

Wendy Dager

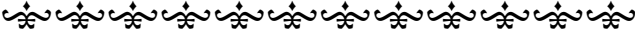
**I MURDERED**

**THE**

**S P E L L I N G**

**B E E**



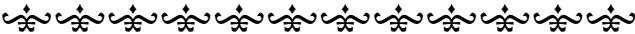


# **I MURDERED THE SPELLING BEE**

*A Daphne Lee-Lee Misadventure*

**BY**

**WENDY DAGER**



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

I MURDERED THE SPELLING BEE

© 2012 by Wendy Dager

ISBN 978-1-61271-149-2

Cover art © Chillpaw

Cover design © Tamian Wood

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

"Zumaya Enigma" and the raven logo are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX. Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com/enigma.php>

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dager, Wendy, 1963-

I murdered the spelling bee : a Daphne Lee-Lee misadventure / Wendy Dager. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-61271-149-2 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-61271-150-8 (electronic/multiple format) — ISBN 978-1-61271-151-5 (electronic/epub)

1. Single mothers—Fiction. 2. Spelling bees—Fiction. 3. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.A3324I35 2012

813'.6—dc23

2012002576

**For Chill**

My fellow superhero



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I gratefully acknowledge everyone who has supported my continued efforts to write stuff that no one else is writing.







I didn't realize Iris was behind me, watching as I stood on tiptoe going through the top rack of my closet, peering at a dozen or so '70s ridiculously garish polyester blouses.

She cleared her throat.

I turned to look at my eight-year-old daughter.

"A-hem," she said again.

"A-hem back at ya," I said.

"Mo-om."

"Ye-es," I said. "Is there something you want? Hurry it up, because I have to get dressed."

She eyed me suspiciously. As usual.

"Why?" she asked. "Where are you going?"

"To downtown Los Angeles," I said. "To see your sister win the National Spelling Bee."

I turned away from her and grabbed a charcoal blouse with a pattern featuring white and gold art deco ladies and peacocks. The tag inside, just under the collar, was marked "Mr. Blackwell."

*Perfect. It'll look smashing with my black leather pants. Maybe I'll even make his best-dressed list this year. Except for the fact he's dead. Oh, well.*

"What makes you think Mari's gonna win?" asked Iris.

"Because she's brilliant," I said. "And gorgeous."

"Barf." She pretended to stick her finger down her throat.

I swept her up and gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

"I'm so lucky to have *two* brilliant and gorgeous girls!"

Iris shook her ponytailed head in disgust, wiping off my kiss with the back of her hand and dragging it down the front of her T-shirt, which read *Santa Barbara College of Oriental Medicine*.

I'd gotten the shirt at a thrift store. I'd wanted to keep it for myself, but Iris snatched it from me after I explained what acupuncture was. She seemed to like the idea of sticking people with sharp needles. If I were any other mother, I'd probably be worried. I wasn't. Any other mother. Or worried.

She scanned me from head to toe, looking critically at my blouse.

"What's with the old-lady shirts?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions. What's wrong with my outfits?"

"They just look so...so..." She threw her hands up in the air, unable to find the word.

"Mrs. Brady?"

"Who?"

"Never mind," I said.

"Mom, you're such a dork."

She was right. The wild, disco era shirts I'd chosen as my new clothing fetish *du jour* didn't quite go with my new-millennium rock-star façade. I bet Mrs. Brady never even considered for one happy shiny mod moment growing her hair long then razor chopping the ends and dyeing it Atomic Pink. Those polyester outfits didn't quite work with a punkish 'do like that.

But, hey, that's exactly why I liked them. You know, contrast. I'm all about the mismatch.

Ever since a year ago, when my band Bob's Brain Freeze got popular, a lot of fans started mimicking my then-style of wearing vintage bowling shirts, which was why I changed to icky old housewife blouses in gross colors and ridiculous floral patterns. I figured the kids would hate the look and stop emulating. I wasn't there for the emulation. I just wanted to sing.

