

To Be  
Honest

**MAGGIE ANN MARTIN**

*Swoon* READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*For my sister, Abbie.  
This one's for you, kid.*

## chapter ONE

I'd never seen so much chevron in my life. We slowly unpacked all my sister's belongings in her small, dingy dorm room, and I wondered how it would ever feel homey. Right now it reminded me of a glorified prison cell with a set of worn-down loft beds and a free-standing sink in the corner. The cement floor was not helping in my sister's attempt to make the room prison-chic. Apparently they were redoing the floors and ran out of budget/time to put in new carpets for this year. Lucky Ash.

I helped her put the sheets on her loft bed (not an easy task, might I add) and we giggled as her corner boinked off and smacked her in the nose. Thank goodness for these moments when we could laugh, when we could forget what was going to happen in a few hours. Forget that I would be living without my sister and best friend for the first time in seventeen years.

No matter how many times Ashley tried to broach the

subject of her leaving this summer, I would always turn my head and plug my ears. I couldn't bear it then and suggested that we push off any sad or mushy conversations to the very last minute. I was a professional procrastinator in all things. Especially feelings.

"You put the bug liner on the mattress before the sheets, right, girls?" Mom asked, looking from a long list she'd printed out from one of her favorite mommy blogs.

"No bugs getting in this fortress," I said, smacking the bed. The force of my hand smack caused another corner of the fitted sheet to snap out from under the mattress, and Ashley scowled at me.

"I told you we should have gotten the extra-long sheets," Mom said.

"That's a waste of money. We had plenty of working twin sheets already," Ashley said. Always the practical one, she was. Ashley's brain was constantly in conservation mode while mom's brain was always in excess mode. Especially in the past two years, after Mom and Dad's divorce, Ashley has had to be the voice of reason in our home.

"The list said extra-long," Mom mumbled.

Ashley huffed after fixing the sheet once more, and we both climbed down from the loft. I offered to wind her twin-kle lights around the base of the bed while she and Mom tag-teamed getting the minifridge up and running. Who

knew you could have a teal minifridge with coral flowers? Only Ashley would upcycle our cousin's old, beaten-up minifridge to make it beautiful. She was going to film school, after all. It was kind of in her blood to be incredibly creative.

As Mom and Ashley exchanged a few heated words while trying to find an extension cord to keep the fridge in the “perfect feng shui location” of the room, I unwrapped the photos she packed. One was of her and me at summer camp the year that we were finally in the same cabin. We both slept in the bottom bunk that year because Ashley was afraid of heights and I was prone to falling out of the bed. I didn't mind, though. You can't quite explain the comfort of knowing your sister is close by.

The next was of our dog, correction, *her* dog, Fiyero. He earned his name during Ashley's obsession with the musical *Wicked*. Our family lived and breathed all things *Wicked* for the entirety of Ashley's eighth-grade year. The poodle baby in the picture looked like a stuffed teddy bear. Now Fiyero was a fifty-pound hellion who had a particular fondness for finding and eating makeup. I'd lost many a lipstick to the Fiyero monster.

The last picture was of Ashley, my dad, and me. We were in Hollywood doing a tour of Universal Studios because Ashley had just caught her movie bug. She was probably twelve, making me eleven. We posed in front of the *Gilmore*

*Girls* town of Stars Hollow and we were laughing our heads off. Most likely, Dad let out a fake fart noise right before the count of three, and we lost it. On the other side of the camera I could imagine Mom's disapproving face. Mom always refused to be in the pictures.

We worked in a scared silence, taking a few moments longer to complete each task than necessary. If we admitted that we were done, we'd have to admit that it was time to leave. I don't think Mom had good-bye on her epic list of dorm move-in responsibilities. No matter how many blogs she read or careful notes she took, nothing could prepare us for leaving.

"So when does your roommate get here?" I asked.

Ashley clapped her hands as the fridge hummed to life and she turned to me, taking the Universal Studios picture out of my hand.

"I think this afternoon. She lives in Kentucky, so it's a bit of a drive."

"Kentucky? They eat everything fried there, don't they? You'll have to be careful that you keep your healthy habits up while you're here," Mom said.

"I'm not sure that it's okay to generalize an entire group of people's eating habits based on a fast-food chain that happens to mention their state," I said.

"My metabolism hasn't changed in the last eighteen

years. I'll be fine, Mom," Ashley said. I envied the way that she could brush her off so quickly. Of course she could. Her entire life she'd been tall and slender, while I'd inherited the complete opposite body type.

Mom brought up a single finger, her telltale sign that you were about to get into an argument, but then she put it down. Almost like she remembered that we were here to drop off her oldest daughter for her freshman year of college and now wouldn't be the most convenient time for a fight.

"And she's bringing the futon?" she asked instead.

"I think she put one on hold at the Target nearby so she doesn't have to lug it up here with her. Don't worry, she sent me options and we mutually agreed on one," Ashley said.

"Because nothing can be left up to chance," I teased.

"There's nothing wrong with knowing how you like things," she said. "Plus, the first one she was looking at was way overpriced. I actually saved her a ton of money."

"I'll make sure to call you if I'm ever in the market for a futon," I said.

"You'll just use mine, silly," she said.

I sighed, twisting one of the bulbs that was winking out on the twinkle lights. "I was joking."

"Oh yeah, right," she said, grabbing on to her head. "Sorry. I'm all out of whack today. My funny-o-meter is broken."



“Only temporarily. It works best when you’re settled and comfortable,” I said.

“Will I ever be?” she asked. She finally took a moment to stop her hurried frenzy of setting things up to take in the room. Her breath became ragged, and I watched her eyes focus and unfocus. Seeing her panic in this way, seeing the mix of emotions racing through her, made my own stomach clench. We always joked that we were twins separated by almost twelve months, always in sync with each other in ways that were out of normal sister territory. Unfortunately, the months between our births robbed us of telepathy and the whole looking-alike thing. Physically, we are as opposite as it comes. She’s tall and lanky with muddy-colored hair, where I’m short and chubby, my hair almost white it’s so blond. About the only part that maybe hereditarily blessed both of us was bad eyesight. We can almost wear each other’s prescription contacts.

I reached out to pull her into a very comforting (and comfortable) hug. We had the perfect builds for a great hug.

“Of course you will, honey,” Mom said, joining our hug. She rested her cheek on the top of my head and we stayed this way for who knows how long until Ashley learned her first lesson about living in the dorms: If you wanted to have a private moment without someone bursting in to say

hello, keep your door closed . . . and probably lock it, for good measure.

“Oh, yikes, I’m sorry,” the girl at the door said. She had her hair pulled up in a messy bun that was leaning haphazardly to one side of her head. “I was just wondering if you had any extra duct tape that I could borrow? A cord on my microwave frayed. Don’t tell the RA or whatever, because it might be a fire hazard, but I definitely don’t have time or cash to get a new one. That’s too much information. BLAH. Hi. My name is Yael.”

“Hey,” Ashley said, pulling away from our hug. “I’m Ashley. This is my little sister, Savannah, and my mom.”

