

Cleo Edison Oliver

in Persuasion Power

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Illustrations by
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◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆

The Next Fortune

Cleo aimed the remote at the TV and punched in channel 24—the Good Life Network. *Fortune's network. Fortune's show would be on in less than ten minutes.*

Cleo had just settled into the cushy, faux-leather recliner when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Julian yelled. Her littlest brother tore through the house.

"I want to get it!" Josh shouted. The foot stomping doubled. There was a crash, the sound of piano keys being mashed, and Julian crying.

“What’s going on down there?” Mom yelled from upstairs.

Cleo glanced at the large family photo hanging on the wall—her and her brothers’ beaming brown faces, Mom’s smiling white one, and Dad’s sort-of tannish one. Why couldn’t her brothers always be as still and quiet as they were in that picture?

Cleo headed for the front room when the doorbell rang again. She passed Josh and Jay wrestling on the wood floor. Barkley stood over them, barking. He trailed Cleo to the door, slowly. Their black lab still had a lot of pounds to shed.

“Hey, Jelly!” Cleo said, pushing Barkley back so she could open the door all the way.

Caylee carried her craft tote—a large, polka-dotted bag—over her shoulder. “Hi, Peanut Butter.” Cleo and Caylee were like PB&J. They just went together.

“Ooo, a new Caylee’s Cutie!” Cleo reached for the rainbow clip holding back one side of Caylee’s chin-length, straight black hair. The word *Hope* was written in silver across the colorful arc.

“Our priest said rainbows are a promise that no matter how bad things seem, the world’s not coming to an end.”

Caylee peered around Cleo's shoulder at the boys. Josh was sitting on Jay's face. Jay flailed his fists but wasn't having much luck making contact. "Should we . . . do something?" she asked.

Josh rose up a little and farted. JayJay shrieked.

Brothers. Cleo shut the front door and motioned with her head for Caylee to follow. They slipped past Mom, who was putting the boys in separate corners—one in the living room and the other in the hallway near the bathroom. "Hi, Caylee!" Mom said from the hall.

"Hi, Miss Nicki!"

Cleo grabbed a box of Cheez-Its as they passed through the kitchen. They had just reached the family room when Mom called out, "You finished your homework, right, Cleo?"

Doughnuts and Disney!

She'd hoped Mom would be so distracted with Josh and Jay that she'd forget.

"Pretty much!" She and Caylee plopped onto the love seat. A lady on TV was dancing with a mop as if she were Cinderella with Prince Charming. A trail of sparkles followed her as the mop magically cleaned the kitchen floor.