny in some way?”

Bernadette furrowed her eyebrows in thought, “Yeah.”

Dr. Kirby took a few more notes. “It looks a little sore. What happened?”

“I just pick at it sometimes when I get angry or nervous or sad,” Bernadette mumbled as if she wished to let the conversation fade with her words.

Dr. Kirby nodded slowly. “Your parents tell me you were writing a story about your sister Ginny, but something happened.”

“It flew out of the window.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, dear. Did you ever find it?”

“No. It started raining. It was too late.” Bernadette exhaled.

“My, that’s awful. What was it about?”

“A girl who can turn into any animal she wants, and she saves her family from an evil animal at the zoo.”

“Sounds very entertaining.” Dr. Kirby continued to scribble notes in an elegant, effortless way across the note pad. When she finished, she looked back at Bernadette and noticed her picking at her scar, flecks of red beginning to appear on her flesh. To refocus Bernadette, Dr. Kirby said, “Why else was the story special to you?”

Bernadette stared a hole through the floor as she tightly tucked her hands under herself. “I thought it would make me feel normal again.”

“And what does normal look like?”

“Having my sister back.” Bernadette’s last words were barely above a whisper.

“Do you think the story will bring her back?”

“I think writing about her will help me feel like she’s still here.” Bernadette shifted in the chair and covered her face with her hair.

Dr. Kirby nodded her head slowly as she collected her thoughts. “Have you ever written a letter to your sister, sharing your thoughts and feelings, like you’re talking to her?”

Bernadette thought for a second and she had only written daily entries in her journal *about* Ginny, never *to* Ginny. “No, I don’t think so.”

“How about you try to write a letter to Ginny, telling her how you feel. How does that sound?”

Bernadette lifted her head and nodded. She took the pen and notepad offered and began to write.

Dear Ginny, a.k.a. Mop head (because your hair always looked like a mop when you woke up),

I miss you lots. I don't always cry because you are gone but that doesn't mean I don't love you. I write about you a lot in my journal. I wish you were still here so we could watch our favorite shows on Saturday morning like on Disney Channel or Cartoon Network. And sometimes I feel bad that I didn't get hurt as much as you. I really hope you don't hate me because of that. Mom and Dad tell me not to think like that, but I still feel bad. Sometimes my heart feels like broken glass and I don't know how to fix it, but Mom and Dad say we will see you again one day, so that helps. I'm still remembering my story about you and maybe if I write this, I'll be happy again like when you were here. I miss that feeling. Mom and Dad said that no matter what, they will be proud of me, and so will you.

Love,

Bernie, your favorite sister

—

Bernadette leaned back in her chair with a smile from ear to ear. She had finally rewritten her story, and this time, she kept the window locked tighter than a screw.

She then galloped to her parents who were watching the news. “Can I go play with Sammy?”

“It’s 6:30 and you need to finish your science homework before bed, so how about you play till 7, come back, finish your homework, wash up, and then bed. Deal?”

Bernadette shook her head rapidly, “Deal.”

As soon as she opened the front door, the first thing Sammy said was “The ice cream truck is just around the corner, I can hear it!” He jumped up and down and grabbed Bernadette’s arms, tugging her along. The two raced to the curb as the ice cream jingle became louder.

“What are you gonna get this time?” Sammy couldn’t stop jumping up and down.

“I’m gonna get the Tweety bar with the blue bubble gum eyes!”

“I’m gonna get the fudge bar.” Sammy’s eyes closed in blissful ecstasy as he thought of the rich, chilled chocolate treat. “Hey, you know what you’re gonna write about?”

“Yeah, I just rewrote it,” Bernadette beamed.

Sammy paid for their ice cream with a crisp \$5 bill, courtesy of his weekly allowance. “I bet you’re gonna *blow* the competition away” Sammy winked uncontrollably, and his laughter was only spurred on by Bernadette’s hand on her hip.

Sammy began to eat his fudge pop, drops of chocolate painting the pavement. “Wanna go play uno?”

“Let’s do it.”

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Bernadette finished putting on her favorite purple bracelet while her mother tied her favorite tie-dye scrunchie at the end of her single braid. She flashed a cheeky grin and winked at herself in the mirror.

At lunch, she ran to meet Sammy at their usual round table near the center of the lunch yard but slowed down after a stern warning about safety from Ms. Fitzgerald. “Ooooooh! Jackpot!” Bernadette whipped out a bag with not just one, but two extra gooey chocolate chunk cookies. She devoured it in seconds after eating a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich that melted in her mouth with an apple and a bottle of water.

Sammy asked Bernadette if she had watched the new episode of *Goosebumps* and replied distastefully, “No, Sammy. It’s too scary for me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sammy wiped the spilled juice from his fruit cup with the back of his hand that he slurped down in record time.

“Did you watch the new episode of *The Powder Puff Girls*? Mojo Jojo created boy versions of Bubbles, Blossom, and Buttercup and they had to whoop their butts and teach them a lesson.” Bernadette’s fist connected with her other hand with a “smack!”

“No, but guess what? The new *Tarzan* movie is coming out this summer!”

Bernadette gasped at the news of the movie and shrieked, “We have to go see that!”

While the two continued to ramble on about the latest shows, Amber strutted to their table.

“Hey Beeswax, good luck with the competition. I’m sure we’ll hear your name today when they announce the winner...” Amber tossed her hair and cackled, “Not!” Marcy and Tatum were like mimes behind her.