Yeah, sure, I like looking different, too. Not in a Bjork goose-feathers way. Oh, hell, no. You'd never catch me in a red-carpet Big Bird getup like that, not with the personal cadre of very picky—and always right-on—gay guys my record company had given me for such events.

Nope, I had my Daphne Lee-Lee way. My own personal polyester-chic style.

I gave Iris another kiss, buttoned up Mr. Blackwell, tugged on the tight leather pants, and Velcro'd my feet into a pair of chunky-heeled black Doc Martens Maryjanes.

"You need to go to school soon," I said. "I'll drop you on the way."

"Grandma said she'd take me," said Iris.

I tried not to make a face. It was unfortunate that my mother lived with us but a good thing I'd lucked into this rock 'n' roll star gig—for however long it was going to last—because it meant I could buy a big house. Luckily, it was big enough that my mother Ping—“Penny,” she liked to be called, even though I never heard anyone call her that—could live in the guest quarters, far enough away from me so I could at least tolerate her sharing the same address.

Sure, she'd somewhat stood beside me during that nasty episode where I'd been falsely accused of murdering an entire PTA, but when it was all over, Mama Ping was as big a pain in the ass as always, snorting and huffing and looking at me like I'd just crawled out from under an entire garden of rocks.

*Punk rocks.*

I studied my little girl standing there with her hands on her hips, still staring at my Mr. Blackwell couture like it was an alien life form. As much as my mother annoyed me, I couldn't deny a family resemblance between her and my youngest kid.

*Maybe she'll outgrow it.*

“It's okay,” I said. “I'll take you to school, honey.”

She sighed, took her hands off her hips, and gave up, as if me taking her to school was one of life's major concessions. Maybe when you're eight years old it is, although I'd hoped I'd become an embarrassment to her much later than that. I wondered if the recent, slightly traumatic events in our lives had caused her to grow up too fast.

About a year ago, we moved from Country Meadow Valley, a suburban neighborhood just north of Los Angeles, to Loomis, a rural town about twenty miles farther out. Iris was in third grade at a public elementary school a few minutes down the road from Weston Academy, a private school my older daughter Mari attended.

Iris was fine where she was for now—none of the other kids knew she was the daughter of a rocker. But Mari, an eighth-grader, had wanted out of her public middle school because she didn't like the attention from the teenagers who listen to my music. She said she was never sure if someone wanted to be her friend because they really liked her or if it was because she was the daughter of the lead singer of Grammy-winning Bob's Brain Freeze.

She also had to deal with the jerks who hassled her because of it. So, since the public school administration—unsurprisingly—took on a “suck it up and deal with it” attitude with my kid, and my singing was making us a few bucks, I decided to send her to private school.

Mari seemed to like Weston Academy. There were lots of other bright kids like her, and no one paid attention to her freaky mother. In fact, the kids and their parents made a point of ignoring me—something I was pretty used to after living in Country Meadow Valley, where more conventional mommies were the norm.

Instead of being the typical husband-doting, minivan-driving, cupcake-baker—“Cupcakes,” I called them for abbreviation purposes—I'm a widow-slash-artist-slash-lead singer in a rock 'n' roll band. Difference now is that I am no longer

a *broke* widow-slash-artist-slash-etc. Meaning the reason everyone ignored me had also changed. I wasn't a weirdo anymore—I was a *celebrity*. Which felt funny, because I still wasn't used to being celebrated.

The parents of the Weston kids ignored me, I guess, because it was their way to respect my privacy. Or maybe they wanted to be cool and act as if it wasn't important that I was famous. After all, most of them had as much money as I did. Probably more. Only they didn't earn it by screeching on stage in front of a mosh pit full of 18-year-olds with multiple facial piercings.

My career was a little different from those straight arrows in fast-food franchising or industrial plumbing supplies or fertility clinic management. At least I was having fun while I raked in the dough. I wouldn't want to do anything else.