“Kim,” Mom interjected.

“Nice to meet you all,” Yael said. Her fingers tapped against the doorframe as she waited for something, anything to happen while we all stared at her. I turned to Ashley for a moment and tried to send her a telepathic “Grab the damn duct tape!” but she didn’t catch my drift.

“Ash, you have some duct tape in the top drawer, right?” I asked, putting everyone out of their awkward misery.

“Oh! Yeah. Yes, I do,” she said, breaking out of her stupor and grabbing the tape. She dropped it into Yael’s open palm.

“You’re seriously a lifesaver. See you around, Ashley,” she said.

Ashley watched Yael skip down the hallway until I coughed to get her attention again. Ashley whipped around and started quickly unpacking more of her clothes. I smiled a little to myself. She thought Yael was cute.

“Well, are you both going to help?” she asked, her face still a light shade of red.

“We’re all yours,” Mom said. “I’ll start folding sweaters. Savvy, can you load the sock and undies drawer? Do you need me to show you my sock-folding trick again?”

“I’ve got it under control,” I said.

We worked in silence until every last bit of her clothes were meticulously placed in her closet and drawers. We rearranged the few knickknacks she’d allowed herself to bring and weighed the options of moving the fridge to the other side of the room at least three times. It was slowly reaching that point where we realized we were no longer needed in this dorm room, which meant an awful and painful good-bye was in my very near future.

“So,” she said. “This is it.”

“I guess so,” Mom said. “Jeez, I’m glad they put waterproof mascara as a must-have on that list.”

Mom pulled her into a bear hug, her head barely reaching Ashley’s collarbone. Ashley leaned down to plant a kiss on her cheek and pulled away, wiping a stray tear from her cheek.

“I love you, Chicken,” Mom said. “I think I just have to leave the room now before I become a complete mess. I’ll meet you outside, Savvy, okay?”

I nodded, feeling the lump in my throat starting to block my airways. As Mom walked out of the room, both of our dissolves crumbled. We pulled each other into a tight hug, our bodies shaking as we cried. We’d never been apart for more than a week at a time, when she went to film camp a few summers in a row. Even those weeks were tough. I couldn’t imagine *months* without her.

“We’ll Skype all the time,” she said. “We’ll have sister check-ins throughout the day just like normal. The only thing that will change is that we won’t be in the same room anymore.”

“Is that supposed to make it better?” I said.

“I know things have been rough with you and Mom lately. Cut her a little slack, okay? She’s gone through a lot of huge life changes this past year and is adjusting. I’ll come home and visit as often as I can, but I won’t be there anymore to be your buffer. Pick your battles, Savvy, okay?” she said.

I nodded. “I’ll try to be better.”

She held me by my shoulders and forced me to look into her eyes. “You’re stronger than you know. Don’t you ever forget that, no matter how tough things might get. And, it’s

not like I'm across the country. I'm only a few hours away if you ever need me."

I nodded again, curling into her for one last hug. When we pulled away it felt final. I felt like a part of me had been severed and I was leaving it behind. Like Cinderella's glass slipper, but if her leg was still attached. I decided that, like Mom, if I looked back again I would never leave. So I opened the door and closed it quickly behind me. I took my mom's hand and we walked down the hallway, down the flight of stairs, and to the car, where we cried for a good fifteen minutes before hitting the road again.

## chapter TWO

It had been exactly two days, thirteen hours, and thirty-four minutes since we left Ashley at Indiana State, and I was itching to get out of the house and away from my mom's sole attention. We'd already prepared healthy prep meals that we could freeze and eat for the next month, and if I had to dice one more carrot or make one more pot of rice, I would most definitely scream.

Thankfully, I'd already made plans with my best friend, Grace, to go to her family's summer cookout slash family field day in the park. Each year, the Morenos from around the Midwest came and joined for this day of fun (and sibling rivalry). I was mostly there for a chance to see her cousin Mateo . . . and hang out with Grace, of course.

Fiyero the poodle monster rested his chin on the side of my bed, rumbling a low, guttural growl, alerting me it was time to get up and play with him. I groaned as I rolled over and grabbed his fluffy face between my hands.

“Now that Ashley isn’t here you have to resort to me, huh?” I asked.

Fiyero cocked his head like he was trying to understand me. His tongue, which was always a little too big for his mouth, flopped to the side and I barked out an early-morning laugh.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I said.

As I stood up, Fiyero started bouncing around the room excitedly and then raced down the hallway and down the stairs. Much to my surprise, I heard Mom yelp “Fiyero!” from the bottom of the stairs. Usually Mom sleeps in until noon on the weekends, but today she was already up and stretching in the living room. Her hands contorted in weird angles behind her back and she listened to the soft hum of Lady Gaga, her workout music of choice.

“Want to join me and Fiyero on a run this morning?” she asked without turning around. My tiptoeing obviously failed me.

“As fun as that sounds . . .” I trailed off.

“The first step to a healthier life is making a commitment,” she rattled off. I kept a mental tally of the thinspiration mantras she preached to me throughout the day. This one was at about two times a day.

“I inherited my commitment issues from Dad, obviously,” I said.

I regretted saying it as soon as it came out. We tried not to talk about the Dad Debacle of Sophomore Year when he cheated on Mom with one of her friends. Should *friends* be in quotation marks in that context? Yes. Her “friend” slept with my dad for about a year before he slipped up, leaving his phone charging on the kitchen counter and leaving message previews open for a naive sophomore me to find. Adult sexting is disgusting.

“Oh, Savannah,” she said, shaking her head with both of her hands firmly on her hips. It was a pose reserved for her times of greatest disappointment.

“Sorry, Mom,” I said. “I have to head over to Grace’s. She’s having the Moreno family reunion thing this afternoon. Um, did you want to come, too?”

She shook her head. “No, thanks, sweetie. I’m heading over to the gym this afternoon. You have fun, though. Be sure to tell Maria thank you.”

Her statement felt a little like a judgment. Like, *You have fun while I improve my mind, body, and spirit at the gym without you.* Most things out of her mouth sounded like a personal attack on me lately.

“I will. See you tonight,” I said, heading into the kitchen.

“Do you want to heat up one of our frozen meals before you go? You don’t need all the extra carbs that come with the grill-out food, especially the buns,” she said.



My whole body flushed red like it did every time she tried to restrict my food. I remembered Ashley's plea to keep the peace while she was gone, and swallowed the anger that bubbled up inside of me.

"I'll be sure to heat one up before I leave, Mom," I lied. "Have fun at the gym."

Normally on Sunday mornings, Ashley would be up and making breakfast. She'd make secret pancakes and bacon before Mom could wake up and tell us how many calories we were wasting on breakfast. We'd lounge on the couch and watch episodes of whatever show we were binge-ing and practically become one with the couch before Mom woke up at noon. Maybe Mom woke up early so that I wouldn't feel so alone. Even though it made me feel a little better, the giant hole in our home dynamic expanded two sizes.

