

ethel is hot. LOL!!



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Understand, Prevent, Combat and Transform The Most Common Cyberbullying Tactics



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For Gigi and all the smart and funny kids



Chapter 1

Ethel F. Effelby poked through the shelves at the Goodwill until she'd found the perfect shoes.

They were brown. They were orthopedic. They were hideous.

"WOOT WOOT," Ethel yelled. This was like finding a hundred-dollar bill on the sidewalk or discovering a new star in the Zwicky Galaxy.

Grandma Marie's voice floated over from two aisles away. "Your what hurts?"

"Gram, come here!" Ethel yelled. "You've got to see these."

"Keep your pants on, I'm coming!" Gram rounded the corner, one hand smoothing back her flyaway strands. She had a blond updo like a swirl of frozen yogurt, a dozen hairpins keeping the whole contraption in place. She wore heavy makeup, and never left the house without her scarlet lipstick. "You've gotta have a shtick, baby," she always told Ethel. "Nothing's worse than completely fitting in."

"Oh God," Gram said when she saw the shoes. "You're like a dog rooting through the garbage . . ."

"Gram!" Ethel said. "These are perfect!"

"*Marie*," Gram mumbled, looking sideways. She hated to be called Gram in public. She reached for the shoes, her fingers waggling. "Gimme those. I'm going to have to spray your whole body down with bleach." A woman with her daughter in the same aisle looked over at them.

But Ethel cradled them close. A beam of light bathed them as if from the heavens above. Of course they were the ugliest things she could find: cracked brown leather, black laces, and thick, putty-colored soles. They smelled like someone else's feet, but worse. They smelled like someone had worn socks of cottage cheese and tramped these things around in a field of dog poop. Ethel gazed at Gram in a head-tilted, begging way.

"You can't be serious," Gram snorted.

Ethel gazed down at the shoes, which were a size too big for her feet. That was the point of having a shtick. No one could mass order these shoes online; they weren't on every shelf. Yuki, Weezy, and Schreck were going to be flippin' flipsies when they saw these!

Gram looked about the store. "You know, Ethel, I *have* money. We can buy you good shoes at T.J. Maxx."

"They're only six dollars, and I'm buying them," Ethel said, and began walking to the counter. Gram could not argue with a girl who had her own money. She always said, "Honey, don't depend on a man when you can make your own money." Ethel could well afford them; she had more than \$600 in the bank from the business she had started this past summer. She called it Grunt Work, Inc. Anytime a dog knocked over a garbage can or spiders had to be cleaned out of windows or poop had to be picked up off a lawn, Ethel had shown up and done the job. She'd even invested part of her savings in a 401(k).

The cashier, an older woman with two eerily drawn-in pencil lines for eyebrows, took the shoes. "Let's see now," the cashier said as she began ringing up the total. "With tax that's gonna be . . ."

"Six dollars and thirty cents," Ethel said, pulling out her plaid wallet.

"That's right." The cashier's penciled eyebrows arched slightly. "How did you know?"

Ethel shrugged. "I'm just kind of good at math."

"Well, good for you. I was never a math person myself," the cashier said.

"I wasn't either," Gram said, placing her hand on Ethel's shoulder. "She doesn't get it from me."

"I probably get it from Mom," Ethel said cheerfully. "She's also good at chemistry."

The look Gram threw her at that moment could've fried an egg. Ethel took the bag the cashier handed her, smiled, and said thank you. God love Gram, but if Ethel didn't say nice things about her mother once in a while, nobody would.

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Gram's rusty car farted and sputtered as they bounced through Portland's wharf district. "Keep it together," Gram said, smacking the dash. "I'm still paying off the timing belt." The car seemed to talk back, shuddering as they drove. Gram waved her hand over the dashboard.

"What are you doing?" Ethel asked.

"A little car Reiki," Gram muttered, as if the healing energy of her hand could keep the pistons from misfiring. "To help us get home."

Ethel propped her elbow up and leaned into the window so close, she made a cheek imprint on the glass. She stared at it and then gave the window a lip imprint. She loved watching the sea play peekaboo with the old brick buildings as they whizzed by. This town could feel big, with its glass-front restaurants, museums, and crazy people talking to street signs. But it felt small, too, in the cobblestone side streets and fish trucks, the way strangers always smiled here, and how the trees, not yet golden, lined so many of the Old Port neighborhoods. They could zip from one end to the other in less than fifteen minutes.

As they headed home toward the Eastern Promenade, toward winding hills where even in late September, people picnicked on the hillside parks overlooking the ocean, Ethel wanted to pretend that this was the way it had always been. Sitting in the passenger's side while Gram drove always spaced her out like this, watching people out the window, imagining faraway worlds with the comforting voices on NPR coming through the crackly FM station. She didn't want to think about the fact that it was Sunday; her mother would try to call today.

**

Gram turned the key in the door of the little tin-ceiling apartment they shared as Ethel helped lug in the groceries. Gram had lived in this apartment since her last divorce. It was super-squeezy inside. Ethel loved how everything in Gram's apartment was weird, from the giant bust of Elvis in the corner to the showgirl-leg lamp with fishnet stockings. That fishnet-stockings lamp was the first thing most people noticed when they came to the

apartment. And Gram would always laugh and say, “Yard sale, three bucks.” That was how Gram typically responded to any compliments.

The living room doubled as Ethel’s bedroom. Each night, Ethel had to unfold the green velour pullout couch, which she had named Clyde, and in the morning, shove all the linens back inside and fold it back up—Gram’s rules. Since space was such an issue, the entry closet had been turned into Ethel’s closet, but it had to be kept neat. It was one of the few things they fought over, for Gram could wear some wicked crabby pants if Ethel’s area got to be too much of a mess.

Opposite Clyde was Ethel’s favorite piece of furniture in the room, a red velvet settee called Fifi. The settee was positioned under the bay window, which overlooked the street and giant maple trees. An adult could only sit on Fifi, but it was the perfect length for Ethel to completely stretch out upon. Ethel would spend hours sitting or lying on Fifi, reading books and magazines. They didn’t have cable TV, only a few local channels, but Gram had a subscription to *National Geographic* for Ethel and *Cosmopolitan* for herself. Often, when Ethel was sitting there reading about Nicaraguan farmers or howler monkeys, Gram would come out of her bedroom to show her an article about makeup or how to use accessories to pump up a wardrobe. Ethel would flip the page of her magazine without looking up and say, “Boring.”

They were putting groceries away when the telephone rang and Gram lifted the marigold receiver off the wall. It was her only phone. Gram did not have a cell phone and said she never would. “Hello?” she answered, and then slumped and put her hand on her hip. Ethel immediately knew who it was.

“Yep, she’s here,” Gram said and held the phone out to Ethel as if she didn’t want anything to do with it anymore.

Ethel took the phone. “Hi, Mom.” Charlene usually called once a week from prison, often on Sunday, sometimes during the week, depending on how much phone time she was allowed. Her mother’s voice sounded tired and draggy, as if she’d been up all night.

“Hi, baby, what are you doing?” She always started conversations like that. And Ethel replied, “Nothing . . . Just surfing my iPad” or “Doing homework” or whatever she happened to be doing at the moment.

Long ago, Charlene had given up on taking classes or getting her high school diploma. She did not often ask about what Ethel was learning at school but was more interested in Ethel's social life and boys (of which there were none), which often left them at a conversational standstill.

"I got some shoes today," Ethel announced after an awkward pause.

"Oh, that's good," Charlene drawled.

"They're orthopedic."

"What's that?"

"That means they are good for your feet."

"Oh. Are they cute?"

"Oh yeah, real cute. They're brown with cracks in them, and they smell like old cottage cheese."

Her mother was silent for a moment. "Well, is that what other girls are wearing?"

"Oh no!" Ethel said, pleased. "That's my thingy thang."

Charlene had no real response to that. "Oh, okay."

Ethel shifted her weight. "So . . .," she said.

"Yeah," Charlene said. "So, when do you think you can come visit me?"

That was the tricky part. Charlene always asked this. But the women's prison was an eight-hour trip away, and Gram's car was one pothole away from completely disintegrating.

In the four years Charlene had been there, Ethel had seen her mother only once, on Thanksgiving. It had been dismal. Gram had arranged to get a rental car, which had been expensive. The trip seemed to take forever, with Gram getting lost and exasperated. By the time they'd gotten there, visiting hours were nearly over and Charlene was furious. That triggered Gram, who had snapped, "Why don't you think about somebody besides yourself?" and Charlene had snarled something back. Then the three of them made their way into the crowded common room that smelled like Lysol.

Pitiful cardboard cutouts of a turkey and Pilgrims were plastered against a gray concrete wall. Families sat marking time with their loved ones, trying to be festive, but Ethel could see it just wasn't in their hearts. Her mother was tense and made no effort to ask Ethel any questions. What little time Ethel and her mother had to spend catching up

drained away as Charlene and Gram sat across from each other, arms folded in total silence. It was awfully exhausting, and despite how much Ethel tried to clamp down and control it, tears squeezed out of her eyes when they got up to leave. It had left her feeling depressed for days. Ethel squirmed whenever her mother brought up the topic of visiting again. She knew her mother had no other visitors.