I thought about how grateful I was for my line of work as Iris and I hopped into my pink '56 T-bird. I could finally afford a lot of cool stuff, but other than the house and its furnishings, the private school and my splurge on a classic car, I was trying to be smart and put a bunch of money away for the future. You never knew when fame could turn around and take a big, giant dump on you.

I giggled a little as I pictured fame, glitzy and gold, taking a steamy silver dump on my head. That's always been a problem with me—well, *one* of my problems. My mind is way too visual. And it wanders. Some people might call that Attention Deficit Disorder. I call it hilarious.

"What's funny?" asked Iris.

She's awfully suspicious for someone so young. Just like my mother.

"Nothing, baby."

We got to the end of the line of cars in front of her public school and waited as students got dropped off one-by-agonizing-one at the curb. Everyone is always so freakin' slow to unload. And here at the public school, unlike chi-chi Weston Academy, were more of the Cupcake-type moms—the ones who hyperventilate like the world's coming to an end if they can't get more than fifty volunteers to man an after-school snack sale.

We were behind a monstrous SUV with one of those vinyl stick-figure families on the rear window: mom, dad, three kids and a dog. I felt sorry for the dog. He was emaciated. As stick figures tend to be.

The three kids in the SUV kissed their mom goodbye, grabbed lunches, slowly climbed out, snapped open the wheels of their rolling backpacks, shut and re-shut car doors, and waved interminably. Their perky blond-ponytailed mom waved back and blew a thousand kisses.

I looked impatiently at my H.R. PufnStuf watch and refrained from honking the horn.

"Come on," I said under my breath.

"That's Tiffany Schmidt's mom," said Iris. "She's a drunk."

"Great! Have a nice day, sweetie."

Iris gave me a flicker of a wave, hopped out of the T-bird, and scurried off to say hello to the drunk's children.

I made my way carefully out of the parking lot—avoiding other possible eight a.m. drunks



and their children—and drove north toward the freeway, where, according to Pufnstuf's three-fingered green hands, the spelling bee orientation would start in about an hour.

Mari was already there. Her English teacher, Mrs. Banks, had driven her to the Civic Center earlier this morning. Today was supposed to be a relaxed meet-'n'-greet where the kids would play games and get to know each other so they could chill out a little before the big event on Saturday—the National Spelling Bee.

It's a pretty major deal, involving trophies and scholarships and savings bonds. And, of course, bragging rights. Not that I brag. After my husband Jack died, I learned that bragging made for some seriously bad karma. Happy marriage? Don't ever freakin' brag about it. Karma's the bitch everyone says she is.

Mari had told me I didn't have to be at the orientation, but this was one of those situations where your kid tells you she doesn't care if you come or not but you know, deep down, she wants you there.

*At least, I hope she wants me there.*



I had a feeling I'd be the only mom with pink hair and an ugly-ass vintage polyester blouse and black leather pants, but I didn't really care. Take me or leave me. That's how I've always been. You don't like it, Mrs. Cleaver, then you don't have to put a ring on it. Apologies to Beyonce. Who I met once. Nice gal.

Anyway, this whole thing—the spelling bee, that is—wasn't supposed to be about me. It was about my kid. Mari didn't say a whole lot about it—she's a quiet one, much like her dad—but I knew she wanted badly to win. She'd already won Weston's bee, then the school district bee, and then the county-level bee. Like the other kids from all over the country, she was hoping to take top prize at the national bee in downtown Los Angeles, about fifty miles away from our house in Loomis.

They used to hold the competition in Washington DC, but with all the security issues and political crap going on lately, they'd moved it to LA. So, the location was convenient for us, and it'd be a great experience for

to hope spelling bee terrorists or whoever the hell the bee officials were allegedly worried about in Washington hadn't moved their operations to the left coast.

*Spelling bee terrorists.* I pictured guys in masks and hoodies stealing all the vowels and holding them for ransom.

