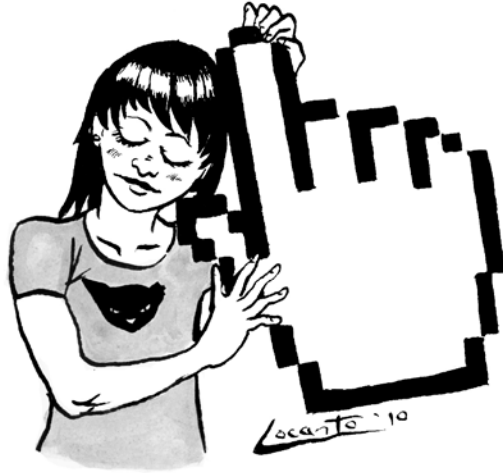


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# TABITHA

ROWENA CORY DANIELLS

I recognised the new girl as soon as she walked into the Computer Club. I'd been there when the office ladies got flustered because her father hadn't bothered to enrol her in person. I felt sorry for her — new kid at a big school.

She looked more like a Drama Club kid. You know the type; they don't have to be good looking but they've got what my mum calls 'flair'.

I hung around the sign-in table to find out her name. Tabitha Bentley. She wasn't pretty in the usual way, but there was something about her. She had dark hair which made her skin look very pale, and hazel eyes that were almost golden.

She caught me looking and I turned away. I kicked myself — I should have said hello.

Tabitha stood there, looking lost and serious. I was building up courage to approach her when Chris beat me to it. Chris's hormones have already kicked in, so his voice has dropped and he's built like a football player. While all the other guys were looking at Tabitha and licking their lips, and the girls were looking and thinking — what do girls think? — Chris stepped right up to her and asked her what sort of computer she had.

Our club is split by a feud between PC users and Mac users. Mostly it's a friendly rivalry, although it can get pretty intense when we compare software packages. Personally, I think Mac has the best graphic packages and they're easier to use, but the PC users outnumber us.

Tabitha tilted her head and looked up at Chris. "I've got the latest Mac, with the best graphics card."

Yes! Chris was a PC user, which left the field clear for me. Chris moved off and Tabitha looked around. Most of the seats were taken. The guys were struck dumb at the sight of her and the girls weren't being friendly, so I pulled another chair off the stack and caught her eye.

She hurried over and sat down. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

My mouth went dry and there was a rushing sound in my ears. I hardly heard the teacher call the meeting to order and ask for nominations. Naturally Chris volunteered for President. He glared at me but I wasn't after that job. I volunteered for E-Zine Editor. Amazingly, so did Tabitha. Because the kids knew me, I won the vote. I felt bad for the new girl and sent her an apologetic smile as I took the Editor's seat.

"You can start the first meeting, Chris," Ms Jacobs said.

"Ah, Ms?" I cleared my throat. "I've got big plans for the E-Zine and the first one has to be delivered a week from today. Could I have an Assistant Editor?"

Ms Jacobs' eyes twinkled as she told me to pick someone. I chose Tabitha. Her smile made my day.

When the last bell went I raced to the school gate and waited to walk her home. Along the way, I invited her over to my place so we could compare software packages. After all, we only had a week to produce the first E-Zine.

I thought I was doing well until we got to Tabitha's front door.

She hesitated. "You can come in. But you can't stay long. Dad says I'm not to have friends over when he isn't here."

"I'm not a friend. I'm a business associate."

A laugh escaped her and I followed her up the garden path. When she unlocked the townhouse, the place had a stale smell like it had been shut up all day. She led me down the hall, past lots of prints of cartoon characters and framed newspaper clippings. Funny. People usually hung paintings.

I passed a family portrait. A scarf was draped across the top of the frame but one side had slipped down and hung over the picture, obscuring the third person. I tucked it into place, revealing a woman who looked just like Tabitha, only grown up. For some reason the expression in her eyes made me shiver.

“Josh?”

“Coming.”

Tabitha opened the back door from the kitchen to let in a big, black cat with only one ear. She scooped him up. “Hello Catnip. Did you miss me?”

He blinked golden eyes and I had the strangest feeling, as if he was sizing me up and didn’t think much of me.

Tabitha reminded me of the cat. Not that was she big and battle scarred. No, she was small and dainty, but she moved like a cat and her dark hair fell in black wings to her small pointed chin. When she looked up at me and smiled, her hazel eyes were almost golden. She was ... bewitching.

“What?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“Would you like milk and biscuits?”

“Sure.”