“Well, it’s kind of hard. We just started school and . . .”

“You could take a bus,” Charlene suggested.

“Well . . .” Ethel stared out the kitchen window. “I asked Gram, but she won’t let me take the bus alone, and she works on the weekends.”

Her mother’s tired voice sounded far away. “Well, you could drive.”

“I’m twelve,” Ethel said.

“I meant . . . someday.”

“Yup.”

There was another drawn-out silence. “Well, all right. I miss you and love you.”

“Okay, Mom, me too. Goodbye.” Ethel hung up.

Gram’s back was turned to Ethel as she flipped on the stove burner to make dinner. The gas went *click, click, click*.

“You’re not taking a bus anywhere, I hope you know.” Tufts of blond poked out from her ’do. From the back, Gram’s beehive resembled a bunch of fighting baby ducks.

“I would say ‘duh,’ but that would be too obvious,” Ethel said, picking up her iPad off Clyde. It was open to her favorite bookmarked page—www.cnn.com—and she stared at the headlines.

“Mmmph,” Gram muttered.

“Gram,” Ethel said, changing the subject. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“What’s that?”

Ethel stared at the screen. “NASA has no idea what to do with the dead bodies.”

Gram began opening a can of peas. “Rewind,” she said.

“Oh. Right,” Ethel said. She was doing it again, obsessing about the Mars mission, forgetting that not everybody could read her mind. “Well, it says here that NASA doesn’t know what to do if one of their astronauts goes up in the shuttle and dies

in the middle of the flight. Can you believe that? I mean, it's going to take three years! How could they not think about this before?"

"Maybe they'll have to shove the body out a window or something," Gram said.

"Not possible," Ethel said. "There's zero oxygen in space. You can't just open a hatch or the astronauts would die."

"Uh huh," said Gram, dumping the peas into a saucepan.

Ethel tapped her chin, imagining the scenario. "I'm really sorry, Mrs. Jones. We had to shove your husband out the hatch, 'cause he was starting to smell."

Gram laughed. "Well, I guess that's something you'd better think about before you become an astronaut."

"I didn't say I *wanted* to be an astronaut," Ethel said with a tinge of annoyance. "I said I wanted to *work* for NASA."

"Lord Thunderin' Jesus," Gram said, stirring. She eye-rolled the ceiling.

"Hmm," Ethel said, scrolling through the news items on CNN. "Maybe I should be a Mars dead-body consultant." Every couple of weeks she changed her mind about how she was actually going to work for NASA. "You can't bury the body, and you can't shove it out the window, and there's really no place to store it, but—oh—I got it—you know what I would do?"

"What?" Gram said, no longer interested in the game.

Ethel began to pace the tiny living room. "I think the other astronauts would be very lonely if one of their friends died, so I would embalm the body with special NASA fluids and keep it in its suit and helmet so that the other astronauts could have some company while they were playing cards. And, you could have prerecorded phrases, so that every once in a while, you'd hear the dead guy say things like, 'Man, I'm really hungry; I wish I could eat a hot dog' or, 'Do you mind? I'm trying to read' or, 'That's funny. You should've been a comedian.'"

Ethel thought she'd hit on a brilliant idea there; perhaps if she wrote to NASA, they would invite her to speak on a panel. She looked up to see Gram staring at her, shaking her head.

"Kid," Gram said, turning back to the stove, "sometimes, you really scare me."

Chapter 2

The right pair of jeans made the difference between a day that went soaringly well and one that was like a splat of seagull plop on the windshield of a car.

At six forty-five in the morning, Ethel consulted her outfit matrix. This was a chart she'd done in an Excel program and printed off. Mathematically she'd coordinated every piece of clothing she owned—six pairs of pants, ten tops, three sweater vests, and four blazers with elbow patches—to produce a different outfit every day on a three-week cycle. In the outfit matrix, she'd listed every accessory. Along with rainbow suspenders, glow-in-the-dark socks, and a sequined bow tie among the myriad of excellent accessories she owned, there were pins and buttons, hats, and special belt buckles. She even had a subsection on holiday-themed earrings. It was just a lot easier to get up in the mornings and consult the outfit matrix than to have to make those kinds of hard choices before breakfast.

Today was Monday, but it was no ordinary Monday. Everybody had been looking forward to this class trip for weeks. Today, the entire sixth grade would board a nineteenth-century schooner down at the wharf for a day sail. The outfit matrix designated today a jeans day, specifically, Ethel's favorite pair: L.L. Bean mom jeans, faded blue, with an elastic comfort waistband and cuffs that ended three inches above her ankles. They were made to be slipped on and off with ease. With this, she paired a lavender blouse with flouncy shoulders and a pea-green sweater vest that had a decal of a kangaroo just below the shoulder blade. The *pièces de résistance* of this outfit were the brown orthopedic shoes and green striped socks.

Ethel put on her big black glasses, peering into the full-length mirror that hung on her closet door, and smiled. This was going to be a good day, all because of the jeans and the shoes. With her fingers, she raked through her short, dark hair so that her bangs lay even, like a black comb across her forehead. Last week, after Gram had put a bowl on her

head and given her a haircut by trimming around the underside of the bowl, Ethel had gone back to trim up the bangs even higher. She liked to see a lot of forehead.

Ethel tiptoed into the kitchen, so as not to wake up Gram, who didn't get up till eight. She carefully made her lunch, a tuna fish and red onion on rye, with Swedish fish and a baggie full of green olives with pimentos, the kind Gram used in her martinis. Finally, she rearranged her blankets and sheets and folded Clyde back into the couch. It was work to do this every morning, but it wasn't so bad. In geography, they were studying Eastern European culture, and last week they had learned that Russian families completely removed sheets and blankets from their beds, folded them up, and put them away each day. When it was time for bed, they went through the whole thing again, taking the sheets from the closet, unfolding them, and refitting them on the bed. *What a rigmarole*, she thought. *Rigmarole* was a new vocab word. She planned on working that word into casual conversations at least four times this week.

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Schreck was the first one in the cafeteria. Dona Schrecongost. BFF. Sweet, slightly OCD, she sported curled wings for bangs. Her face lit up when she saw Ethel.

"You psyched?" she asked.

"Yah, I'm psyched," Ethel said, setting down her breakfast tray of eggs, sausage, and pancakes.

"Me too." Schreck pointed to the seasickness bands she wore on both wrists. "I hope I don't barf."

Ethel nodded. She'd seen Schreck barf at a birthday party once—not pretty.

"What time do we leave?" Ethel asked.

Schreck consulted her calculator watch. "In a half hour. Ooh, guess what? I met a gamer boy online this weekend." Schreck bounced in her seat.

Ethel opened up a carton of milk and squinted. "How do you know it was a boy?"

"Because his screen name was Neo12."

Schreck was so gullible. Neo was such an overused screen name. "You're sure it wasn't some forty-five-year-old guy in his underwear, right?"

Schreck looked unsure.

“You didn’t tell him your real name or anything,” Ethel warned. The Seaside Leadership School for Girls had done numerous assemblies on Internet safety, but Ethel thought it was her job to constantly monitor her friends’ online habits.

“Of course I did. I even told him my school name, my social security number and my underwear size” Schreck said. “Duh.”

“Kay.” Ethel said, satisfied and stuck out her ankles for Schreck to see. “What do you think of the shoes?”

Schreck’s eyes widened. She looked back up to Ethel. “Whoa, they’re so *weird*.”

Weird was the highest compliment that could be paid among their friends. Ethel smiled. “Goodwill. Six bucks.”

“Coolies.”

“Whoops, forgot ketchup,” Ethel said, putting down her fork. “One sec,” she said, and got up. She headed toward the condiment counter just as Stephönë Gallagher came through the double doors of the main cafeteria. Ethel’s nose wrinkled, unsure of what to do. Given their trajectories, a crossing of paths at their current velocity would be inevitable.

Stephönë was new to the Seaside Leadership School for Girls this year, transplanted from California. When school first began a couple of weeks ago, Ethel had tried to be friendly (after all, she knew what it felt like to be a new girl from out of state), but she’d barely introduced herself when a particular look had spread across Stephönë’s face. Her lips pulled back as if she’d just seen an insect skitter across the wall. Her eyes raked Ethel top to bottom, and Ethel suddenly became aware of the severe contrasts between them. Ethel was pretty proud of her short and runty vibe in high waters, whereas Stephönë apparently favored the tall and tan California look. Hard to deny. They weren’t going to be besties.