I giggled nervously. My giggle is not attractive. Kind of snorty, actually. But at least it's real. It's no Cupcake-phony gentle tinkling of sweet bells fueled by soy half-caff vanilla lattes, magical garden faeries and Zoloft.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. My stomach was horribly knotted, thanks to an overproduction of acid. I've always had a rotten tummy, which was now exacerbated by nerves. Yeah, I was nervous for Mari.

I looked over at the BMW in the next lane. Businesswoman, nice suit, cup of coffee in her left hand, cell phone in her right. How the heck was she steering? With her knee? Her iPad? Her va-jay-jay?

Why be afraid of terrorists when here in LA we've got drivers?

I hit the gas. The T-bird obliged by speeding up. I breathed deeply.

*Mellow out, Daphne!*

I couldn't worry about stuff that mostly consisted of my all-too-vivid imagination. Right now, I had to worry about my kid and her spelling bee.

Mari, at thirteen, was growing up to be a decent young woman—conservative, a good student, someone who liked her parents.

Or, rather, parent, singular—me. Also single.

Jack, her dad, died two years ago. I miss him terribly. He was my high school sweetheart—my soul mate, if you believe in that stuff—and I was heartbroken when he croaked after eating bad raw oysters that messed with an immune system already weakened by diabetes.

But, like they say, life goes on. At least, crap keeps happening whether you want it to or not.

I'm dating a guy—a cop, of all opposites-attract things—named Antoine Neil, who I met during the whole nasty exploding-PTA incident. He's gorgeous in a Denzel Washington way but also kind of nerdy in a way like no one else I've ever met. He's just...Antoine. He likes bowling, for freakin' goodness sakes. He has bowling trophies. I can't understand how someone so hot can *bowl*.

And that smile. That's what did for me. And the eyelashes. And pretty much everything else.

I took another breath. A sad one. Kind of.

We were doing okay for a while but had recently cooled off. He hadn't liked me being on a three-month, fifteen-city tour with the band. He wants to get married and have kids, which I wasn't sure about.

Now, the tour is over, but I kept telling him I'd already been married, already had kids. And I'm 33, which, while not old, is definitely...settled. As settled as the lead singer of Bob's Brain Freeze could be.

I don't know what's on the horizon for the band. Or me. Or my kids, who are more important than anything.

So, even though I like him—love him, in a way, I guess, and the kids like him—or maybe

even love him, in a way, I guess—we decided to break up...sort of. It was too bad, though. It would have been nice for him to be at the spelling bee with me. I needed someone who could keep me from being too nervous. Man, was I ever.

It was February in Southern California, nice and cool outside, but I started sweating like crazy, thinking about my little girl being under pressure. I rolled down the driver's-side window of the T-bird, trying not to suck in the freeway fumes along with the brisk air.

It's amazing that I can step onto a stage and perform in front of hundreds or even thousands of people, but, when it comes to my children, I'm a total, freakin', sopping-wet bowl of Campbell's Cream of Anxious Mom Soup.

I started singing the commercial in my head, changing the lyrics just a tad.

*M-mm-good, m-mm-good, God, my pits are sweaty...m-mm-mm-good...*

Seventies polyester is definitely not absorbent; I might have to rethink my fashion choice. Cotton '50s day dresses were looking like a possibility at the moment. With sewn-in armpit shields to wick away that unsightly moisture.

I don't have a good sense of direction—thank goodness for Nigel, my English-accented GPS—but I managed to negotiate the tangle of LA freeways, finally ending up at the Civic Center, where I parked in the lot. I stepped out of the car, making sure my blouse was discreetly pulled down over the top of my leather pants. Didn't want my stomach to show.

Yeah, I have a pierced bellybutton. So what? I'm not the only mom with one, but I hated the thought of embarrassing Mari, although I'm sure she's used to it.