While we shared chocolate milk and biscuits at the kitchen table, I searched for something to say. I wasn’t going to ask about her mother. So many kids’ parents are separated. “How come you’ve got all those prints of cartoon characters and newspaper clippings?”

She cast me a glance, then seemed to decide I was serious. “My dad does the *Little Logans*.”

“What’s the *Little Logans*?”

She went off into a peal of laughter that made the cat lift his great black head and blink at us. I felt myself grow hot and embarrassed.

“Sorry.” She rolled her eyes at me. “It is so good to meet someone who has never heard of Dad’s comic strip. I’ve lived with the *Little Logans* all my life. I used to think those kids were more real to Dad than me!”

She was suddenly silent and sad.

“I’m more into computer generated artwork,” I said to fill the gap. “One day I want to create special effects for films.”

“Really? I love SF and fantasy films. I want to do 3D animation, too.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’ve got the latest animation software. Would you like to see it?”

“What are we waiting for?”

We went into what should have been the dining room. It had been converted into such a professional looking computer workroom that I stood open mouthed.

“My dad’s office.” She raised her voice. “Honey, I’m home!”

The computer hummed — voice activated — cool! With a soft hiss like a large reptile waking, the screen came to life, revealing her father’s face.

“Hello, Tabitha.” It wasn’t a computer generated male voice. The words held warmth, like it was happy to see her.

Tabitha sat in front of the screen then looked at me. “You’ll have to bring a chair from the kitchen.”

When I rejoined her, she tapped a key and her father’s face disappeared from the screen. “I wish my screen was this big.”

“My dad needed it for his work. I’ll show you what the animation software can do. We’ve been trying to animate the *Little Logans*.” For the next half hour, she introduced me to the *Little Logans*, or rather she let them introduce themselves. Each of the six Logan kids said their name and there was a short animation which revealed what sort of person they were.

Tabitha showed me how she animated the bodies. She could even create a story by feeding ideas into the fuzzy logic program. The computer knew all the kids and what they were likely to do. It wrote the story for her.

I was so impressed, I forgot all about leaving before her dad came home, but he must have been held up, because it was dark before I tore myself away.

“We haven’t talked about the E-Zine yet,” I said. “Why don’t we surf the net during lunch hours and write reviews of interesting sites? Then put it all together on the weekend.”

She nodded. As I said goodbye, I was already looking forward to spending my lunches with her. Tomorrow, I’d show her my animation. Maybe her dad could give me some tips.

Tabitha thought my 3D space station, with the sun hitting it as it spun, was great. At least she said she did and I don't think she was just being polite.

"Should I burn a copy to show your dad?" I asked.

She hesitated. Maybe people were always trying to show him artwork. Maybe he was sick of want-to-be artists.

"Sure. Burn a DVD. I'll take it with me," she said.

Just then Mum came home with my baby brother. Tabitha went gaga over him. He'd started to crawl and I must admit he is cute. Tabitha actually said that she wished she had a little brother or sister. "Then I wouldn't be so lonely."

"You can have mine any day!" I told her. We both laughed but I felt sorry for her being an only child.

When Mum asked Tabitha to stay for dinner, I could see she really wanted to. "Why don't you ring your dad and ask?"

So she did. Tabitha chatted to Mum and Dad as if she was more used to grown-ups than kids, which sort of explained why she found baby Luke so interesting.

I guess, being an only child, she spent a lot of time alone with her father. Maybe that was why he was so strict.

"So," Dad said, "your father does the *Little Logans*?"

Tabitha nodded.

Dad looked like a kid on Christmas morning. "I've read that strip for years. I'd like to meet your dad, Tabitha."

She looked down and when she looked up and smiled, I knew she was going to lie. "I'm sorry, Mr Foster, my dad is a bit eccentric. He doesn't like meeting people. He's very shy."

Why was Tabitha lying?

Dad changed the subject. "Josh tells me your computer is out of this world."

"My father's dream was to make an animated movie of the *Little Logans*," Tabitha said. "So the computer has all the latest software."

"You should see it, Dad," I said. "There's a file of the cartoon characters with their personalities and all the story backgrounds. Plus there's a fuzzy logic program that will create a strip from your idea!"

My father laughed. "Your dad will be out of a job at this rate, Tabitha!"

She shot me a quick, angry look. I started to ask why but suddenly there was this buzzing, rushing sound in my head and when it cleared Mum was speaking.

“Tabitha ... I know why that name is familiar. That was the daughter in *Bewitched*.” She turned to Dad. “D’you remember that show, Gary? I loved it when I was a kid.”

“Witches!” Dad snorted.

“Don’t you believe in witchcraft, Mr Foster?” Tabitha asked.