I listened to the soft rhythm of Mom's feet hitting the floor as she did her warm-up routine. I'd become accustomed to this sound over the past year. After Mom and Dad's divorce, Mom tailspinned into a shame spiral. She started making changes to every aspect of her life—anything to get her out of the "rut" she'd been in all those years with Dad. One night, she saw a call for audition tapes for the weight-loss reality TV show *Shake the Weight* and conned Ashley into helping her film a tape. Thinking nothing would come

of it and being willing to do anything to make Mom happy in those months, Ashley helped her out.

About a month later, on Mother's Day, Mom got a call that she'd need to fly out to LA for a screen test with other potential contestants. Two weeks later, she was packing a bag to move out to LA and we were packing our bags to stay with Dad and Sheri for the next two months.

Each Wednesday night we would sit in front of the TV and watch this woman who was once our mother fight with other contestants, puke on camera, and shed a definitely unhealthy amount of weight in a few short months. She started praising the woman who barked orders at her, pushed her until she passed out, and caused her emotional damage she couldn't see happening to her. There is a reason people on these shows aren't allowed to call their family members while they're filming. Everyone would convince them to run from that place as fast as they could.

Now Mom inhabited a new, smaller body, after rigorous exercise and plastic surgery to remove some excess skin. I knew she was the same woman, could recognize her voice and her eyes, but everything else about her had changed. She had a one-track mind to count calories, follow to-do lists, and repeat the mantras that had been ingrained in her on *Shake the Weight*. She fixated not only on every little thing that crossed her lips but mine as well.

I snuck back up the stairs as Mom did arm circles to “Applause.” The weather was sweltering. The Morenos always managed to host their family day on the stickiest day of the year. Thankfully, Mr. Moreno usually brought a sprinkler so that we could all cool down when it became unbearable.

The yellow-and-blue polka-dotted swimsuit sat snugly on my hips, and I instantly regretted opting out of swimsuit shopping this year. I figured I’d managed to squeeze into the same one for three years, what could possibly change in one more? Oh, right, everything. I flung on a T-shirt from Adventure World and slipped into my favorite flip-flops, on the verge of ripping in two. You can’t beat a really nice pair of broken-in flip-flops.

When I came back downstairs, Mom and Fiyero had left for their run. I grabbed the keys to my new, inherited car. Ashley always had the touch with Norma (a very normal car name for a Nissan), but I absolutely despised driving. Thankfully Sandcastle Park was only a few-minutes drive away. If I could make it there with only a few bumps along the way, I would consider it a successful trip.

Sandcastle Park came into my view after a particularly violent curb check. I parked a block away and could still hear Mrs. Moreno greeting everyone as they showed up. She had the biggest heart, and the loudest voice to match. I once said

that if I had to take one person with me on a deserted island, I'd take Mrs. Moreno because she could calm me down, cook some bomb food, and use her loud voice to track down civilization from miles away.

"Savannah! Savannah, over here, Savannah!" she called to me from across the street. I waved sheepishly as all of Grace's extended family turned to look at me.

"Hey, Mrs. M," I yelled back.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my best friend running my way. She wrapped me up in a hug, knocking the wind from me, in typical Grace fashion. When she pulled away, she held me by the shoulders and looked me up and down.

"How are you doing? Don't lie," she added, holding up an accusatory finger.

I sighed. "I've been better. But we're not here to have a pity party. We're here to have a fun day!"

"I signed us up for a three-legged race," she said, cringing as she waited for my response.

"You what?" I asked, knowing full well what I heard. Knowing full well that Grace knew that I refused to participate in this event every year since third grade, when I watched Andrew Adams break his leg while he was in a three-legged race with Cody Grant.

"You can't let the ghost of Andrew's broken-leg past haunt you forever. It's the only event I've never won. Come

on, this is our *year*. I'll even get Mateo in on a conversation with you if that sweetens the deal," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

"I feel really uncomfortable with you bribing me romantically with your family members," I said.

"Ugh, you wouldn't have cared if I didn't mention the three-legged race! What else do you want? I'll do anything," she said. When competitive Grace came out, you didn't want to get in her way. She wasn't above bribery if it meant she had the opportunity to win something.

"Do my laundry for the next month?" I offered.

"You know how much I despise laundry," she said.

"Take it or leave it, Moreno," I said.

She held out her hand for a binding handshake. "Deal."

After we shook, Grace took me on the grand tour of the attractions at this year's Moreno Family Field Day. First was a game of corn hole; next to it was a Slip 'N Slide and a rope for tug-of-war. One of the newer additions was a life-size chess board for a round of wizard's chess, spearheaded by Grace's little brother, Leo. For once in my life, I was grateful for Dad forcing Ashley and me to learn to play and go to chess club all those years ago. I was going to rock this wizard chess like it was nobody's business.

As I gazed over at the Slip 'N Slide, I saw a boy—no, a man—with luscious, wavy black hair and a smile that could

melt the hearts of the iciest queens. Mateo had made the song “I Believe in a Thing Called Love” play in my head whenever I saw him since we were first introduced at the tender age of ten. We’d bonded over our matching Silly Bandz and it was pretty much love at first sight. For me, anyway. I was fully aware that sex gods like Mateo Moreno didn’t look twice at girls like me.

“You can’t just ogle my cousin while he’s hanging out by a Slip ‘N Slide.” Grace laughed, elbowing me in the side.

“I’m actually ogling the Slip ‘N Slide. Is that an extra ten feet at the end? Mrs. M went all out,” I said.

“*Sure,*” she said, rolling her eyes.

Mrs. M called everyone to gather around her picnic table to recite the rules for the day. No cheating would be tolerated, and Grandma Rosalina was the official ref. When I looked back to her she made “I’m watching you” fingers at me. Grandma Rosalina apparently didn’t forget the year I ran into my competitors bumper-car style during the sack race. The second rule was to find your partner for the day. Under no circumstances were you to sabotage your partner during one-on-one activities to earn more points, or you would be disqualified. You’d think we were being filmed by ESPN with how strict they were about the rules.

“Now, pick your partners!” she yelled. Everyone frantically ran up to their desired partner, practically tackling

other people out of the way to get to where they wanted to be. Grace and I instantly linked arms in a technique we'd perfected while having to find partners in school. Nothing could describe the sense of pure panic you felt when a teacher announced that you'd need a partner. Having the instant person you'd make eye contact with from across the room, sealing your partner bond, was the best feeling in the world.

"We're doing something a little bit more fun this year," Mrs. M announced. That sinking feeling that I just talked about? Yeah, let's multiply that by a thousand.

"You have to find a new partner! Everyone has been choosing the same ones for years and it's starting to get a little unfair. I'm looking at you, Roberto and Luis. Ready, set, find a new partner!" she said.

"Did you know about this?" I hissed to Grace.

"I had no idea!" she said.