No matter how cool it is to be a rock star, sometimes all it takes is my mere existence to embarrass my children. I guess that's the only time I could be exactly the same as a regular Cupcake. All mothers are embarrassing in some way or other. Mine sure as hell was when I was a kid. Even now.

*Ugh. Ping.*

I walked into the lobby of the main building. Someone shoved a program in my hand and pointed toward the auditorium entrance. The theater-style seats were filled with parents, most talking animatedly—some to each other and some into cell phones. They were wearing business clothes or yoga pants and tees or trendy California casual blah-de-blah. There were a lot of Cupcakes in the room, recognizable in their mom-jeans and Skechers Shape-Ups and V-neck jewel-tone T-shirts. Most of them looked very respectable.

I noticed there were a lot of Asians like me in the group, which figured, since it was a spelling bee, and, well, a lot of smart kids are Asian—one stereotype we mostly don't mind. I also noticed no one else had on a vintage blouse. Or leather pants. And no one else had pink hair. They were probably all successful professionals—or married to one.

I tried to blend, but it was a little difficult. I just acted like I always did—as if I wasn't the least bit uncomfortable in my surroundings.

Walk tall—even at five-foot-three—but avoid eye contact. I started getting a little mad at myself for worrying about my appearance.

*Dammit, Daphne, this is not about you. Stop being so freakin' self-centered!*

I settled into an end seat in a middle row and looked at the stage, which held about fifty folding chairs. I took a deep breath.

"Daphne? Daphne Lee-Lee?"

I looked up, right into the crotch of some guy. It was not a crotch I recognized. I tilted my head back farther—way back—until I saw the face.

He was tall—over six feet—with curly brown hair and green eyes. He was very good-looking, but I still had no idea who he was.

"Uh, hi?" I mumbled.

He and his crotch turned sideways to slide by, and then they sat down next to me. I looked at his face again and smiled like a dumbass while frantically running through my mental list of people I should know on sight, but I couldn't come up with an ID. In addition to having chronic acid reflux, a bad sense of direction, and whatever the opposite of an Oedipus complex is, I am also terrible with names.

He shoved his metrosexually manicured hand at me.

*Nice cuticles, dude.*

He wore a huge, gold nugget-style initial ring, which I stared at for a second as I shook his hand. The initials were "QQ."

*Quirky queers? Questionable quacks? Quivering Quinones?*

"I don't believe we've formally met."

He smiled. He had very nice teeth. I was very happy to see the dental part of his anatomy, since the crotch part had somewhat unnerved me.

"I'm Quentin Quayles, Cammie's dad."

I had no idea who he was, and I'd never heard of Cammie, either.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Great to meet you, too! Cammie's told me a lot about Mari."

"And Mari's told me virtually nothing about Cammie."

He laughed, thank goodness. I'd always figured honesty was the best policy, but then again, it often wasn't one of my more appreciated qualities. The phrase *honest to a fault* comes to mind, but my honesty is more of the blurt-ing kind, which is definitely a fault.

"Oh, that's okay," said Quentin. "Cammie says Mari's kind of quiet. Not like you, though."

"Excuse me?" *What the hell is that supposed to mean?*

"Your singing. You've got a big voice for such a petite gal," he said.

"*Petite*—that's a new one," I said. "Usually people say 'You don't look this short on TV.'"

"You *are* petite," said Quentin. "Petite is nice."

*Oh, crap. Am I blushing?*

"Cammie and I are huge fans. We have all your CDs."

"All *two* of them?"

Quentin laughed again.

"Yes, we bronzed them and hung them over the mantel."

I looked directly into his green eyes. He was kidding. That was cool. I like sarcasm. He was



winning me over even though I wasn't sure I needed to be won.

I thought about Antoine for a moment. Was it considered cheating if you're *sort-of* broken up? Was it cheating to even *talk* to another guy? Was it cheating to think he had nice teeth? Or to stare at his crotch? Hell, it's not like I did that on purpose. It was just there, in my face, making me stare at it.