“The day I believe in witchcraft is the day I believe in little green men from Mars!”

We all laughed but I noticed Tabitha looked relieved.

By the time we finished dinner it was pouring so Mum gave Tabitha a lift home. There were no lights on when we arrived.

“It’s all right, Mrs Foster. I’m used to it. Dad often works late.”

“I thought he worked from home,” Mum said.

“He does,” Tabitha agreed quickly. “Only he has to meet publishers and press agents, that sort of thing.”

“He must hate having to do that,” Mum sympathised. Tabitha looked blank. “When he’s so shy.”

“That’s true, but it’s part of his job — self promotion.” Tabitha talked too quickly. I could tell she was scared, covering-up. But why?

“I watched them build these townhouses. I’d love to take a look inside,” Mum said.

What could Tabitha say?

Mum parked the car and we ran up the front path. A rush of stale air met us when Tabitha opened the door.

Mum stopped at the family portrait. The scarf was hiding Tabitha’s mother again. Mum tucked it in place. “Is this your mother? She looks just like you.”

“We’re not a bit alike!” Tabitha snapped. “She left Dad six months ago. I refused to live with her.”

“I’m sorry,” Mum said and glanced at me for help, but I didn’t know what to say, either.

Tabitha led us through the archway, telling Mum about the rooms as we went.

Mum poked her nose out the back door when Tabitha let the black cat in. He purred loudly. His coat was dusted with diamond raindrops.

“Hmmm, the backyard is bigger than I thought it would be. That jasmine smells beautiful. I wish I could get mine to grow this well. What’s your secret, magic fertilizer?”

“Just a green thumb.” Tabitha frowned as she closed the back door. “Dad will be home soon.”

“I don’t like leaving you alone. Josh can stay until your dad gets home. You don’t mind, do you Josh?” Mum didn’t even wait for an answer. “I must dash.”

After Mum left I grinned at Tabitha. “Sorry about that. Mum likes to manage things.”

“That’s all right,” she said looking wistful. “I like your mum.”

“I guess she’s okay.” I glanced past Tabitha into the computer room. “Since I have to stay until your dad gets home, can we have a look at the animation program?”

“Bring in a chair,” Tabitha told me as she went into the computer room.

I went into the kitchen where Catnip was cleaning himself. A plate and mug were on the sink, along with an up-turned bowl. Tabitha and her father weren’t big eaters. Come to think of it, there was only one bowl in the sink and one chair in front of the computer.

“Hey, Tab—”

“Come on, Josh,” Tabitha called.

I hurried in. It wasn’t every day I got to work on a computer this powerful. The big screen was a dream. I’d forgotten where I was, when the computer alerted us to an in-coming call. Mr Bentley’s face appeared on the screen, frozen in a mask of a smile.

“Hello Tabitha.” His voice sounded just like the computer’s recorded voice.

“Hi Dad.”

“I’ll be home late. Something came up.”

“That’s okay.” Tabitha gave me an apologetic smile as the call ended and the screen resumed the graphic display. “I guess there’s no point in staying, Josh.”

I tilted my head to listen. “The rain’s stopped. I won’t bother to call Mum.”

We walked to the door. The night air was muggy, heavy with moisture. Tabitha stood on the verandah. “Thanks for having me over tonight.”

Now that I was about to go, she seemed sorry to see me leave. The quiet dark surrounded us. I thought of my noisy home, with Mum trying to get baby Luke off to sleep and Dad playing his electric guitar, while Tabitha had to return to that empty computer room.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right? I can stay.”

“It’s okay, Josh, really.”

“Okay.” I ran down the path to the gate and jumped over it. As I walked, the scents of the night were strong on the damp air, fresh mown grass and jasmine...

Disaster! Saturday morning, when I switched on my computer to layout the E-Zine, the whole system crashed. I’d saved the reviews to my USB, but it meant I couldn’t finish the E-Zine on time unless I went around to Tabitha’s.

When I called to explain she said her dad was going out so the computer would be free. I told her I’d be over in half an hour.

As it turned out, Mum was about to visit someone and gave me a lift so I got there in five minutes. I walked up the front path to knock on Tabitha’s door but there was no answer.

Tabitha’s house was on the street corner. I went around the high wall that ran along the side yard. Then I heard her voice. She was talking softly with someone in the back yard. I couldn’t catch the words, only a questioning tone and the word, “Dad”.

Her father hadn’t left yet. Maybe he could tell me what he thought of my artwork. I jogged back to the front door and knocked loudly.

After a minute or two, Tabitha answered.