Bernadette rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah,” she huffed to herself. “Just you wait, Amber Jones. I’m gonna show you just how good of a writer I am.” Fume was flying out of Bernadette’s ears but before she could say another word, the lunch bell rang. Amber ought to be lucky,

Bernadette thought to herself. She was going to show Amber's pants off this afternoon, and she couldn't wait to see the look on her dumb face.

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“Good afternoon faculty, staff, and students of Fox Ridge Elementary. We hope everyone has had a Fantastic Friday and are ready to start their weekend,” said Principal Coleridge with a perky voice.

Bernadette was biting on her nails, her legs jumping up and down.

“As you know, the 5th graders were given the opportunity to write a school-appropriate story of their choosing for a chance to meet author, Ramona J. Bernstein, and to have their story featured in her next book. What a great prize! I want to thank all our brilliant, creative students for having the courage to share their work. There were so many wonderful stories from our students at Fox Ridge and we couldn't be prouder.”

Bernadette threw a glance at Sammy, her heartbeat getting loudly, and he threw a silly thumbs up at her.

“Now, the winner of our 1999 Fox Ridge Writing Contest is,” Bernadette squeezed her eyes together tightly and crossed her damp fingers, “Amber Jones!”

The class erupted in a sea of claps as Amber jumped from her chair. Her head was held high, and she stood tall with her hands on her hips. “Thank you, everyone, thank you.” Amber curtsied and combed her hand through the air like she was a princess. Bernadette wanted to wipe the smug look off her face, but she didn't want to be in Principal Coleridge's office on a Friday.

She slumped in her chair completely speechless. The color drained from her face and the excitement deflated Bernadette's body. So many thoughts flooded her mind. What would her

parents think? What if Sammy didn't want to be friends with a loser? How upset was Ginny going to be at her for not winning? How was she ever going to feel normal now?

Sammy then waved his hands in her face, trying to get her attention. He also gave Bernadette a soft tap with his hand on her shoulder.

After a moment, Bernadette finally made eye contact with Sammy and noticed others talking around her. "What?"

"Hey, it's okay. There's always next time, right?"

Bernadette's eyes welled with tears and her head hung low. She raised her hand to ask Ms. Fitzgerald to go to the bathroom and got up from her chair like a zombie.

The halls were so quiet compared to the classroom, her footsteps now echoing. She stopped for a drink of cool water at the fountain to distract herself from her tears, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

Almost at the girls' bathroom, Bernadette heard a commotion going on in the school gymnasium. Glancing both ways to make sure the coast was clear, she tip-toed across the hall like a spy to see what was going on, and before she could stop the loud gasp that came from her mouth, Bernadette tripped over her own feet, knocking into the doors.

She couldn't believe it. There she was. It was Ramona J. Bernstein.

Before she could try to run away, Mr. Jeffries, another fifth-grade teacher called, "Bernadette Clark! What are you doing out of class?"

Bernadette felt her heart race because she just couldn't believe she was looking at Ramona J. Bernstein. But also, she didn't want to get in trouble.

She walked over and she stood in front of the two adults. When she looked up, she said, "S-sorry, I was just going to the bathroom. Please don't tell Ms. Fitzgerald!" she begged.

“Alright then, get back to class, young lady.”

As Bernadette was about to turn with her head down, she heard, “Wait, you wrote the story about the girl who saved her family at the zoo, right?”

Whipping around, Bernadette saw that the soft, gravelly voice came from none other than Ramona J. Bernstein. She was a tall, slender woman with skin the color of coffee beans. Her hair was a straight black pixie cut, and she wore an oversized beige suit. Bernadette had always known she was pretty, but not this pretty.

Speechless, Bernadette stood glued in place for a few seconds before she exclaimed, “Yes, that was me.”

Holy moly, Bernadette thought. Ramona J. Bernstein knew about her story. Did she like it? Did she hate it? Thoughts raced through Bernadette’s mind and it was hard to stop to say, “Did you like my story?”

“Why yes, I did. It was fabulous!” Ms. Bernstein clapped her hands together and bent down to be eye-level with Bernadette.

Bernadette’s jaw dropped.

“You’re a great writer, Miss. Bernadette. What inspired your story?”

“My twin sister, G-Ginny. She died nine months ago in a car crash and I miss her, so I wanted to w-write a story about her to help me feel better,” Bernadette stuttered, her smile faltering slightly.

“Let me guess, you’re like the super girl who saves her family, aren’t you?” Ms. Bernstein questioned; her voice as smooth as a river of honey.

“How did you know?”

“I know a great sister when I see one.”

Bernadette looked down at the carpeted floor and blushed. “Our mother always read us your *Jubilee McGee* stories and they were our favorite, Ginny and I’s.”

“I’m glad you like them. They were meant to inspire wonderful young ladies like you.”

“I didn’t win the contest, but I’m glad you liked my story,” Bernadette momentarily jumped up and down before she returned to the fact that she was a big fat loser.

Ms. Bernstein nodded her head slowly while a soft smile graced her face. “Well Miss. Bernadette, you made your sister, and the rest of your family very, very proud, and that’s what matters most. No matter what, she will *always be* with you,” Ms. Bernstein softly gripped Bernadette’s shoulders that sent a warm sensation through Bernadette. “Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“Never stop writing. No matter if you win or lose, no matter if there are days you don’t want to, keep writing. Nobody knows your story like you do, and one day, I hope to see your name out there in the world. So, do you promise me?”

Bernadette, with a glint in her eye, said, “I promise.”