We both frantically looked around for a new option, and I felt like we were competing in the Hunger Games. Or, I felt like I was going to get picked last like in gym class. I think both scenarios are equally terrifying. Everyone was pairing off, hurtling their bodies at each other in what seemed like slow motion in my mind. I whipped my head around, and my eyes locked on Mateo from across the park. He started to lift his hand up to wave at me, the most iconic symbol of "Let me be your partner" in the universe, before Leo snatched

his hand and claimed him as his partner. Damn it, Leo, now I'm really going to have to own you in wizard's chess.

"Who's left?" Mrs. M yelled from her picnic table. Everyone looked around and stared at each other. Really? Just me then?

"I'm super alone, Mrs. M," I said, which garnered a few pity laughs from the crowd. It got quiet for a moment before one more person spoke up from the back.

"Also super alone," said a male voice that I didn't recognize. He stepped out from behind a cluster of people and into my vision. He didn't look like the majority of the Morenos—he was unbelievably tall, with strawberry blond hair. He was at least the height of two Grandma Rosalinas combined. He inhabited that awkward in-between boy stage where they lacked muscle definition but their forms had outgrown their younger bodies.

"Great! Savannah, you will be with George. Now, everyone, it's time to start with the egg toss! We'll go in waves of five. Everyone come on over to the other side of the park so we can start," Mrs. M said.

While everyone started walking toward the other side of the park, I walked in the opposite direction to meet George. My palms started to sweat and my heart fluttered in my chest the way it tends to when I meet new people for the first time. It didn't help that he had some exceptionally



dreamy brown eyes that crinkled in the corners when he smiled. I wonder what it said about me that I found my best friend's extended family attractive.

"Hey," I said, waving a little. "I'm Savannah."

"George," he said, holding out his hand. It made me feel a little better that his hands were shaking, too.

"Are you . . . Grace's cousin? Friend of the family?" I asked.

I meant it innocently, since I obviously fell under the "family friend" category, but his face turned down. "I know I don't look traditionally Colombian, but I'm a Moreno."

"Oh! Oh shit, no, that's not what I meant. Seriously, I just, I'd never seen you before and I honestly didn't know," I said, wanting to kick myself for being so inconsiderate.

"I mean, I'm not technically a Moreno, like, my last name is Smith, which now seems like it's defeating the point. My mom's Colombian. My dad's very Irish. Hence the hair," he said.

"Okay, cool. Well, I'm Savannah Alverson, with a painfully uninteresting cultural background. I think my dad has some strong Norwegian ties in his family, but I can't be sure," I said.

We stared at each other for a few solid seconds, taking in each other's cultural history, before Mrs. M's voice sounded again.

“We’re about to start! Savannah! George! Get a move on!” she said.

That was our cue to speed-walk over to the rest of the group. The egg toss was my peak event each year. I’d perfected my soft-palmed catch down to a science and knew how to arc the egg perfectly so that my partner could catch it without a problem. I tried my best to divulge all my techniques to George as we joined the rest of the family on the other side of the park.

“You see, I have a bit of a reputation to uphold,” I said. “I’ve been dubbed egg master for the past three years. And I’m not prepared to revoke my title today.”

“Teach me your ways,” George said, with a lopsided smile.

“The key is to imagine where the egg is going to land before it even leaves your hand. I think positive affirmation works wonders. If you think the egg will land softly in your partner’s hand, it will,” I said.

“Okay, Mr. Miyagi.”

I grabbed an egg from Mrs. M’s hand and George and I met in the middle with all the other teams. Mrs. M instructed each of us to take four steps back from our partners to start the game. I caught the wave of Mateo’s luscious hair out of the corner of my eye, and turned to take one last peek before I entered competition mode.

“Good luck, Savvy.” Mateo smiled.

Normally I would say something like “You know I don’t need luck” or “I’m the one who should be wishing *you* luck,” but the sparkle of Mateo’s eyes in the sun made my mind completely incapable of forming a coherent comeback.

“Uh, yeah, you too,” I said.

“Savannah!” George yelled at me from across the park. My head snapped back to him and he mouthed “Focus!” while attempting a tree yoga pose. Which did not make me focus more, for the record. It made me snort out an entirely unattractive laugh that Mateo definitely heard.

“On your marks, get set, toss!” Mrs. M yelled.

The egg left my hands with the perfect arc and velocity to land peacefully in George’s hand without too much difficulty on his end. I held my breath as it made contact, and he held it up, intact, with a surprised look on his face. I sent him an encouraging thumbs-up before he sent the egg back my way.

We took another four steps back away from each other. This was usually the round where people started cracking their eggs or dropping them. You could hear a mix of shrieks and “Are you kidding me?”s as we kept progressing through the rounds. And then, there were three groups left. It was getting harder and harder to see the egg flying through the air, and I thought for sure he would not catch it as I tossed it

across the park. But, by some stroke of egg-god luck, we were the last ones standing as the other two groups dropped theirs.

“Our egg toss champion wins again!” Mrs. M yelled.

George gave me a giddy high five that made me giggle. I’d never seen anyone as excited as me about an egg toss. He carried that same enthusiasm as we competed in the ring toss, only coming in third place for that activity. It was harder for me to aim the rings to get on the tiny post than it was to pass an egg to my partner, for some reason.

Next, we separated for our first individual event of balloon archery. And even though I didn’t make it into the top five finalists, I felt accomplished that none of my arrows went astray and threatened anyone’s life this year. It took a lot of trust and reassurance on my part to earn my bow and arrow back in the past few years. Mrs. M would hardly forget the time that a stray arrow of mine knocked over the cake that she’d been working on the whole day before.

I was about to tell George the story about my faulty arrow when Mrs. M’s voice boomed over the crowd.

“All right, now it’s time for the three-legged race. We’re going to go in waves of five and do it bracket-style. Come to me to grab your team’s rope and get prepared,” Mrs. M said.

George volunteered to go get our rope for the three-legged race, and I watched him run away in his basketball

shorts. Grace sat on the ground, joining her leg with one of her younger cousins. I suddenly felt self-conscious about the short shorts I chose to wear over my swimsuit. Imagining my jiggling thigh having to be tied up to a stranger's was my version of a nightmare. Would he notice the stretch marks that striped down my inner thighs? Would he be disgusted by me when he saw them?

“What’s the best way to tie two legs together?” George asked. “I figured you must be a pro at this, too.”

I could barely understand what he said as my brain started to shut down at the thought of tying my leg to George's.

“Um, yeah, this is the first time I'll be doing this event,” I said.

He shook his head, completely oblivious to my internal freak-out. “Cool. So it will be a learning experience for both of us. Do you want to take this end and wrap it around your thigh and I'll pull this end through mine? Then we can try a loop knot. I think that will be the most comfortable. What do you think? Savannah?”

It suddenly felt like all the air had been pushed out of my lungs. I swayed on my feet as the ringing in my ears began. No matter how many panic attacks I had, my body always believed that it was dying. My body told me that I couldn't catch my breath, that I was going to actually die in

Sandcastle Park in my polka-dotted swimsuit before I even got to eat lunch.

I plopped onto the ground and put my head between my legs, trying to catch my breath again. George's voice played over the pounding of my heart and the ringing in my ears, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. I squinted my eyes closed in an effort to make everything stop. My body didn't listen. I felt someone move my ponytail from off my neck and offer me a bottle of water. When I could finally look up, Grace's eyes met mine. Grace. Thank God for her.