Surely, at a place like Seaside, where so many girls of different backgrounds got along, they could too. However, it was clear from the start that Stephönë just didn’t like her. And then, a few days later, there was the Bathroom Incident. Ethel had walked into the girls’ room and found Stephönë crying on her cell phone in the corner. Ethel had tried to go about her own business. Cell phones weren’t allowed during the school day, and

girls often got around that by retreating to the bathroom. As she stepped around her, Ethel made a big point of not looking at Stephönë. From inside the stall, Ethel could hear everything. It was clear from the one-sided conversation that Stephönë was fighting with her mother.

“I did tell you. I *did*! Oh my God . . . why can’t you just listen to me for a change. Listen!” On that last word, Stephönë’s voice broke and she let out a huge shuddering sigh. She was really crying now.

Ethel knew she couldn’t stay in there forever. When she came out, she’d handed Stephönë toilet paper in case she needed to wipe her eyes.

“What are you giving me your nasty TP for?” Stephönë said, throwing the toilet paper on the floor. The look on her teary face turned to outrage. “Are you spying on me?”

“No.” Ethel stiffened and turned to leave the girls’ bathroom.

Ai chee wa wa, that went well.

That pretty much set the tone of their relationship from the get-go; Stephönë wanted nothing to do with her, and Ethel tried to stay out of her way. As Gram always said, “You can’t make everybody like you, so don’t waste your time trying.” Except now, as Stephönë strode through the cafeteria and Ethel moved closer to the condiment stand, they were about to collide.

Newton’s Laws of Motion

1. An object will continue to move in a straight line unless another force acts upon it.
2. The acceleration of an object is determined by the force acting upon the object.

As they drew uncomfortably close, Ethel stopped to let her pass, thinking that perhaps Stephönë would acknowledge this little courtesy. Instead, Stephönë had mastered the art of pretending not to acknowledge Ethel, while simultaneously uttering an incomprehensible sound.

Behind Stephönë followed Carrie Swan, looking like a dutiful puppy. Carrie walked right by Ethel.

“Hi Carrie,” Ethel said pointedly.

Carrie turned briefly to meet her eyes. But she said nothing as she kept pace behind Stephönë.

What kind of freakin' snub was this? This past summer, she and Carrie had gone to the Kineo Science Camp for girls. They'd been partners on the rock-climbing wall, canoe mates on Lake Day, and lab partners testing the pH and turbidity of the lake water. They'd become good friends! How could Carrie change from a wacky girl who emerged from the lake with a massive tangle of dark green algae "hair" upon her head, cackling like a madwoman, to this? Now, along with her sudden personality transplant, Carrie had changed her appearance dramatically as well. Her normally frizzy auburn hair was now pin-straight in a ponytail, just like Stephönë's. And was that eye shadow and mascara?

At the condiment stand, Ethel pumped ketchup into a little paper cup, thoroughly annoyed. She was getting awfully tired of Stephönë's high and mighty act. For someone who had a long nose and plain face, she had a pretty high opinion of herself. Her only distinguishing assets were her artsy turquoise glasses and her glossy, brown hair that she highlighted once a month and wore in a high ponytail. The only reason she stood out so much against the other girls is that her look was *so* not Maine. Tiny shirts, the skinniest of jeans, paired with big boots and a big bag. In her first week at school, she told everyone she was, and always would be, a California girl. The only reason she'd moved to Maine was because her parents split up and she wasn't going to stay in this state any longer than she had to. She'd acted in one commercial in California and talked about Hollywood constantly, like her only goal in life was to move back and become famous.

And Carrie wanted to be like *that*? Ethel sighed, watching them both disappear into the serving area of the cafeteria to buy breakfast. *Oh well*, Ethel thought, realizing her friendship with Carrie this summer was now a faraway dream. *Goodbye, nice knowing you.*

Ethel stopped to say hi to the other girls in the cafeteria as she walked back to join Schreck. The PC and Mac girls were sitting with the Soccer Chicas. Ayanna and Elise sat across from each other with their iPads open next to their smartphones. Everyone was trying to eat breakie while cross-checking their iPads and sneaking glances at their cell phones in their laps. No one was supposed to have her phone out in the open and on, but everybody did it anyway.

“Hey, Ya Ya,” Ethel said, calling Ayanna by her screen name. Ayanna’s eyes rose briefly, the shyest smile barely emerging. She was Somali, draped in colorful hijab headscarves. As she was new to Seaside and just learning English, she didn’t have much to say in person, but on the chat room, she was much more outgoing.

At Seaside, they all had a special monitored chat room they could use outside of class time on their iPads . . . for schoolwork, sure, but it had turned into more of a social room, and the monitors didn’t hassle them about it unless someone got too snarky online. Then they got a time-out—but that rarely happened.

All of the girls at Seaside had screen names and changed them frequently. Ethel’s current fave was Ethanol; Schreck was Schreckno (because she loved techno); their friend Yuki was Yuki_lurvs_bass, and their other friend, Weezy, was pretty boring—just Weezy.

“You wanna get on the chat with us for a couple minutes?” Elise asked.

“Maybe later,” Ethel said. “I’m having breakie with Schreck.” Ethel snorted at her inadvertent joke. “Breakie with Schreckie.”

“Beast,” Elise said, acknowledging her joke, while simultaneously typing something to Ayanna, who was sitting right next to her.

As Ethel wandered back to the table where Schreck was sitting, someone grabbed her sleeve.

“Dah-link,” Val said in her eye-fluttering, overexaggerated way. Val was a funny little thing with a bob of blond hair and loads of freckles. Sitting next to Val was her best bud, Georgia, who always wore a black turtleneck, her hair in a messy bun. This was the artsy girl table. Val and Georgia were the theater girls, Bayley and Nessa, the dancers.

“What’s yup?” Val said. That was a little joke, as Val had mistakenly typed “What’s yup” instead of “What’s up” on the chat room yesterday and everybody loved it. Now it was a thing.

“Hey, save me a seat on the ship,” Ethel told Val, continuing to walk by.

“Okay, I will,” Val called. “Toodleyoodles.”

Ethel glanced at the cafeteria clock and stopped briefly to talk with the Jens (Jen P. and Jen T.), who officially made up the school’s robotics team, to ask when they were going to the next LEGO competition. Satisfied that she’d made her rounds, Ethel plopped

back down next to Schreck, who was reading an anime comic book and sucking on her plastic spoon like a lollipop.

“We need cooler names on the chat room,” Ethel said, squeezing ketchup onto her rapidly cooling eggs.

“Yeah, I know.” Schreck said.

“Oh! And Gram said I could have a sleepover this weekend, so bring your iPad. There’s this site called Fairy Glen. We can take real classes online on how to do fairy spells. They even give you homework.”

Schreck pulled her spoon out of her mouth. “Really?”

“Yup.”

“I seriously would do more homework just for that,” Schreck said, revealing her upper gums.

“Here come Yuki and Weezy,” Ethel said, scooting over to make room.

Yuki Yamazaki and Louise Sunanda came toward them with trays. These two were always together. They walked to class together, rode the bus together, and had even ended up coming as conjoined twins to last year’s Halloween party. Yuki was Japanese, the only Asian girl in their grade, and Louise was the only East Indian girl. Although physically they were mismatched (Yuki was the taller and heavier of the two with black fringy bangs and plus-size jeans; Louise was thin, with enormous glasses and a little mustache), personality-wise, they were made for each other.

“Yuki and Weezy,” Ethel said. That’s how everyone addressed them, as if they were one. They even had a celebrity mash-up name: Wuki, which was cool because it sounded like that *Star Wars* character.

“Do you guys want to come to my sleepover Saturday night?” Ethel stared at them. “Don’t answer unless it’s yes. And bring your iPads.”

“Maybe. It depends,” Yuki said, sitting down with her tray. She stared at her breakfast grimly. “I haven’t practiced on the stupid piccolo in weeks and my parents told me I can’t do anything unless I catch up by Saturday.” Yuki was in one of her famous Monday moods.

“Aww,” Ethel said. “Well, practice then!”

Weezy pushed at her glasses. “When is your recital?”

“I told you,” Yuki answered. “In three weeks.”

Weezy yelped. “That’s my birthday weekend!”

“*I know*,” Yuki said, irritated.

“Well, you better practice,” Weezy said. “I will be so mad if you can’t come to my party.”

“Un-clench,” Yuki said, her head slowly turning to face her. “I will.”

“You better,” Weezy said grumpily as she began to dig into her eggs.

Yuki and Weezy regularly argued like a married couple, because, in fact, they’d secretly eloped in second grade. Weezy had been promised at birth to marry a boy her parents had chosen, another First Gener, the son of Weezy’s parents’ best friends. Dinesh was a self-absorbed boy way into sports and gaming, and Weezy thought he was totally *narsty*. In protest, she had asked Yuki to marry her. They picked the dress and the date and did the ceremony in Schreck’s backyard under the swing set. Yuki and Weezy had gone to Tippecanoe Camp together for the honeymoon.

Carrie briefly paused by their table with her green plastic tray. On it was a bottle of spring water, an apple and a plastic case of Tic-Tacs.