“Sorry, I’m early. Mum gave me a lift.” I waved the USB. “Can we still work on the E-Zine even though your dad hasn’t gone out?”

“You just missed him.”

“But I heard you talking to him in the backyard.”

She jumped like I’d caught her out. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t answer the door. I thought you must be out the back so I went around and heard you talking to your father.”

Her eyes went very wide and golden, as a strange rushing buzzing noise filled my head. When it passed I found myself looking at the closed front door.

I knocked. No answer. I knocked again. Hadn't I done this before? Tabitha had answered and we'd had an argument about something.

I yelled through the door. "Look, whatever I did, I'm sorry. Tabitha, can I come in?"

No answer.

I couldn't remember what we'd argued about. I didn't know whether to be afraid or annoyed so I settled for being disappointed as I walked home.

I dreaded the Computer Club meeting. When Chris asked for the E-Zine, I'd have to tell him it wasn't ready. Tabitha dashed in late and sat next to me as if nothing had happened. What *had* happened?

Suddenly Chris was asking me about the E-Zine.

"My computer crashed." I sounded lame.

He grinned. "You should work on a PC."

"I'd be able to finish the E-Zine if I could use someone else's Mac."

"Didn't you say your software was compatible?" Chris asked Tabitha. She swallowed and nodded. "Then you two can finish it tonight. We don't want the E-Zine to be late, it'll make the Club look bad."

Tabitha wouldn't meet my eyes for the rest of the meeting. She was the last one out and I waited by the door.

"Will your famous father let me use his computer tonight?" My voice tight and angry.

Her eyes widened and then she put on her lying face, only what she said sounded reasonable. "You didn't let me explain. Dad had to pack to catch a plane and he was running late. That's why he didn't have time to meet you."

I didn't want to fight with Tabitha. "Sorry, if I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I guess I can meet him tonight."

"He's still away."

"Who's looking after you?"

"I can look after myself."

"What about your mum?" It was out before I could stop myself.

"I don't want anything to do with her." Tabitha's face closed up. "We moved here to get away. She's a real w ... bitch!"

I winced. Tabitha must really hate her mother. I changed the subject. “We have to get the E-Zine finished.”

“Come over after school.”

It only took an hour on Tabitha’s computer to do the layout and send it through to the school computer where the E-zine subscription list was kept. This meant I had time to try her father’s graphic programs.

We were animating a robot we’d designed, when the computer let us know about an incoming call. I looked at Tabitha. She didn’t pause the graphics program to answer.

“Why don’t you answer it?” I asked.

“Dad said I’m not to answer the phone, while he’s away.”

That didn’t make sense. “What if he’s trying to call you?”

She’d left it too long — the computer answered the phone. Her father’s voice came on. “Hi, Jake Bentley here.”

“Hi, Jake, it’s Serena.”

Tabitha gave a little whimper.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“My mother!” she whispered, as if her mother might hear.

“Jake, are you there?” Serena asked. “Pick up.”

Tabitha shrank into herself.

“Jake?” Serena prodded, her voice grew heavier. “Tabitha?”

“Go make a hot chocolate,” Tabitha told me.

“Ohhhkay.” I could take a hint. She wanted me out of the room while she talked to her mother. I was catching on quick this afternoon. I went into the kitchen where Catnip was scratching to go out the back door.

I put the kettle on, then opened the door and let him out. The jasmine’s scent was strong and the late afternoon sunlight sparkled with tiny droplets of rain. Catnip hesitated.

“Do you want in or out?” I asked him.

He decided to go out and I shut the door. I wasn’t trying to overhear Tabitha’s conversation with her mother, but I was surprised when I couldn’t hear her at all. Instead I caught her father’s voice.

I looked for a couple of mugs and found the makings of hot chocolate. While I was at it, I stacked the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. One plate, one bowl, one glass. Poor Tabitha, left all alone.

I poured the hot water, put two marshmallows in my cup and went to the other room to ask. “Do you want marshmallows in yours?”

Tabitha jumped, then signalled for silence

Her mother asked. “I take it you won’t send Tabitha to me for the long weekend?”

“I’ve told you before. Speak to my solicitor,” Tabitha’s dad answered from somewhere.

Tabitha hit a button on the keyboard and the computer cut the call.

“How did you get your dad on the phone?”

“I patched the call through to his hotel room,” she said. “Look. It’s nearly dark. You better go.”

“But I’ve made two hot chocolates.”

Tabitha’s golden eyes fixed on me. My head buzzed and I found myself walking down the garden path in a sun shower. When I reached the corner I realised I’d left my E-Zine folder at Tabitha’s place. I might as well go back and get it, and call Mum to give me a lift home.