"Hey, bud," she said. "I never should have pushed you to do the three-legged race. I know how much it freaks you out, and I should have respected your limits."

"S'okay," I whispered, my bottom lip shaking involuntarily.

"Are you breathing? Do you want my phone so you can use my meditation app?" she asked.

"I'm okay; I'll be fine," I said. My body was starting to believe me now, too. Calming down from a panic attack felt like you had run a marathon. When your body freaks itself out so thoroughly that adrenaline pumps through you and all your muscles become tight at the same time, it can seriously kick your ass.

"Do you want me to drive you home?" she asked.

“I can do it,” George interjected. “I know Lizzie really wants to race. I’ll make sure she gets home.”

Grace cocked her head at me, gauging my comfort level. My eyes slid to little Lizzie tapping her feet on the ground, the rope still tied around her thigh. I couldn’t ruin an adorable seven-year-old’s afternoon with my seventeen-year-old meltdown.

“That would be nice,” I managed to get out. Grace rubbed her hand up and down my arm while whispering a quick thank-you to George. Lizzie clapped as Grace returned and tied their legs together effortlessly. The rope had more than enough give between them and Grace’s perfect, toned legs would never get chafed by the rope.

George held out his hand to help me up. I put all my focus into getting my legs to move again without wobbling. They only felt a little bit like Jell-O by the time I was fully standing, and I could walk around without feeling like I could faint any second.

“I’m going to pull my car up to the curb here. Are you okay to wait for a second while I go grab the keys from my mom?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” I said. Everything was a bit of a blur when he ran back to grab the keys and bring the car around. I tried to focus on the moving leaves of the tree directly in front of me. Anything to distract me from the way my lungs seized

up every few seconds, threatening to send me spiraling again. The leaves followed a pattern as the wind gusted underneath them. Slow left, slow right, quick up. Slow left, slow right, quick up.

“Savannah!” George yelled from the car as he idled by the curb.

My eyes readjusted to take in the black Suburban in front of me. I shuffled my way there, opening the passenger door as quickly as I could manage so that I could flop into the seat. I slid the seat belt across my body and felt his eyes on me. I knew he was concerned, but it wasn’t helping with how self-conscious I was already feeling.

“Where do you live?” he asked, pulling out his phone to put it in his GPS.

“Nine Ninety-Two Mulberry Court,” I managed. A British voice erupted from the car’s speakers instructing George how to get back to my place. We sat in silence only broken by the occasional “Turn left in seventy feet. Recalculating. Turn right in thirty feet.”

This was the single most embarrassing moment of my life. I was letting a stranger drive me back home after I had a panic attack with just the thought of participating in a children’s picnic game. He had to think I was the biggest loser in the world.

“How are you feeling?” We were a few seconds from



pulling into my driveway, and I just wanted to melt with humiliation into my seat.

“I’m doing better,” I said. “I’m sorry that you had to leave because of me.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” he said. “I think I used up all my luck on that egg toss. Every other competition would have been disappointing in comparison.”

My smile quivered, and I felt like I might break out into full-blown panic again if I didn’t get out of the car. Now. I could not do this in front of him again.

“Thanks again,” I said, reaching for my door handle, very aware of how heavily my hands were shaking.

“Do you need me to stay with you for a second?” he asked.

“Oh, gosh no, you’ve already done enough,” I said. I opened the door with a shaking hand and managed to wiggle myself out of the tall car.

“It’s really no big deal, I can stay—” he started.

“I don’t need you to stay with me, okay? I’m perfectly fine without your help,” I snapped.

He shook his head the smallest bit as I slammed the door shut. I marched to the front door of my house and into the front room. I collapsed onto the couch and let my body properly process the anxiety and sadness I’d bottled up in the last few days. Jagged breaths came in between my tears

that I'd worked so hard to keep at bay. My loneliness was truly starting to sink in. I couldn't run up the stairs and get a hug from my sister. I couldn't tell her about my panic attack—she wouldn't be able to analyze it for what it really was.

This year was a new, huge, exciting adventure for Ashley. I'd never felt more abandoned.

## chapter **THREE**

**F**irst days of school are always made out to be this momentous occasion full of school-spirited montages. In reality, it goes on like any other day, only the parking lot is generally more of a disaster as the sophomores who now have parking spots try to navigate it for the first time. I usually parked Norma as far on the outskirts of the lot to avoid the mess. I looped my book bag over my shoulders and headed inside, barely dodging a driver who was racing to get a close spot. I yelped, jumping back, and waited for the person to come out of the car so I could give them an earful.

“Did you even see me there? You almost hit me!” I yelled.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” said a very familiar voice. As he climbed out of his car, his look of panic turned into a frown.

“Since when do you go here?” I asked George.

He slung his bag across one shoulder and started to walk

toward the front door. I barely kept up with him, my short legs working double just to keep up with his long stride.

“I transferred this year,” he said.

“Why would you transfer for your senior year?” I asked.

“Junior,” he replied.

“That explains the driving,” I replied.

He shot me a sideways glance before shaking his head in the same fashion as he had dropping me off at my house yesterday. We started down the hallway, and I smiled at a few people as we walked by. They all looked quizzically at George as he passed. We made it almost down to the cafeteria, near where my locker was, before we ran into Grace.

“Hey, you two! What a fun surprise,” Grace said, enveloping me in a hug. She pulled George into a hug, too, and he awkwardly patted her back.

“Can you actually show me where the office is?” George asked Grace.

“I could have shown you,” I said.

“I’m perfectly fine without your help,” he repeated back at me. The words that I’d spat out at him in my moment of panic stung when they were thrown back in my face. Grace’s mouth fell open, and she looked between us for a few seconds.

“Fine. Have a super first day,” I said. I turned on my heel and started to walk the opposite way down the hallway, away

from my locker, with no destination in mind. The stinging of tears and the lump in my throat started to creep up, and I looked everywhere for the nearest bathroom. I refused to be the girl crying in the hallway on the first day of school.

The girls' restroom at the end of the hall came into view, and I started to speed-walk in that direction. But, the universe had a fun way of interrupting me when I was on a mission.

"Savannah!" I heard from the doorway of a classroom. I turned around slowly to take in a waving Mrs. Brandt, who cradled a cup of coffee in her hands. At least some things stayed consistent from year to year. She waved me over to talk to her, and I cursed internally.

"I see you're not signed up for newspaper this year. You're going to leave me hanging without one of my best reporters?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Brandt," I said. Genuinely, it was a tough decision to not take newspaper this year. It was between newspaper and AP chem, which I needed to get into the engineering program at Indiana State. Ever since Ashley decided that she was going to Indiana State, I found out the requirements for getting into my program and was doing everything in my power to make that happen. "I couldn't fit it into my schedule this semester."

"Who's your counselor?" she asked, leading me inside to

her desk. She scrounged around through two overstuffed drawers and on through a filing cabinet until she found a scrap of paper to write on.