“Wow,” Carrie commented, looking at Ethel’s tray. “Are you really going to eat all of that?” If this was Carrie’s way of making conversation, it wasn’t exactly friendly.

Ethel looked down at her eggs. “Yeah?” she said.

“It’s called *food*,” Yuki said, her mouth full of toast. “You might want to try it sometime.”

Carrie shook her head. They watched her walk over to the table where Stephönë and a few other girls sat. All of them had Stephönë’s look with the high ponytails and double skinny headbands. The PPs, Schreck called them, Pretty Ponytails.

Ethel stared after her and turned back to her friends. “Okay, like what in the freakin heck was that?”

Weezy shrugged. “Carrie has totally changed since school started.”

“Yeah, well, I just can’t with the whole PP thing,” Yuki glanced over at them.

“Stephönë’s got the personality of a flippin’ warthog. Who’d want to copy that?”

Schreck leaned forward, pointing her plastic spoon. “I heard Stephönë talking in gym about her dad. He’s like this big deal in California and works on reality shows. She

was saying how he's got connections to get her on TV, and over Christmas break, he's going to fly her out there to do some auditions."

Yuki's face became animated, flashing her orange-colored braces. "Are you serious? Holy crap! I'm impressed." She leaned back in her chair, using a plastic fork to pick at her teeth. "Happy Sarcasm Day."

"She thinks Maine is boring," Weezy added. "She said we don't have anything to do around here."

"Negative," Schreck said. "Not true. Nope."

Weezy chomped her toast. "You have to develop interests."

"All right," Ethel said, the voice of reason. "Let's not be that movie where we rag on the popular girl just 'cause she thinks she's *hawt*." Ethel drawled out the word, the way they spelled it on the chat room.

"Hot," Yuki snorted.

Actually, they all prided themselves on being the opposite of hawt. Schreck always wore T-shirts with corny tech expressions like I'VE READ YOUR EMAIL. Yuki, on the other hand, looked as if she were going to a job interview. She favored wide-striped skirts and too-tight oxford shirts with buttons that puckered across her growing chest. And Weezy, well, everything Weezy seemed to own was tan, chocolate, flax, hazelnut, mocha, wheat, or sandstone. In other words, brown.

Ethel didn't want to look over at Stephönë and Carrie, but she couldn't help it. Now they both had their cell phones out and were texting each other, each giggling over what the other said. *Ooh, not allowed!* Ethel watched as Nessa got up from the artsy girls' table and walked over to their table with her phone. A genuine smile lit up Stephönë's face as she asked Nessa to join her. Ethel felt a twinge. Nessa, with her lean dancer's body and Latina beauty, was on Stephönë's good side. Ethel fingered her too-short bangs. Maybe it was Nessa's long, glossy hair to the middle of her back, the "it" accessory. In observing Stephönë, Ethel searched for clues. What made Stephönë so appealing? She did seem to light up when she liked someone, and she did have a razor-sharp sense of humor. On the chat room, Stephönë called herself herpy-durpington and made fun of her own bossiness. She'd started a new trend last week when she'd typed **slow clap** Well said! Now everyone was typing the **slow clap** thing.

Ethel turned back to her friends. Not one of them had anything that resembled the “it” factor, but at least they didn’t all look like clones or act as though they shared one brain. Yuki had music and dance; Schreck, eBay and basketball; Weezy, ballet and Girl Scouts; and Ethel, science projects and a weekend job. She made herself stop thinking about Stephöñě. There was so much to look forward to, starting with today’s field trip. Now that she and her friends were in sixth grade this year, it was going to be like one yearlong, majestic, rockin’ science camp.

Chapter 3

The koolio thing about school, this *particular* school, was that no one sat bored for hours on end, waiting for the clock to tick. The teachers were young, and they made this stuff seem exciting. Miss Tucker, whom all the girls called Mizz T, had once been an Outward Bound instructor.

“Okay, chickies!” Mizz T clapped her hands, trying to organize the groups of girls in the hallway. “I need you all to stop your yammering so I CAN HEAR MYSELF.” Her voice billowed down the hallway. “The buses are waiting outside. Mr. Place, Madam Volon, and I need you to be on your best behavior—because why?”

Several girls called out the answer. “’Cause we’re leaders!”

Mizz T, with her hand to her ear, acknowledged that as correct. “You are all ambassadors of Seaside today, so let’s remember that. Okay,” she said, waving for the girls to follow her. “Move it or lose it, champs, let’s go.” Mizz T never really seemed like a traditional teacher at all—more like a camp counselor, minus the marshmallows.

“I love Mizz T,” Ethel whispered to Schreck as they all began to shuffle out the front doors.

“You say that, like, every day.”

“You know, not *love* love, but love-like,” Ethel said, walking ahead.

“I mean, you don’t see me writing on bathroom walls about how much I love you,” Schreck said as everybody lined up for the bus. “Although, actually I almost did once, but Katey Sanders walked in and I didn’t have time.”

Ethel gazed at her. “I am . . . so glad you didn’t do that. Never do that, Schreck.”

“I’m just saying, the more you shout from the mountaintops how great certain people are, the more you make other people feel like they don’t matter.”

“Oh my God. I’m not like on a mountaintop right now, am I?” Ethel sighed.
“Look at me—I am standing in line with you to get on the bus. When did you take your medication?”

Schreck scowled. “At breakfast.”

**

The bus ride lasted twenty minutes, and soon, everyone shuffled off and the entire sixth-grade class stood at the edge of the wharf, a crowd of twenty-one girls. Before them, an enormous two-masted schooner nearly eighty feet high swayed against the dock. In late September, it still felt like a summer day, although the way the wind whisked small whitecaps across the water, everyone knew it would be cold once they got sailing past the harbor. The girls held their winter jackets in their arms, watching the crew as they began hauling around ropes, readying for the journey. Everyone was talking, impatient to board the schooner, and Mizz T tried to hear herself above the crowd. “Okay, girls—*girls!*” Mizz T said, her hands cupped around her mouth. “I know everyone’s in pandemonium at the moment . . .”

Panda what? Ethel thought.

“ . . . but let’s reel it in.” And here, Mizz T made the motion that she was fly-fishing, cranking the rod and reel. She did that a lot.

“She said something about a panda,” Ethel whispered to Yuki. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, maybe it’s a foible.”

Ever since Yuki had discovered the word *foible*, she’d been sneaking it in at every opportunity, milking that laugh pretty hard, and Ethel thought it was high time a new catchword was introduced. “That’s a lot of rigmarole,” she said, carefully watching Yuki for a reaction, but Yuki either hadn’t heard or pretended not to. Instead, she stood, arms crossed, focused on Mizz T.

“La-deez,” Mizz T said. “Listen up.” As Mizz T began to go over the instructions, Ethel strained to hear. At the edge of the crowd, Stephönë and Carrie were pretending to push each other in some sort of girly tussle to get the attention of the twentysomething

deckhands. When they got the male crew to notice, they dissolved into loud *look-at-me* giggles. It was so annoying. And rude! Forget about being ambassadors of Seaside. Unfortunately Mizz T didn't catch it, for at that moment, she was talking to the captain. As the crew tightened the halyards and expertly wrapped the lines off in a hitch, a couple of them looked over as Stephönë squealed, much to Carrie's barely repressed mirth. Two of the male crew members exchanged smirks.

For some reason, that just made Ethel nuts. Stephönë and Carrie were making everyone at Seaside look like idiots. She left Yuki, Weezy, and Schreck and made her way over to the edge of crowd. Ethel stared directly at Stephönë and Carrie as she put her finger to her lips. "You guys! *Shhhhhhh*," Ethel said sharply. She turned back around.

Several girls in the crowd turned to see whom Ethel had shushed. It was as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown on Stephönë. Her expression chilled as Ethel tried to see what Mr. Place, Mme Volon, and Mizz T were doing, hoping they'd get on the schooner soon. As soon as everyone began to board, Ethel felt a hand yank her shoulder back.

"*Shhhhhhh*," Stephönë imitated Ethel in a bratty tone.

With nothing to say, Ethel let Stephönë move past her and fell back in place next to Yuki. "What's going on?" Yuki asked.

"Nothing," Ethel mumbled.

"Okay, ladeez," Mizz T called, stepping down the gangplank. "You girls over on the side—stop the chitchat. While we're waiting to get our safety talk on the schooner, gather round. Mr. Place has something to tell you."

All the girls liked the unflappable science teacher, Mr. Place. He was wearing his customary gray sweater. He must have had six gray cable-knit cardigan sweaters, which matched his gray hair and gray eyes. Contrasting with the crackling energy of Mizz T's voice, his delivery was dry, subdued. "Let's do a little current events while we're waiting. Who here saw the movie *Titanic*?" he asked.

All of the girls raised their hands. Of course, every girl had seen that movie.

