Winning Isn’t Everything

“E-x-t-r-a-o-r-d-i-n-a-r-y,” Jenna slowly spelled the word out loud.

“That’s correct,” her friend Amy said. “The next word is ‘gaudy’.”

Jenna paused and thought for a moment. “Can you give me the word in a sentence?”

“Sure,” Amy said, “Sarah was wearing a gaudy dress at school today. In fact, Sarah is just plain gaudy no matter what she wears,” she giggled.

Jenna smiled as she spelled, “G-a-u-d-y, gaudy. That’s enough for right now. I’m really tired of spelling. When this stupid contest is over, I may never spell another word for as long as I live!” Jenna flopped down on the bed dramatically.

“Well, you need to spell a lot more words right now if you want to have any chance of beating Sarah. You know she was born with a dictionary in her brain. She has won the spelling bee every year since we were in first grade.”

“I know! I know! I do want to beat her; I want to beat her so bad that I have spent every spare minute studying for weeks now. I haven’t watched a movie, sent a text message, read a book that wasn’t a dictionary, or done anything else fun in forever. I’m so tired of Sarah always beating me at everything. She makes the best grades and she always wins.”

Amy put the book of spelling bee words down on the desk and stood up and stretched. She knew there was no point in trying to get Jenna motivated when she was in one of her ‘poor me’ moods.

Jenna watched her friend. “I’m sorry,” she said, “this isn’t much fun for you either, is it? I really do appreciate you helping me study. I wouldn’t have a chance without you helping me. I know I whine a lot. You’re the best friend a girl ever had for putting up with me.”

Amy said. “Why don’t we go and swim a few laps in the pool and have lunch? Then we can get back to spelling. You only have three days and you’re still a little iffy on some of the words.”

Amy was used to being the practical one of the two girls. Jenna was always the dramatic one. Their looks were as different as their personalities. Jenna was tall with long, blond hair and blue eyes that changed colors with her moods. Amy was average height with brown hair and eyes. Amy was a very pretty girl, but all eyes went to her tall, willowy, blond friend when they were together.

“Okay,” Jenna sighed. “I bet Sarah isn’t even studying. She’s probably shopping with her friends, or doing something else fun.”

But Jenna was wrong. Sarah was studying. She had spent most of the last two weeks in her room endlessly going over every word list that she could find on the internet. She knew that second place was not an option.
Her mother accepted only the best and life was not pleasant if Sarah let her down. Not that her mother beat her or anything like that. She had never laid a hand on Sarah, neither in anger nor in love. Her mother’s disappointment was what Sarah had to deal with if she didn’t achieve the top scores, win the first prizes, and excel in every way.

At school Sarah was always the first one to volunteer for any project. Her list of extracurricular activities was long and time consuming. She had lots of friends, but none were close friends. She didn’t have time to spend doing the things that girls her age liked to do. Her mother insisted on a rigid schedule of homework, piano practice, and household chores.

Sarah knew that Jenna was working extra hard to beat her this year. Jenna was very vocal about it with all the kids at school. So, Sarah was studying even harder than usual. She couldn’t imagine what would happen if she didn’t win the spelling bee. Her mind went back to the beginning of the school year when she had made a B on a math test. It wasn’t that she hadn’t studied; she just had trouble grasping the concepts sometimes. Her mother had reacted first with anger, and accused her of not caring if she ever amounted to anything. Then it had been the silent treatment that Sarah hated so much. It was just Sarah and her mother; her father had left when Sarah was just a toddler. For days after she brought the test paper with the big B on the corner home, she had tiptoed around the silent apartment wishing that her mother would talk to her, but dreading what she might say. Sarah sighed and picked up another printed list of words. She didn’t stop studying until it was time to help her mother with dinner.

Jenna’s mother stepped out onto the patio and stood for a minute watching her daughter and her best friend playing in the pool. She was holding a tray piled with sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade and glasses. “I made you some lunch,” she called. “There are brownies for dessert for the hardworking girls.” She sat the tray down on the patio table and stood smiling at the girls.