“Mr. Reed,” I said.

She scribbled a few notes down on the slip of paper before handing it to me. “Go talk to Mr. Reed and see if you can start an independent study for newspaper. I can meet with you after school to collaborate on story ideas. I understand if you have too much on your plate. Just think about it. I hate to see you give up something that you’re so great at.”

As I went to grab the paper, Mrs. Brandt really looked me in the eyes for the first time in her frenzy. Her face immediately turned to concern.

“Is everything all right?” she asked. “I’m sorry if I overwhelmed you.”

“No, no, it’s not you,” I said, wiping under my eyes to catch some spillover tears. The warning bell rang, signaling that I had five minutes to make it to my first class of my senior year. Students started to roll into Mrs. Brandt’s classroom, and I took this as my cue to leave. “I’d better get to class. I’ll talk to Mr. Reed.”

“Ah—okay, talk to you soon,” she shouted after me as I dodged my way through a sea of students. I moved through them like an emotionless zombie, my usual resolve during difficult or painful days taking hold. I never cried in front of

people who weren't Ashley. It was like not having her as an emotional buffer was opening the floodgates to all emotional interactions with people. I was not a fan of this change, to say the least.

I spotted Grace, alone this time, on the other side of the hallway. Her eyes widened when she saw me, and we rushed to reach each other.

"I see you and George have already started World War Three," she said.

"I *might* have accidentally started it. But to be fair, he did almost run me over in the parking lot this morning," I replied.

"Because he was mad at you?" she asked.

"No! On accident. But I *might* have given him some crap for it," I said.

"Of course you did," she said, rolling her eyes and smirking. We walked together to our first-period class. "Remind me again why I agreed to eight thirty calc?"

"Because this is the only one that fit into my schedule and you wanted to have full access to my notes," I said. I linked my arm with hers. "And because you love me."

"This is really testing my love right now," she said.

"So Mrs. Brandt wants me to do an independent study for the paper," I said, sliding into a desk in our calculus room. Grace's eyes went wide and she clapped excitedly.

“Tell me you’re going to do it. We can work on a big investigative story like we’ve talked about for years! Come on, you’ll be the best partner ever because you already appreciate all my character quirks. Please, Savvy, please do this!” she said.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, playing around with the sheet of paper that Mrs. Brandt had given me. The warning bell rang, and more of our classmates filled in the chairs around us. Our teacher, Mr. Kavach, went to the front of the room and started rattling off attendance and the nerdy school-loving part of my brain got excited.

Even with my morning brain, calculus came easy to me. It gave me a chance to use everything I’d learned before, all the ideas from algebra and geometry that I’d taken the time to memorize, and build upon them. It let me solve things in a perfect world, where the only things that mattered lived on the page. I could decide how to get to the answer. I had the freedom to find my own path. Also, Mr. Kavach was pretty cool, which helped.

Grace scribbled down notes idly next to me, which were probably more like doodles. She knew that I took great calc notes and we would study together eventually. The class drew to a close, and Grace packed up her things quickly.

“I’ve got to go meet Ben out by his locker, but I’m honestly begging you to do the independent study with me.



You're such a great writer, Sav, the paper needs some hard-hitting reporters this semester," she said.

Ben was Grace's newly minted boyfriend. They worked at Famous Footwear together over the summer, and a relationship blossomed among the surrounding sneakers and Ugg boots. I was still a little weary of Grace dating a jock, but he seemed nice enough from the few times that I'd met him.

"I'll seriously think about it," I said.

"You better!" she said, blowing me a kiss as she walked down the hallway. "See you at lunch!"



After school I picked up a happy Fiyero from the groomer, his fur looking clean for the first time in weeks. I guess that's the risk you take adopting a white puffball of a dog. He's pristine for a few hours before he rolls in something he shouldn't. Fiyero frowned at me as I buckled him into his harness in the back seat and then I imagine had thoughts of panic when he realized I was driving. Animals are very attuned to imminent danger.

Norma pulled through once again and delivered us home with only minor psychological trauma, mostly on Fiyero's part. I apologized to him profusely for almost knocking him over after a particularly sharp right turn. He

dashed out of the car once I opened the door and jumped into the arms of my mother, who was home from work. She already had her too-tight bike pants and sports bra on. It was an effort to show off her transformation to the neighbors, like they all didn't notice her new body already.

"How was your first day?" she asked as Fiyero licked a giant, slobbery kiss onto the side of her face.

"It was fine," I said. "Is it possible for senioritis to already be kicking in?"

"Oh, come on, you love school!" she said. "You're so smart, Savannah Lynn. Don't let the concept of a senior slack year throw you off from your trajectory."

"Don't worry about me, Mom," I said. Normally, I'd add something like "You haven't much in the past," but Ashley's advice on picking my battles rose to mind. If we were going to make our cohabitation without Ashley work, I'd have to work on the whole "processing what I was going to say before blurting it out" thing.

We walked through the door and Fiyero immediately went to his container of treats, as if he deserved a treat for surviving the car ride with me. I couldn't really argue with his logic. He sat patiently as I grabbed one of the smelly bones from the smelly container and set it down in front of him. I was about to head upstairs and start on my homework

(after one deserved episode of *Buffy*, of course), when Mom called my name.

“Savannah, come back down here for a second,” she said.

Nothing good ever started with that sentence.

“As you know, it’s almost been six months since my time on *Shake the Weight*,” she said when I reached the foot of the stairs. “They are getting ready to film their check-in special and want to come by the house next week to get some footage. It will be mostly of me doing things in my everyday life. They might ask to interview you about how things have changed. You know, just basic things.”

“Are you having Ashley come home for it?” I asked.

“Oh, no, sweetie. She needs to adjust to her schedule at school. Coming back only two weeks in would mess up the routine she’s establishing. You wouldn’t want to set her back, would you?” she asked.

“Definitely not,” I replied. My gut lurched. Having to go on camera and speak positively about my mom’s transformation sounded like a nightmare. Not only did I disagree with everything the show stood for, but a smaller, more vicious part of my subconscious believed that they’d ask if I was interested in being on their teen *Shake the Weight* show. I couldn’t handle someone asking me that.

“You don’t seem very excited,” she said, frowning. “It will be great for our community to be featured again.”

“You know how I feel about this show, Mom,” I said.

She sucked in her cheeks before putting her hand to her forehead. “Why is it always such a battle with you to ask for your support?”

“I support *you*. I don’t support the show,” I said.

“I am me because of that show, don’t you get it? I was no one before it. Now I’m someone. I can finally be my true self. Isn’t that something worth celebrating?” she asked.

“You were someone to me,” I said quietly. We sat in a few beats of silence before she turned her back on me, heading into the living room.

“Can I at least ask you to fake it? Smile pretty for the cameras when they come?” she asked.

“Whatever,” I said, continuing the journey upstairs to my room. The only person who would understand and support my decision to fight back in this moment wasn’t here, but I needed to hear her voice. And I had a feeling she needed to hear mine right about now, too.