"Remember that opening scene," Mr. Place said, "where the little submarine sees the *Titanic* for the first time and it's all covered in gray gook? Well, that submarine wasn't just movie magic—it was an actual submersible called *Alvin*. It was the first to

take film and pictures of the *Titanic*, and this morning, *Alvin* was on the news for making another discovery . . .”

From the side Stephönë screamed, “Are we going to be in a film?”

Ethel heard the girls laugh. She realized with a pinch of bitterness that this was a supporting kind of laugh, a *with-you* not *at-you* laugh.

“Uh, no . . . ,” Mr. Place said, chuckling. “I’m just talking about the submarine right now.”

Stephönë began to wring her hands. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God . . . are we going to be in the same submarine as Leo?” Carrie and Nessa began to jump up and down and scream. The crew on the schooner stopped what they were doing once again to look over.

Ethel felt a burning sensation, staring at Stephönë. How could someone so shallow be so well liked? Carrie had been the first surprise, but now Ethel didn’t like the looks of Taylor and Nessa banding around Stephönë as well. Thank God Ethel had only one class with Stephönë—French. She would have to endure Carrie in two other classes. On “A” days, they might have phys ed together as well; Ethel made a note to check her schedule when they got back.

Mr. Place scratched at the graying strands on his temple. “No one is going in the submarine, Stephönë. We’re just talking current events here.”

It was torture to see the crew of the schooner smirk a little at Stephönë’s comments. *They must think we’re all stupid!* Her pride got the better of her. Ethel raised her hand. “Mr. Place, how deep can *Alvin* go?” She ignored the din of low murmurs and unmistakable snickers on the side of the crowd that teachers’ ears never seemed to catch.

“Well, technically it can go as deep as 4,500 meters, which is almost 15,000 feet, and that’s a full eight hours under water,” Mr. Place said. “You know, my college roommate, who is now a marine biologist, got a chance to go deep below the sea in *Alvin*.”

“What if you have to go to the bathroom?” Schreck called out.

Mr. Place laughed. “That seems to be the question everyone asks. They try not to eat a big meal the day before, or have a lot of liquids or coffee. And everybody goes to the bathroom beforehand. But, apparently they have special little bottles for both men and

women so if you have to go . . .” He shrugged, somewhat embarrassed to be saying this to a crowd of teen girls. “Well, you just gotta go.”

All the girls in the crowd screwed up their features. “That’s naaaasty . . .,” said Nessa up a few girls ahead.

Schreck looked at Weezy and Yuki and turned to Ethel, mouthing the words. “I would rather die.”

Ethel smiled, glad to be near her friends. She wondered if there was a special pee bottle for men and women in the space shuttle going to Mars. From what she read, there was no extra room on the shuttle for things like a men’s and women’s bathroom. But where was the opening in a space suit if they had to pee? Did they have to take it all off like a giant snowsuit, but keep their giant helmets on? All these questions and more would need to be addressed if she was ever to work for NASA. ’Cause peeing into a bottle was not part of the master plan, thank *you*.

**

The schooner seemed to lumber out of the harbor like a water buffalo, undulating out to sea. Ethel was glad Stephönë had no interest in raising the sails as she and the other girls worked with the crew to raise the mainsail, listening to the captain as he named each part of the sail and rigging. She instantly loved sailing; the feeling was like riding on the back of a giant, slow-moving beast. Out past the harbor, the smooth sails snapped in the wind. Ethel lifted her face to the headwind, breathing fresh, tart air. She could see islands, a small lighthouse in the distance, rocky outcrops, and enormous houses dotting the shoreline. Each house seemed nicer than the next; many of the backyards were adorned with brightly colored Adirondack chairs overlooking the ocean. How wonderful would it be to have a life where you could come home at the end of the day, sit in one of those chairs, and stare out at the ocean?

Most of the girls were looking over the sides of the schooner into the water as it made headway into deeper waters, which turned blackish green even under a bright, sunny sky. Some girls stood around Mizz T as she sipped coffee. Yuki and Weezy crossed the deck to where Schreck and Ethel stood.

“I helped raise the staysail and jib,” Weezy said, out of breath. Her eyes, already magnified behind her thick prescription lenses, appeared enormous when she was excited.

“The technical term is *hoist*,” Yuki said, patting Weezy’s arm. “You did a good job.”

“Who wants to go back to the quarterdeck?” Mizz T announced, her voice muted against the snap of the sails. “The captain is going to show us how a compass and navigational equipment work.”

A screech came from the bow of the schooner: everyone turned to see if something was wrong. Mizz T took a few steps, then flashed an expression of annoyance. Mme Volon and Mr. Place exchanged looks as the crew went back to their tasks. Of course it had to be Stephönë again. Who else had that fingernail-down-a-chalkboard fake scream? Stephönë stood at the very front of the vessel in the small triangle of deck of the bowsprit.

“I’m king of the world!” Stephönë yelled with both arms raised. *Yeah, ’cause no one has ever done that before*, Ethel thought. Yet Taylor, Nessa, and Carrie thought this was hilarious, and each one had to get up after Stephönë and do exactly the same thing. They spent the next few minutes aiming their cell phones and digital cameras to snap pictures of one another. Carrie raised her hands against the wind and started to yell, “I’m king of the . . .” and stopped when she realized they weren’t taking a picture of her. “You guys,” she pouted. “Why aren’t you watching me?”

Taylor held up her phone like she was pointing a weapon. “I am!” Taylor said. “Okay, do it again.”

“Watch me do it,” Stephönë said, trying to step up on the tiny triangle of the bowsprit with Carrie.

“No, you already had your turn,” Carrie said, nudging her away. “Guys, come on! When I hold my hands out, take the picture!” When she was finished, she hopped off the bowsprit deck and tried to take the cell phone out of Taylor’s hand. “Lemme see.”

Stephönë snatched the phone before Carrie could get to it and laughed at the picture on it, lapsing into an inner-city accent. “Girl, you are so not ready for your close-up. Look at your eyes all closed. ”

Nessa and Taylor were a perfect audience for Stephönë, laughing appreciatively. Carrie swallowed back the zinger, laughing a little too. Ethel watched Carrie carefully, remembering how submissive Carrie had been when they'd been canoe partners this past summer. Carrie didn't have the confidence to lead when they paddled; she always wanted Ethel to steer. That's why Carrie didn't dare contradict Stephönë now. *You deserve each other*, Ethel thought, borrowing one of Gram's favorite phrases.

At that moment, Schreck was at Ethel's elbow, tugging at her. "You are *not* gonna believe this," she said breathlessly.

"What?"

Weezy and Yuki skittered up to Ethel, both of them just as agitated.

"What? What?" cried Ethel.

"Just now we were down in the galley—they showed us these cargo holds where the crew sleeps. And we just met Bob, the chef . . ."

Weezy broke in. "I was looking at him and I knew there was something not right. One of his blue eyes didn't move. It just kinda *stayed* there."

Impatient to finish, Schreck said, "It's fake! It's a glass eye!"

Yuki grabbed Ethel's shoulder in a death grip. "You are not going to believe what he just did."

"What?" Ethel wanted to scream.

All three talked over one another, providing a garbled account until Schreck's voice broke through the loudest.

". . . And then he said, 'Watch this,' and he plucked out his glass eye and threw it into this big soup pot on the stove!"

For a second Ethel was appalled, and then, she couldn't help herself and howled with laughter. Schreck grabbed her elbow again. "Come on! We'll show you!"

As the schooner heeled against the wind, the four stumbled across the deck, backs to the stern, trying not to fall on the slick wood. The galley hatch was swamped with girls trying to get a good look down below, and Ethel stood on her toes, bobbing to see over their heads. "Where's his eye?" she hissed.

Without tearing away her gaze, Katey Sanders said, "It was in the soup, but now he's got it back in his face again." Ethel could make out Bob, a big balding man in a

white apron and loose green pants, talking to the girls crowded together below on the galley benches. As he turned, sure enough there it was. Ethel could see the light blue glass eye next to his gleaming real one, a smirk upon his face.

“Okay, girls,” Bob boomed, leaning over to pick up the giant stockpot with two hands. “Who wants lunch?”

The entire galley erupted in a cry of disgust just as the captain came up alongside Ethel, followed by Mizz T and the other teacher chaperones, to peer down into the galley. The captain chuckled. “That’s old Bob’s favorite trick for the kids,” he said. “Don’t worry, though, we’ve got sandwiches.”

“Good . . . to know,” Mizz T said with an uneasy smile. Mme Volon clutched her hand to her throat, horrified, while Mr. Place looked confused. Ethel stared out at the brilliant sprinkling of sunlight on the waves. She couldn’t wait to tell Gram about this trip. She had it all planned out. Gram would ask, *So what happened on your schooner trip today?*

Of course Ethel would mention all of the educational stuff first, like how they’d sailed on one of the last working windjammers in Maine and how the charts, sextant, and compass worked and how to tell main shoreline from a bay or an inlet. But she planned to save the best for last. *Oh, and for lunch? The chef threw his glass eye into the soup!* Not even the chaperones had been prepared for that. Huh-larious!