“You’re the greatest, Mom!” Jenna said as she jumped out of the pool and gave her mother a big, wet hug.

“You’re not bad yourself, pretty one,” her mother smiled at her. “I hope you aren’t working too hard on this spelling bee. It’s just a contest, you know. It’s not a matter of life or death whether you win or not,” a little frown of concern creased her forehead.

“You’re just afraid that Sarah is going to beat me again and I am going to get all upset like last year,” Jenna said. “But I’ve studied a lot more this year. Amy and I have gone over all the words in the book the teacher gave out and some lists from the internet. I’m ready this time, and I’m going to win.”

Amy high-fived Jenna and giggled, “Go get ’em girl! Are you ready to go study some more?”

Amy didn’t really understand why Jenna was so determined to beat
Sarah in the spelling bee. Sarah really was a nice girl; she did always win, but it was because she worked harder than anybody else. Certainly harder than Jenna.

Jenna sighed, but she followed Amy back to the bedroom where they spent another hour going through the words.

On the day of the spelling bee, Jenna felt like there was a whole field full of butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. She peeked through the curtain and saw the whole school assembled in the auditorium. “I think I’m going to be sick!” she moaned as she pushed her way through the crowd of kids waiting to go on stage.

She rushed into the girl’s restroom and stood at the sink to splash some cold water in her face. She went into one of the stalls to wait and see if her stomach was going to settle down. As she was getting ready to open the door to the stall, she heard voices.

“I know, Mom. I know. I did study. I think I can win.”

“That’s Sarah,” thought Jenna. She decided to stay inside the stall until Sarah left.

A voice that was quiet, but somehow still menacing, said, “You think you can win? I think you have to know you can win. You have to want to win more than anything in the world. Don’t you ever want to be somebody, Sarah!? Don’t you want to amount to anything? Do you just want to be a nobody like your father for the rest of your life?”

“I will win, Mom, I promise you.”

From the stall, Jenna could hear the quiver in Sarah’s voice.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” the menacing voice that Jenna now knew was Sarah’s mother said. “I’m going to go and find a good seat. If you don’t win this contest, don’t expect me to be waiting around for a loser.”

Jenna stood in the stall shaking from what she had heard. She opened the door a crack to peak out and see if Sarah had left. She hadn’t. She was standing alone in front of the mirror looking at herself. Jenna thought that she had never seen a sadder look on a person’s face than the reflection of Sarah in the mirror. It was the face of a young girl with the eyes of an old woman, an old woman that had been beaten down by the world for too many years to care anymore. Sarah took a deep breath and gave herself a little shake. Her small hand shook as she wiped away the tear that had rolled down her face. She held her head up as she walked out the door.

Jenna waited for a few minutes until she was sure that Sarah wouldn’t see her come out of the restroom. She wanted to run and find her mother, she needed one of her mother’s healing hugs. From the time she could walk, Jenna had walked straight to her mom whenever anything hurt her. Her mom would wrap her arms around her and Jenna felt safe from the world, like nobody could ever hurt her as long as she was surrounded by her mother’s love. She wanted to go and get Sarah and take her to her mother, so that she could feel that love.
She walked over and looked into the mirror that had reflected Sarah’s sad face. She realized that winning wasn’t everything, at least not in her world. She knew what she had to do.

“There you are!” Amy was walking down the hall towards Jenna. “They’re going to start in just a minute; you need to hurry up and get on stage.” Amy grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the auditorium. She gave her friend a quick hug, and said, “You’re gonna do it this time. I think this is your year.”

“No. I don’t think it is,” Jenna said quietly. “Suddenly I don’t feel like I could spell ‘cat’ if my life depended on it.” Amy stood with a confused look on her face as Jenna moved through the curtains and out onto the stage.