The phone rang twice before Ashley answered on the other end of the line.

“Hi, cutie,” she said when she answered.

“It’s so good to hear your voice,” I said. “How was your first day of classes? Did you make any friends? Enemies? *Frenemies?*”

She laughed. “My roommate moved in! She’s pretty

great. And I ended up having a few classes with the girl Yael from down the hall. Only time will tell if we become frenemies.”

“I have a feeling Yael will *not* be a frenemy,” I said.

“Stop, we don’t even know yet if she’s interested in me,” she said.

Oh, Ashley, always the practical one, never the dreamer.

“I’m just saying, she was super cute,” I said.

“Enough about me. What about you? How was your first day?” she asked.

“I almost got run over by Grace’s cousin. I think I’ve started a feud with him. Still unclear at this point,” I said.

“See? You have enough frenemies for the both of us,” she said.

I twirled a piece of my hair around my finger so tightly that it started to turn blue. I tried to figure out the best way to break the news that Mom and I had our first big fight sans Ashley. There was no good way to start.

“So,” I started. “*Shake the Weight* is coming to film some check-in footage of Mom next week.”

After a long pause, “Oh,” was all she could say.

“Just when you think you’ve exorcised the demons,” I said.

“Does she want me to come back home?” she asked.

“Oh, gosh no!” I said. “You stay put. You’re still getting

used to things. I have to at least give you some time to make a frenemy before you can come back for a visit.”

“You’re sure you don’t want me to come back home?” she asked.

Of course I did. I wanted more than anything for her to come back and be the sister who does all the talking on camera. I wanted her to be in the footage, with Mom and Fiyero in the background. No one would judge her for being the fat daughter who didn’t follow her mom’s advice she learned from *Shake the Weight*. No one would question her.

“I’m positive. I’ve got this,” I said.

“I told you you’re stronger than you think,” she said. “I’m proud of you, Sissy. Things are going to be okay with us separated, you know? It’s just something we’ll have to get used to.”

“At least for this year. And then I’ll come join you and we can be roommates and go back to normal,” I said.

She paused on the other end of the line again. “You’re sure you want to come here? You’re one of the smartest people I know—you can probably get in somewhere even better than here.”

“Of course I’m sure!” I said. “This is only temporary. As long as I know that this is only temporary, I feel much better about everything.”

“Whatever you say,” she said. I could almost imagine her

shaking her head in her dorm room. I heard the sound of a door slamming, and Ashley said a quick hello to her roommate.

“Isabel is back. Can I call you tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sounds good,” I said. “Do you want to start season two of *Scandal* tonight? We could text throughout however many episodes as we can stay awake for?”

“You know it,” she said. “I have to support my girl Olivia Pope.”

“Good. As long as we both express our mutual love for OP over text message, then all is right with the world,” I said. “I miss your face so much already.”

“I miss your face more. Talk to you later, ’kay?”

“’Kay. Bye, Sissy,” I said. The line cut abruptly on the other end before she could echo back her typical “Bye to you, too, Sissy.” I looked at the phone in my hand for a few seconds, waiting to see if she’d call back to correct her mistake. The phone stayed silent in my hand, and I flopped onto my bed, letting out a long sigh.

Week one without Ashley: 1. Savannah: 0.

## chapter FOUR

**N**ot a few seconds after I reached my locker, I felt Grace's presence behind me. She had one of those energies that you just felt whenever she was around, like a warm hug without her even touching you. Her calc book rested on her hip, and she looked at me expectantly, like she had something on the tip of her tongue that she was dying to spit out.

"I have the best idea for our story," she said.

"You know I haven't officially signed up for the independent study, right?" I asked.

She waved her hand in front of her face. "I know you will. You can't pass up a good story."

"Dazzle me," I said, picking up my calc book out of my locker. I slammed it shut and turned to walk to class with her. Grace excitedly pitching a story was probably 85 percent why she was voted editor of the school paper this year. Her love of journalism was infectious.

"So I was talking to Melinda Aldridge this morning, and



she mentioned that the dance team was trying to practice in the gymnasium yesterday afternoon, but the boy's *baseball team*, which doesn't even start until spring, had somehow reserved it. But the dance team had never had to reserve the space before," she said.

"You're kidding," I said, actually getting kind of into it.

"Right? Anyway, they were kicked out and forced to practice in the cafeteria, with not enough space and horrible acoustics, when they have a performance this weekend at the football game. How unfair is that? It got me thinking about the disparities between boys' and girls' sports and how the school shows its favoritism. Like, letting the baseball guys reserve a space that had always been the dance team's. I'm thinking there might be some favoritism in funding, too. That's why I would want Mrs. Brandt as our faculty instructor. If we find some dirt that the school wouldn't want us to publish, we need her to have our back legally."

"Whoa," I said.

"If we can prove it, we could totally make some changes in our own school. We could make a difference," she said.

We both slid into our seats in calc, and I was suddenly jazzed to have a project to work on. I was already scheming up ways to get interviews with the athletes of the school, even some of the coaches, without telling them exactly what the story was about. I'd ask them about practices,

where they usually practice, the process they go through to get those facilities—it wouldn't be too hard to get some foundational dirt.

Mr. Kavach started the class by announcing a quiz for Friday. Not really the first thing that people want to hear at eight thirty on a Tuesday. Grace looked over to me with wide eyes and mouthed, "Help me." I mouthed back a confident "I got you." At least I hoped I did. I would have to go home tonight and study so that I could help Grace study the rest of the week.

After class was finished, Grace and I both rushed into the hallway, trying to beat the crowds, to head to our next class.

"So is it safe to say we're having a calc study session on Thursday?" she asked.

"Totally," I said. "And maybe tomorrow we can get started on the story?"

"Tomorrow?" she said, her voice reaching a new octave. "Uh, tomorrow after school I have plans. I'm, uh, going to hang out with Grandma Rosalina. She needs help setting up for a party she's throwing."

"On a Wednesday?" I asked.

"The elderly don't party on our same schedule," she said.

"You're allowed to say that you're hanging out with Ben, Grace. He is your boyfriend," I said.

“I know, I just know that we’ve always promised each other that we’d never become those girls who forget about their best friends the moment they get boyfriends, and I don’t want to be that person; I really don’t,” she said.

The only thing that saved her from further questioning was the warning bell for my second-period class. I had been given a very specific warning from our gym teacher that if I was late for class this year he wouldn’t be as lenient with all my excuses like last year.

“I have to go to gym, but you don’t have to lie to me about hanging out with him. It’s very okay!” I said.

She mouthed “Thank you” to me as she continued down the hallway to her second-period class.

I made it halfway to the gymnasium before I realized that I’d left my phone on my seat in Mr. Kavach’s room. I weaved in and out of the kids texting and taking up more general hallway width than necessary to talk to their group of friends. If I didn’t hurry, I’d for sure be late and get points off for gym.