*Daphne, you are such an idiot.*

Besides Antoine, I'd only had one other boyfriend in my life—Jack—so I had no idea what the rules were when it came to dating. So much for being a big, tough, worldly, pink-haired, Doc Martens-wearing rocker.

*What a poser.*

"So, what are you doing here? Is Cammie in the bee?"

"Didn't Mari tell you?" he asked.

"Well, like you said, Mari's kind of quiet. She didn't say too much about it."

"Cammie's our county's alternate. Too bad only one of them could compete at the national level."

I smiled and nodded then became instantly horrified.

*Cammie. Camilla. Camilla freakin' Quayles.*

This guy's lovely daughter Cammie was actually *Camilla* Quayles, the girl who was constantly coming in number two to Mari's number one in academic competitions. Worse, Mari said she wasn't very nice, which translated from my daughter's conservative lingo into normal human language meant she was a first-class biznatch with a side helping of assholio.

“Here they come!”

Quentin started applauding furiously, along with the rest of the audience. I turned to look toward the front of the auditorium. Fifty fourth-through-eighth-graders marched across the stage, looking incredibly somber, wearing name placards that hung around their necks.

I spotted Mari right away—she was the tallest girl, her long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. I couldn’t tell if she was nervous. She looked like she always did. Serious and beautiful. I sighed, because I’m so totally in love with my children. Iris is right. I am a complete dork.

Quentin elbowed me.

“That’s Cammie, right there,” he said.

He pointed away from the stage toward a girl sitting in the front row of the auditorium along with other county alternates.

She looked like Malibu Barbie.

Not that there’s anything wrong with looking like Malibu Barbie, but from what Mari had told me, Camilla Quayles had the attitude to go with it. I visualized her in a pink Corvette with anatomically deprived Malibu Ken sitting gaily in the passenger seat, thinking about redecorating the Dreamhouse and attending the newest production of *Les Mis* with his “best friend” Allen...

*Daphne! Focus!*

I smiled and muttered something neutral like “she’s cute” then directed my attention back to the stage. Several adults—presumably spelling bee officials—had followed the participants. They, in turn, were followed by...

*Oh, Christ, is that a bee?*

It was some fool in a ridiculous bee costume. He was dancing around the stage like an insect that'd stung too many ravers at the Electric Daisy Carnival. The competitors watched him with that bemused-but-slightly irritated look children older than preschool age give practically everyone who does something stupid while trying to be funny. Like the classmate who sticks pencils in his nose in a desperate attempt to get attention and ends up lobotomizing himself.

Some of the Cupcakes giggled appreciatively as the bee pranced around. I assumed the performance was supposed to be an icebreaker for the nervous kids and parents, but, geez...why? Why break the ice with Cirque du So Lame?

After a couple of seconds, he leapt off the stage and headed for the audience. I recoiled in horror, worried he would shake his stinger-adorned fanny in our direction. Which, to my dismay, was exactly what he did.

It was awful. And by awful, I mean it made me reconsider my formerly negative opinion of *Death to Smoochy*, which was now looking like the best movie ever made.

"Oh, my God," said Quentin. He looked horrified as well. I had no idea how his crotch was taking it.

I nodded in agreement. I'm not religious, but at that moment, I sincerely hoped God would smite the bee. I wasn't sure how. Plague of locusts? Do locusts cancel bees like paper covers rock and rock smashes scissors? Or like a Diet Coke cancels chocolate cheesecake? Whatever. I just wanted the bee to *die*.

I don't know whose idiotic idea it was to hire someone to put on a bee suit and dance around like a big gooberhead, but it didn't diminish my anxiety about my kid. I felt like fleeing the auditorium, but I had to stay there for Mari, so I just slunk down in my seat and tried to make myself invisible.

The bee worked his way up the aisle between the seats, high-fiving kids and waving at adults with his oversize yellow-gloved hand. Most of the attendees were pretty good sports despite the bee's embarrassing antics.