Chapter 4

At Seaside, an iPad was a girl's best friend, which was funny because only a few short years earlier, all the kids in Maine had gotten laptops, which wasn't *that* exciting. Every girl got her own iPad she could use for schoolwork and Internet research, and to take home. Of course like most schools, they blocked Facebook and Twitter, but then, Seaside started a monitored chat room so girls could do virtual study groups. A girl could be in the science lab, log on to the chat room, and get in a quick convo with her pal in English, just two doors down. To be able to talk with your friends in real time, no matter where you were in the school, was more than just a novelty; it had become a necessity. Chatting each day had become so addictive that if a girl got timed out from the chat room for breaking the rules, it was like cutting off her soul.

In Mizz T's tech class, Ethel, Schreck, Yuki, and Weezy sat beside one another typing merrily away, not speaking. Spread out at various computers sat Val and Elise as well as the Jens, the two Robot Chicks, and some of the Soccer Chicas. Mizz T had not yet come into the classroom. Unlike most of the Seaside teachers, she wasn't that strict about when class started, as there was no bell that sounded between classes. The girls counted on these precious few minutes to furiously type to one another on the chat room.

01:02 PM **Ethanol**: lets have an insta-party

01:02 PM **Schreckno**: yeah!

01:02 PM **Ethanol**: *bass thumping

01:02 PM **Weezy**: PAAAH TAY!

01:02 PM **Ethanol**: *lemonade flowing

01:03 PM **Ethanol**: *dance music cued up

01:03 PM **Ethanol**: lemme hear ya say . . . oooo oooo

01:03 PM **Schreckno**: *dancing like a fool

01:03 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: OH YEAH! lol

01:03 PM **Schreckno**: im sure you couldnt dance worse than me
01:03 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: * bumping my rear out
01:03 PM **Ethanol**: haha Schreckno im not so sure
01:03 PM **Schreckno**: I AM
01:03 PM **Schreckno**: this is how i dance: step to the right, clap, step to the left, clap
01:03 PM **Weezy**: LOL!!!
01:03 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: rolf Schreckno!
01:03 PM **Ethanol**: lol til milk comes out my nose

Ethel looked up to see Carrie slip into the science/computer lab. It was so obvious how Carrie used Mizz T's tendency to linger to her advantage, as this was the third time she'd walked in late. Ever since the schooner day, Ethel had been hypersensitive to anything Carrie or Stephönë did.

"All right, girls," Mizz T said, closing the lab door behind her. "Off the chat. Ethel, what is so funny?" Mizz T wiped a spot on her sweatshirt where her coffee had spilled.

"Nothing, Mizz T, just something Yuki wrote."

Mizz T sighed. "I love how you guys will giggle for hours sitting right next to each other but no one will actually say anything out loud."

Val called out, "But Mizz T, chatting makes us good writers!"

Mizz T leaned against her desk, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. "Hardly. You should see your English papers. *U-r* for *You're*. No capitals, no punctuation. It's still a mystery whether the Internet makes you guys dumber or smarter in the long run." Mizz T was always coming out with things like this.

"In the Industrial Revolution, we created machines to make our lives easier so we weren't working in the fields and factories sixteen hours a day," Mizz T went on. "But let me ask you, with technology making our workload lighter, what do you girls see as a downside? Anything?"

"Um." Schreck tried to position her pencil between her nose and upper lip like a wooden mustache. "I don't see any downsides, 'cause our world is run by the Internet. And we need it to live."

Ethel mused out loud, “Seriously, Mizz T. By the time we use up all of the Earth’s resources, we’re going to need more advanced rocket boosters and bio domes so that we can go to Mars. That’s like technology *we have to have!*”

Jen T. spoke up. “Me and Jen are going to make robot babies for people who can’t have children so they can always have a baby if they want.”

Mizz T smiled. She didn’t even correct Jen T. for using the wrong grammar.

Ooh, thought Ethel. *Why didn’t she smile like that when I said rocket boosters?*

“I think technology is going to kill us all,” Yuki said in her death-rattle voice.

Mizz T cocked her head. “*Really*, Yuki.”

“Yeah. My dad says a nuclear war will probably happen in my lifetime and that we should learn other skills like hunting and fishing and farming instead of just technology so we can barter stuff when the bomb hits and people die and all the computers shut down.”

Mizz T gazed at Yuki. “Remind me to give you a hug when class is over. Okay, we could probably spend all day on this topic, but I have some other stuff to go over today, so . . .” Mizz T got off her desk and turned around to fire up her laptop just as Principal Frederick opened the door slightly and peered in.

“Miss Tucker, sorry to bother you. Do you mind coming outside for a moment? I just need to get you to sign off on a couple of these expenses for the class trip. I have to get the accounting in by four.”

“Sure,” Mizz T said, following him. She turned to the class. “A few minutes, girls. Be right back.”

Yee haw! A few extra minutes. All the girls jumped back onto the chat. In the Seaside chat room, there were six little “lounges” girls could enter, all named after Maine islands. Ethel, Schreck, Yuki, and Weezy dove back into the Ragged Island lounge, which they usually had to themselves. Val entered the Deer Isle lounge to see if her dance/theater girls were there, while the Robot Chicks talked to each other in the Little Hen lounge. Carrie seemed to purposely distance herself from the girls in tech class. With Mizz T out of the room, she pulled out her phone and began texting.

“You guys!” Ethel whispered to Val and the Robot Chicks. “Come over to Ragged!”

“Okay,” Val said. “No one’s in Deer Isle anyway.”

“Is that you, Val?” Schreck said, staring at the screen.

“Yup, I changed my screen name to **broadwaydahling**.”

01:15 PM **broadwaydahling**: hey galz, wut yup

01:15 PM **Legomyego**: we’re here . . .

01:15 PM **R2D2**: *rubs hands* muu ha hah hah hah

01:15 PM **Ethanol**: OMG run Schreckno

01:15 PM **Schreckno**: !!!!

01:15 PM **Ethanol**: HELP!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Evil robots are begining their attack.

01:15 PM **Schreckno**: eeeeeeeek

01:15 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: ethel, hardy har har

01:15 PM **Ethanol**: don’t say my real name! against rules!

01:15 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: oopsie, sorry :0

01:15 PM **Ethanol**: hey monitor—she didn’t mean it okay? Don’t get mad.

01:16 PM **Schreckno**: every one in this room is weard exsept me

01:16 PM **Ethanol**: o really

01:16 PM **Weezy**: hold on u guys! stop typing so fast

01:16 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: you’re wierd cause you can’t spell

01:16 PM **broadwaydahling**: type faster Weezy! type!type!type!

01:16 PM **Schreckno**: LOL

01:16 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: jk

01:16 PM **Weezy**: I cant wahhhhhh . . . *hates stubby fingers*

01:16 PM **Ethanol**: Evil robots have taken over weezys fingers!

01:16 PM **Ethanol**: * in robot voice*: we-are-coming-for-you

01:17 PM **Schreckno**: OMG run

01:17 PM **Weezy**: theyre eating my fingers! ahhhhhhhhh

01:17 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: don’t be an idiot—RUN

01:17 PM **Schreckno**: Ooo. Name calling U r in trubble.

01:17 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: arggh! Sorry monitor. Plz don’t ban me!

After a *clackety-clack* and silence, Weezy looked up, disgruntled. “You called me an idiot,” she said, sitting next to Yuki.

“I didn’t mean to,” Yuki said. “I got carried away by the evil robot monsters.”

“Shh, here comes Mizz T.”

“All right, girls,” Mizz T said, walking back through the door to the computer lab. “We’ve got some work to do.” Everybody looked up from her keyboard. Carrie snapped her phone shut.

“Mizz T,” Yuki said, her hand in the air. “I accidentally called Weezy an idiot on the chat, but I was just kidding.”

“Yes, well, the chat monitors will flag it, but it’ll be okay.” Mizz T said, sitting back down at her desk.

“I know, but can you tell them I didn’t mean it?”

Mizz T didn’t bother to look away from her laptop. “If I had to tell the office every time one of you guys said something you didn’t mean or said something as a joke, I swear, Yuki, I would never have time to teach. Okay, we’ve got forty-five minutes.” She snapped her fingers. “You can do your mindless chatting at home. Today, we’re going to learn some real skills.”

“Uh!” Val protested. “It’s not mindless.”

“How would you like to learn how to design a website instead?” Mizz T asked.

Ethel whipped around in her seat, her face intense. “Yes.”

Schreck screeched, jumping up. “Our own websites?”

Mizz T pressed her finger to her ear. “Dona, you just shattered my eardrum.”

Schreck sat back down, one leg folded under her. “Sorry.” She looked to the ceiling reverently. “Mine’s going to have a big picture of a Triceratops and my favorite bands: ABBA, the Bee Gees, and the super-group Røyksopp, which is like the best Norwegian band ever.”