I knocked on the door but there was no answer. I jogged around the corner and pulled myself up on the fence. Tabitha was standing in the backyard talking to the jasmine bush.

“... didn’t know what else to do. Josh is really nice and so’s his family. But I can’t risk anyone finding out. If Mum knew you were dead she’d fly up here and drag me away.” She gave a little sob. “It’s so hard without you, Dad, and now Josh is angry with me and I can’t keep fuzzing his memory. He’ll catch on.”

She shivered, brushed tears and rain from her face, then ran inside, leaving the door ajar. I waited a moment before I jumped the fence.

My heart raced as I stepped into the kitchen. I heard the shower running in the bathroom upstairs. Glancing around, I remembered the one bowl in the sink, one computer chair, the stale smell of a house that was closed up all day.

Boy, was I slow. Tabitha’s father wasn’t shy; he was dead. He couldn’t have called to say he’d be late home, he couldn’t have been talking on the phone only five minutes ago. How...

I sat down at the keyboard and touched the mouse, the screen cleared to show his face. “Hello, Tabitha.”

His voice made me shudder. I opened the *Little Logans* file, running through the menu. She’d shown me all this, the characters, the

animation, the files of the story backgrounds. Upstairs, the shower stopped running and my hands began to shake. I'd never make a good James Bond.

There, at the bottom — *ZZ-Dad-Speech*. What did that file hold?

A password symbol came up on the screen. What password would she choose? It had six letters.

I went blank. Her first and last names were longer than six letters. I licked my dry lips. She'd come down those stairs any minute and find me.

Something thumped at the window and I jumped with fright. I saw the black cat's golden eyes glowing with reflected light.

Of course. I typed in *catnip*.

Sure enough the screen shivered and rearranged itself in a new menu. There were files for Editor Talk, School Talk, Interview Talk and Publisher Talk.

Tabitha had edited her father's recorded voice. She'd told me how he would dictate ideas and the stories of the *Little Logan* characters into the computer — she had hundreds of words to choose from.

But that was crazy.

Tabitha needed her father, needed him to do the *Little Logans* comic strip every week. Or did she? My dad's laughing comment came back to me. He'd said her father would be out of a job because the computer could do the strip. Could the computer generate a strip every week? With all that Tabitha had shown me, it was possible.

Tabitha's father was dead and she'd been covering for him.

"But why hide his death?" I whispered.

"Why?" Tabitha snapped.

My heart lurched and I spun in the seat. She stood at the entrance to the kitchen, small and angry, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I forgot the E-Zine file," I said, coming to my feet. "But you didn't answer the door. I went around the back and heard you say your father was dead. I understand how you've covered it up, but I don't see why."

"Don't give me away, Josh," she pleaded, her eyes very wide.

My head felt thick and there was that buzzing sound again but now I knew what was happening, I fought it, trying to concentrate. "You lied to me."

"I had to. Dad died just after we moved in here. I didn't like lying to everyone but I had to."

“Why?”

She led me into the hall pointing to the family portrait. The scarf had fallen over her mother’s face again. I went to push it back.

“No!” Tabitha stopped me. I could feel her hand shaking. “If my mother knew Dad was dead she’d fly up here and take me away to live with her people.”

“She can’t be that bad, Tabitha.”

“Oh no? She’s a witch!”

Didn’t she mean bitch? I shook my head. “She’s your mother and you have to live with a grown-up.”

“You *can’t* give me away,” she said, eyes glowing.

My head went muzzy and my tongue felt thick as I spoke. “Your father wouldn’t want you to be all alone.”

“I’ve got Catnip,” she said and took my hand, drawing me out the back door. “And Dad’s not far away. I buried him here and planted the jasmine over him.”

“You can’t bury your father in the garden!”

She plucked a jasmine flower. Its rich scent filled the air, filled my mind until I couldn’t think.

“You could work with me, Josh. We could animate the *Little Logans*. It’s what you really want to do,” she urged, her face haunting in the twilight. It was true. I did want to be a computer animator and I wanted to help her. Needed to help her. “Please, Josh. Don’t turn me over to that witch!”

I could hardly breathe; the scent of the jasmine filled my senses.

Her pale face, her night-dark hair and huge eyes filled my vision. “Promise you’ll never give me away, Josh.”

“I’d never give you away, Tabitha.” I heard my voice from a great distance. It was a relief to stop fighting.

“The first time I saw you I knew you’d come to my rescue.” She smiled, and I knew her mother wasn’t the only witch in the family but it didn’t seem to matter. I was going to be an animator and work with Tabitha.

I was bewitched.