When I walked back into Kavach’s room, he and George were talking. My body heated with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. As if he could feel me looking his way, he turned around to face me but quickly turned back to Mr. Kavach. Like he could pretend he didn’t see me, when we so clearly made eye contact. I huffed and started to go up

the aisle, where my phone would be sitting in my seat. To my dismay, it was nowhere to be seen. Dang. It.

“Savannah,” Mr. Kavach said. As I flipped around to look at him, he waved my phone in his hands.

“Oh, thank God,” I said.

“Savannah, have you met George yet?” Kavach asked. “He’s new this year. A junior taking precalc.”

“Yeah, we’ve—” I started as George simultaneously stuck out his hand for a handshake.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

I shook my head in disbelief but took his hand. What exactly was his damage?

“It’s funny, George, you have a very familiar face,” I said back. “I’d better head back to gym. I’m going to be late.”

I smiled a tight smile and turned on my heel, my blood boiling.

“I was just suggesting that you would be a great peer tutor for George. His old school didn’t offer up as much of the calc foundation in other math courses like we did, so he’s a little behind because of it,” he said.

It was George’s turn to turn bright red. Good.

“Oh, I don’t know—” I started.

“Think about it, Savannah. Maybe you two could swap numbers if you decide you have the time. I know it would be a big help to George.”

I looked to George, who had refused to meet my eyes during this entire conversation. Truthfully, I just need him to say one word, one phrase that indicated that he actually needed and wanted my help. I wouldn't mind it—precalc was arguably one of my favorite classes. I raised an eyebrow and tilted my head, as if I was waiting for him to say that he'd be interested.

“Um, yeah, sure let's swap numbers,” he said.

“Great. Thanks, Savannah. See you fifth period, George,” Mr. Kavach said. George threw his backpack over one shoulder, and I started making my way to the door.

“Okay, let's walk and talk. I'm seriously going to be docked points if I don't get to gym soon,” I said. The hallways were thinning out, meaning it was almost time for the second-period bell to ring. Teachers were starting to shut their doors behind them, and the noise of slamming doors reverberated off our emerald-green lockers. Once we were out of Kavach's earshot and in the hallway, I whipped around to face him.

“What the heck was that? Why did you pretend not to know me back there?” I demanded.

“What was I supposed to say, ‘Yeah, we've met—I pissed her off yesterday morning when I almost turned her into a car pancake?’” he asked.

“Or something like, ‘Yeah, I'm her best friend's cousin’? Even a nice ‘Yep, we totally have’ would have cut it. Seriously,

are you that embarrassed to say that you know me? Kavach is, like, the last person you need to seem extra cool around. He's very much in the Savannah fan club," I said.

The redness in his face had reached the tops of his ears and he wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. He looked up and down the hallway before turning back to me.

"I panicked, okay? I had a feeling that he was going to offer you up as a tutor, and I was embarrassed that you'd know I was bad at math. Happy now?" he said. He was bright red all over. His fair complexion had become an entire shade that matched his embarrassment, and my gut wrenched. I'd made him feel this way.

"George—" I started. The second-period bell cut me off.

"I have to get to band," he said. He walked down the opposite hallway from me, and I stood there, a doofus without a hall pass who was now officially late for gym.

"I'll catch you later!" I said. He didn't look back or answer me.



When I got home, the overwhelming smell of Mom's signature kale and ginger smoothies struck me like a smack in the face, and I gagged. I put my shirt over my nose in an effort to smell the laundry detergent on my blouse instead of the ginger that seemed to be seeping into my nostrils anyway. I

walked into our open-concept kitchen to find Mom by her blender with enough kale to take up all the counter space plus our kitchen island.

“Was there a really good deal on kale at the store?” I asked, plugging my nose as I talked so that everything came out with a nasally tone.

“I’m going on a juice cleanse,” Mom said with a smile plastered on her face. “I have to drop ten pounds before *Shake the Weight* comes to film, and Lindsay recommended this kale juice cleanse that she went on a few weeks ago.”

Lindsay was another contestant who was on *Shake the Weight* with Mom. She lived in suburban Iowa, so she and Mom really bonded while they were on the show together. Mom always rubbed it in my face that Lindsay’s family had taken on her healthy eating habits without any protest and that they’d collectively lost one hundred fifty pounds. I usually responded with something like “Good for Lindsay’s family” or “Sorry we’re not interested in joining your health cult,” neither of which usually went over well.

“Well, that sounds fun,” I said. “While you blend up your meals for the next week, I’m going upstairs to go work on homework.”

I turned to go, but she called out to me.

“Savannah, wait!” she said. Part of me wanted her to admit how unhealthy it was to go on this juice cleanse,

or that she didn't really need to drop the ten pounds before the crew came to our house. But that was just the wishful-thinking side of me.

"I have to post a picture of myself with this protein powder that is sponsoring me on Instagram. Can you take the photo for me?" she asked.

"Couldn't you get someone at work to help you with this?" I asked. "You work at a PR firm. It's literally your coworkers' jobs to do this kind of stuff."

She rested her hands on her hips and gave me the Look of Disappointment before I finally caved.

"Fine. Where do you want me to take it?" I asked.

Mom poured herself an Insta-worthy green kale juice in one of our fanciest glasses and brought out her copper measuring cups and her cooking knife to arrange on the table in front of her. She held up her kale juice and positioned the protein powder to be in the top right corner of the photo with her smiling in the background. She wore one of her smallest neon pink sports bras that showed off the most of her new body, and she made me count down when I was taking the picture so that she could simultaneously suck in her stomach and squeeze her muscles at the same time. All tricks that she had learned while she had to take photos on the show.

"Do you mind writing the caption for me? You're so



much quicker than I am at writing things out on the phone,” she said.

I almost protested, but she started rattling off the caption before I could say no.

“‘Enjoying a refreshing kale juice infused with Power Powder’—make sure to use that little trademark thingy—‘this afternoon. I’m starting a juice cleanse this week and need some accountability buddies. Who’s with me? Leave me your messages of encouragement in the comments. Love you all! Hashtag healthy life, hashtag inspiration, hashtag *Shake the Weight*, hashtag weight loss, hashtag juice cleanse—’”

“That’s enough hashtags,” I said.

“Are you sure? I usually do a few more. I want to make sure it reaches more people, since it’s a sponsored one,” she said.

“You can always add more later if you want. Here’s your phone,” I said, handing it back to her. “I really have to go do some homework now.”

It took everything within me not to add some extra hashtags, like #LoveYourBody or #AllBodiesAreGoodBodies. I walked such a fine line with her because, yes, she was my mom, but I also did not agree with her views on her body and my body, for that matter. How was I supposed to sit back and bite my tongue, like Ashley had suggested I do in her absence? How was I supposed to stand aside when she

made me post things on her behalf that made me queasy? I just imagined all the girls my age, or the adults Mom's age, looking at her posts and feeling terrible about their bodies. I imagined them taking drastic measures like a juice cleanse to lose some weight in an unhealthy amount of time. And the fact that I played a small part in a post that could potentially make someone feel less confident about themselves and the body that they inhabited made me beyond upset.

But I bit my tongue. Because she's the mom, and I'm just the daughter.