“Let me clarify,” Mizz T said. She got up from her desk and began writing strange symbols on the blackboard. “You have all your life to be narcissistic and self-absorbed. In college, you’ll find the best place to cultivate that is in a sorority.” She turned, smirking. “Little joke. I never did make it past pledging. But we won’t be creating websites just so you can list your favorite foods and your favorite TV shows,” Mizz T

said, bouncing a piece of chalk in her palm. She turned back to the board and began writing a list. “You will be creating a website for your future career or business. Once you assemble all of your information and pictures, I’m going to teach you how to load them into a website.”

“Not *as* exciting,” Schreck said. “Can I still have Röyksopp on there?”

Ethel’s eyes followed the symbols on the blackboard. She had a pretty good idea what they were.

“Listen up,” Mizz T said, quieting the excited murmurs. “I’m going to teach you how to design a website the real way, not the wussy way. This ain’t no Facebook or MySpace, where all you have to do is plug in the content—no.” On the blackboard, Mizz T pointed to words enclosed by symbols: `hey gals`.

“What’s that?” Carrie asked, the first thing she’d said so far.

“HTML,” Miss T said. “It stands for ‘hypertext markup language.’ This is the name of the language that allows you to make a website on the computer.”

“You wrote that in bold,” Ethel announced.

“Ethel, you already know how to write HTML?”

Writing in bold and italic online was easy. She’d picked that up from the many girls’ websites she’d joined that summer. Ethel swiveled in her chair and gazed at the girls. “I’ve done a little.”

“Good, well, you can help me teach the other girls.”

“Ooh,” Val whispered to Ethel. “Can you teach me how to do my name in royal purple?”

“Yuppers.”

Schreck punched Ethel lightly in the arm. “You are *brilliant*.”

“Pshh . . . Anybody can do it,” Ethel said, her hands behind her head. At last, she had a favored smile from Mizz T.

Chapter 5

How to put together the perfect slumber party menu: frozen cookie dough balls for the appetizer, a giant bowl of peanut M&Ms for the palate cleanser, pigs in a blanket for the side dish, followed by the main course, potato chip crustless finger sandwiches.

Ethel carefully slathered two pieces of white bread with mayonnaise. Now for the crucial decision: the salt-and-vinegar chips? Or the ridged? The ridged would provide a wallop of crunch, but then, the salt and vinegar might taste better—especially if she paired them with some sour pickle slices. Ethel opened the refrigerator to find the pickles. Once, for Gram’s birthday, Ethel had tried to make a chocolate cake, but it had just felt too boring—the measuring, the batter, the baking soda. Soon, the “cake” was nothing more than a syrupy pool of liquid in the clear bowl and had to be scrapped. In desperation, Ethel had scoured the refrigerator. Gram was the kind of person who always said, “I don’t want any fuss over my birthday. *Really*.” But anytime Ethel made any little amount of fuss or preparation, Gram’s eyes lit up. She loved fuss. So, Ethel had finally pulled two pounds of hamburger out of the refrigerator and sautéed it up. She then went to work fashioning an elaborate three-tiered meat cake, frosting it with mashed potatoes and garnishing it with salami rosettes and candles. Gram just about died when she saw it. She thought it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen.

Ethel pressed both palms down on the potato chip sandwich, listening for the satisfying crunch as her thoughts spun around about the website she wanted to make for tech class. *Future Self, Future Self, who will you be? You will rock the world when you get your PhD*. She tried to imagine what she would look like at twenty-five years old. Would she still be rocking her sassy look? Ethel imagined herself with the same bowl haircut and a pair of black-framed glasses, sitting next to a hot pink psychiatrist’s couch. Her future office would be funky like that: a floor-to-ceiling glass office with a hot pink couch and all of her diplomas framed side by side.

By the time Ethel got her PhD, she reckoned, she’d be twenty-four or twenty-five. She planned to have her own apartment by then—her own room! *Sorry, Clyde*, she

thought, glancing at the old green pullout couch. In about a dozen years, NASA would be ready to send astronauts to Mars. Having the right people traveling together on the mission was mega-important. God knows if she were forced to take another class trip with Stephōnē, she'd go crazy, so imagine six months of riding in the same shuttle with someone you couldn't stand. From what she had read, a NASA psychologist worked with astronauts, helping them in simulators and training them in shuttle mock-ups. It would be her mission to make them comfortable, researching the types of games they could play, even creating special comfort foods for the journey, like potato chip sandwiches. Even the colors on the shuttle walls and the type of music they had would make a difference. She pictured that by 2020, she'd be able to talk to them every day on a special uplink as she paced her glass office with a headset. Folding her hands into a steeple, she thought, *"Mmm hmm. So, Astronaut Smithers, tell me about your childhood."*

In Gram's room, she heard a pitiful groan.

"I'm coming, Gram," Ethel called. She put together a tray of potato chip sandwiches, pigs in a blanket, and a glass of tomato juice and brought it into Gram's darkened bedroom.

"Here ya go!" Ethel said. She glanced at the painting of a clown in the rain over Gram's elaborate sleigh bed.

"Mumph," Gram said into her pillow. One hand lifted limply and dropped back to the bed.

"This will make you feel better." Ethel set the tray on her nightstand.

"The only thing that would make me feel better is if you threw a plugged-in toaster into my bath."

Ethel clucked and tried to comfort her. "I can make you a bath, if you want."

"That's okay." Gram turned her head to the other side. Her face was pale, her blond updo all spilled out across her pillow, bobby pins still sticking out in odd places, like old cobwebs with flies caught in them. Last night had been girls' night at Applebee's.

Ethel sat down on the side of the bed. "When are your friends coming?" Gram mumbled.

“Um,” Ethel said, squinting at her watch in the dim light. “In about twenty minutes.”

“You’re all set. You don’t need me?”

“I’m good. We’ll be quiet.” Ethel put her hand on Gram’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch,” Gram groaned. “Don’t even speak. I can’t take any words right now. Oh, why must I always trip the light fantastic?” She pulled the covers over her head. “Don’t stay up too late.”

**

Schreck’s dad dropped her off first; Yuki and Weezy arrived together five minutes later. Each girl carried a sleeping bag and overnight bag under one arm and an iPad in a neoprene zip case under the other, except for Weezy, who needed both hands. Hers was a gigantic, awkward Compaq laptop made in the late 1990s.

“Ugh,” she said, dragging it behind her in a rolling black suitcase. “I hate this thing.” Weezy’s parents never let her take her iPad anywhere but home or school. Ethel felt sympathetic and took Weezy’s overnight bag for her. Weezy’s laptop *was* kind of embarrassing.

“Where’s Gram?” Yuki asked.

“Oh, she’s, um, resting in her room.”

Everything was set. Clyde was in his upright sofa position to make room on the floor. Trays of fun food lined the kitchen counter. “Ooh,” Schreck said, picking up a potato chip crustless finger sandwich and crunching down on it. “Snacktacular.”

Ethel, Schreck, and Yuki arranged their iPads on the living room rug, wiping the screens to open to a browser. Weezy opened her laptop, which made an awful cracking sound.

“Wow,” Ethel said as Weezy’s laptop turned on with a series of chattering clicks and a weird whirring hum.

Weezy’s mouth bent and she sighed. “Yeah. I know.”

Ethel clapped. “Okay, people, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve asked you to be here today.” Then she snorted. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“Har har,” Schreck said, reaching for a pig in a blanket.

“Okay, for real,” Yuki echoed, getting comfortable in a cross-legged position on the floor. “Where do you guys want to go first?”

“There’s this new place called Fairy Glen I want to check out,” Ethel said, and gave them the URL so they could type it into their browser windows.

“Wait for Weezy,” Yuki said. Weezy rolled her eyes, looking at her blank, humming screen. “No, go on . . .” she sighed.

Fairy Glen was a swirling grayish-purplish website. Tiny-waisted fairies, giant nightshade houses, and dragonfly coaches awaited users once they registered. Ethel patiently waited, since she’d already registered on the site days before, but Weezy couldn’t get in, and Schreck kept getting denied her choice of nickname. In moments, everyone was frustrated. “Argh,” Schreck said. “Yuki, how come you’re already in?”

Yuki shrugged. “I registered under the name Kirei. It’s Japanese for ‘pretty’ and nobody has it.”

Ethel looked over Schreck’s shoulder and peered at her screen. “Well, duh,” she said. “No wonder you can’t use that username. How many Gamergirls do you think there are in the world?”

“Guys,” Weezy said, hunching in a small cross-legged position with her chin resting on her hands and her elbows balancing on her knees. “Let’s just go to Paperdollz.” She and Yuki shared a secretive grin.

“Yeah,” said Yuki, typing in the URL. She stopped abruptly, looking up at Ethel. “Will Gram care if we go on here?”