Thankfully, it appeared as if he was heading out the back door of the auditorium. I looked straight ahead as he started to go past me.

*Do not have eye contact with the bee.*

He stopped.

*Oh, no.*

He pointed at me. Specifically, he pointed *at my hair*.

For goodness sakes, it's not like I was the only person in the entire freakin' universe who'd used Special Effects dye to get that Atomic Pink glow. This was LA. The bee should be used to it by now. Hadn't he ever been on Melrose?

I pictured the National Spelling Bee strolling down trendy Melrose Avenue with his life partner, the Honey Nut Cheerios Bee, looking for an antique store that had just the right 19th-century carved mahogany table to put in their dining room because they were giving a dinner party in honor of the Nasonex Bee, who'd finally come out of the hive.

*I'm definitely losing my mind.*

The bee grabbed my hands, which I thought were securely grasping the armrests of my seat.

He yanked me up. He was very strong for a bee. I put a big, fake smile on my face and glanced at the stage, where Mari was staring in my direction, utterly mortified. I looked around. Everyone else was staring, too. People of all shapes, sizes, races, nationalities, wardrobe and degrees of Cupcakey goodness; it was an equal-opportunity, We Are the World without-the-musical-talent spectacle, and I was terrifyingly in the middle of it.

Using exaggerated motions, the bee started to *make fun of me*.

I'd taken a lot of crap in my life, but I'd never been taunted by a giant bug. He pointed again at my hair and mimed a huge guffaw, holding his stomach in his mute, mocking way.

"I don't think so," I muttered.

I tried to sit down, but he pulled me back up. The people in the audience laughed uncomfortably. I looked at Quentin for help, but he just shrugged his shoulders. I don't know what his crotch was doing, but it didn't seem to want to assist me, either.

"Please stop," I told the bee through clenched teeth. "I am begging you."

The bee pointed at my blouse then back at my hair then gave the audience a quizzical shrug.

*Ah, I get it. My old-lady polyester throwback-to-the-'70s shirt doesn't match my punk pink hair. My youngest child already mentioned that this morning, thank you very much.*

I briefly wondered if Iris was wearing the bee suit. No, knowing Iris, she'd simply phoned the bee and demanded that he pick on her mother in some sort of humiliating attempt to get me to dress like a normal person.

"Okay, now, please, sir, that's enough." I tried to be firm yet polite.

I obviously don't mind attention, or else I'd dress like everyone else. If I didn't want people looking at me, I sure wouldn't be a singer in a punk rock band.

But as far as I can remember, no one has ever turned me into a public joke. This costumed jerk was ruining my single wish to make the spelling bee all about my kid, and it probably wasn't doing anything to put Mari at ease.

I was mad. And I hardly ever get mad.

I tried to sit back down, but the bee pulled me up and, this time, into the aisle with him, which caused me to trip over his puffy yellow feet. I fell and landed directly on my face, getting a slight rug burn from the aisle's rough, brown, and I'm not sure entirely sanitary carpet.

There was a huge gasp from the audience.

Then *laughter*.

They were laughing at *me*. I was now not just a joke. I was freakin' *slapstick*.

The bee tried to help me up. I definitely didn't want his help. I stood just fine on my own Maryjanes and pushed him away.

I only wanted him to get off me, but my surging adrenaline made me push a little harder than I expected. The bee went tumbling

down the aisle, backwards toward the stage, ass over teakettle. Or, rather, black plastic stinger over big ol' foam bee head.

He rolled and rolled, a blur of black-and-yellow, his feet practically kicking himself in his own pointy butt.

It was my turn to laugh. Problem was, at this point, nobody else was laughing. Some people were even shrieking.

I turned to Quentin. His pretty green eyes were filled with a combination of pity and confusion.

"See you later," I said.

It was time for me to buzz off.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

[Buy Now - Amazon](#)

[Buy Now - B&N](#)

Check [www.zumayapublications.com](http://www.zumayapublications.com) for other retailer links.