“Naw.” Ethel typed www.paperdollz.com. “She doesn’t know anything about this site. My only rule is I can’t chat anywhere but on the school’s chat room.”

“Me too,” Schreck said.

“Oh, you’re lucky,” Weezy said. “I’m only allowed on like three sites at home, and one of them is for help with phonics. Bleah.”

“Weez and I found this at my house the other day,” Yuki said, and rubbed her hands. “Muu ha ha ha ha. You’re gonna love it.”

Disco music cued up as all four screens turned pink with white outlines of butterflies and stars. A female avatar faded in, a thin, blond teen with pink punk stripes in

her hair. Her cropped hoodie top revealed a belly ring, and she had on a snug pair of flare jeans. Ethel wasn't impressed; she'd seen other bratty dolls sites like this before. Like the others, this Paperdollz avatar had the blond hair and black, arched eyebrows and looked kind of mean and trashy. Ethel didn't feel naturally drawn to avatars that looked as though they might gang up on her in a dark alley and kick her butt. For the sake of being a good sleepover hostess, however, she went along with it.

On the Paperdollz site there was so much to look at that it was hard to know where to start. They could go to the four-story glass mall with its grand front doors and red carpet, or they could click on hundreds of Paperdollz that other girls had made on the site and get ideas for what to wear. Or they could start by making mini computerized versions of themselves.

"Oh! Oh!" Ethel had never seen Weezy so maniacal as she banged the mouse in frustration to make her own avatar, a "Me Doll." She chose the shape of her face, an Indian skin tone, long hair, and big boobs (which was kind of funny for someone who was flat as a board).

"Oh my God!" Weezy said, suddenly high-strung. "What should I wear?"

"A sari," Schreck said.

"Puhh!" Weezy stuck out her tongue. "No way."

"I'm doing that purply glitter top and knee boots," said Yuki, who'd already made her avatar. Ethel noticed Yuki's "Me Doll" was Asian with super-long hair, and very thin. Schreck had also picked a thin body, but with a blue Mohawk.

"You have a tattoo?" Ethel asked, gawping at Schreck's avatar.

"Yeah, don't be such a derp," Schreck said, typing. "Let me guess: yours is gonna look exactly the way you look now." She glanced over at Ethel's iPad and nodded.

"Yup."

Ethel stared at her screen. What was wrong with that? She'd given her avatar a bowl cut and glasses with a pair of madras shorts and duck boots. Ethel scowled. "This is just pretend—don't take it so seriously."

"Exactly," Yuki said. "It's just pretend, so that's why I'm gonna be sitting on a motorcycle." A press of a button put Yuki's avatar expertly across a black BMW bike.

"Ooh!" Weezy said, dejected. "What if I wanted a motorcycle?"

“There are two million combinations you can use to create, Weez. Here, you can play guitar,” Yuki said, leaning over and pressing a key on Weezy’s laptop. Instantly, Weezy’s avatar stood in a rock-and-roll pose with a vintage Stratocaster.

For the next fifteen minutes, they tried on virtual clothes and props, discarding them almost instantly to try on more. Once they were suited up, each clicked on the ghostly glass outline of the “mall.” The screen swirled and changed, opening to the Paperdollz mall with four stories of 100 virtual stores they could browse. The sound coming from their iPads changed into tinkling orchestral music. In the center of the mall, a three-story fountain gushed, complete with the whooshing sounds on their speakers. Weezy’s pathetic Compaq had no sound, but between the three iPads, the sound came through in stereo.

“Aiiieeee,” Weezy said, her hand clutching her heart. “I can’t take it. We’re gonna have to stay up all night.”

That comment made everyone giggle. “Hey,” Ethel said, clicking on an item that she wanted to try on. It wouldn’t immediately transfer onto the shoulders of her avatar. “Why isn’t it working?”

Schreck peered over. “Oh. You have to spend Paperdollarz on that. It’s like five bucks for fifty Paperdollarz.”

“You have to pay real money for this?” Annoyed, Ethel sat back. “That is so stupid.”

Schreck got her dad’s credit card out of her wallet. “I’m gonna buy some.”

“Schreck,” Ethel said. “I wouldn’t. Seriously.” Last month, Schreck’s dad hit the roof when he found out she bought \$150 worth of apps for her phone. The card was only supposed to be for emergencies.

“I’m just gonna buy five dollars’ worth. He won’t notice.”

“Schreck,” Weezy said, her eyes wide. “You’re gonna get in trouble.”

Schreck dismissed them as she pulled up the screen to punch in her credit card number. “Whatever. My dad doesn’t care. He doesn’t even look at his bills; he just pays them, so *five dollars* is not going to get me in trouble.” She held up a hand to indicate that this was the end of it. “Do not worry your pretty heads.”

Weezy got up from her laptop and sat on Clyde, her arms around herself.

“Weez?” Ethel said.

She hugged her knees, staring. “I can’t take it. I don’t know whether to make an album with my celebrity doll crushes or do a multimedia catwalk or create a club or shop in a hundred virtual stores. I’m going to start crying.”

Yuki fell over laughing, as did Schreck, and Ethel tried to stifle giggles as she got up to put an arm around Weezy. “Do you want me to call the doctor?”

“Call the morgue,” Schreck said. “Make sure she’s got some nice clothes for the coffin. Ooh, Weez. Can I dress you for your funeral?”

That prompted Weezy to jump off Clyde and smack Schreck’s fingers away. “No, you evil woman. You stay away from my lifeless body.”

Ethel sat back down and popped a pig in a blanket into her mouth as she perused the clubs on the Paperdollz site. There were more than seven million users worldwide—that’s what it said on the counter in the upper left-hand corner. In a sidebar on the home page, the largest clubs were displayed, listing Fashionista, Diva Darlings, and CelebDreamz as the three with the highest number of worldwide members. Ethel scrolled down the page. It was evident there were hundreds of thousands of clubs on here, all reflecting the individual styles and personalities of the girls who created the avatars. A light orange sidebar displayed all the clubs that had been created in the last twenty-four hours. She spied one called Broadway Dahlings. That was Val’s screen name!

“Hey, you guys,” Ethel said. “It’s Val and Georgia. They created a club on here. Look at their avatars!” One click opened the Broadway Dahlings club page. Sure enough, the avatars were digital renditions of Val and Georgia. One was short with a blond bob, a feather boa, and a tiara, and titled Drama Dahling underneath, obviously Val. The other avatar was most certainly Georgia, for she was wearing a black outfit, and her hair was in a messy bun. Her avatar’s name was MethodGirl. Ethel glanced at the club creation date. They had created their club only yesterday, and already, more than a thousand girls around the world had added their avatars to the Broadway Dahlings. Wow! They were popular!

Each club came with its own “journal” and “guestbook.” Ethel clicked on the journal and read Val’s words:

Hey girlies, wat yep yall? We jest wanted to create a fab club of drama dahlings like ourselves . . . haha. If you LOVED Hairspray and HSM I and II, please tell us your thoughts in Guestbook so we can all be drama dahlings together . . . tooodeleyoodles.

“Unbelievably cool,” Ethel said. She looked at her watch. It was almost 10:00 p.m. They had some work to do. “Okay,” she said, clapping several times. “The time has come.”

Schreck yanked her fingers away from the keyboard. She sat ramrod straight, her face pale. “Ouija board? I can’t. I get nightmares. Okay, just this one time.”

“No.” Ethel waved her away. “We need a club name. Something we can have on Paperdollz and at Seaside. Everybody’s got one—the Robot Chicks, the Broadway Dahlings. We’ve got to have one.”

“Hmm,” Yuki said, chewing on the ends of her hair.

“Girls Rule?” Schreck said. The others booed.

“Next,” Ethel said.

“Seaside Sistas?” Yuki said. There was a little more interest with that name, but they kept going.

“GamerGirls3000?” Schreck offered. “Like *Mystery Science Theater 3000*?” Again that one got booed and she scowled. “Fine!”

“The Pretty PaperDollz?” Weezy ventured and shook her head. “No, that stinks. That sounds like the PPs.” The Pretty Ponytails, their nickname for Stephöne’s group.

After a while, the suggestions dried up. Everyone looked to Ethel.

“LOL Patrol,” Ethel said. “I can make us up some business cards by tomorrow.”

“Uh . . .,” Yuki said. “It’s a little dorky.”

Ethel squinted at her. “Um . . .,” she said, waving a hand to include the four of them. “Look at us?”

“I like it,” Weezy said, wiggling happily. “It’s cute.”

Schreck was staring open-mouthed at the ceiling. She seemed to come back down to Earth. “Yeah. Gamer girls call themselves ‘clans’ so it’s not that dorky.”

Yuki shrugged, more interested in trying on virtual clothes. “All right.”

Ethel reached into her backpack and took out a piece of notebook paper. She tore the paper into four pieces. For each girl, Ethel wrote “LOL PATROL,” followed by her individual title. She thought for a moment, making up titles. Then, she handed Schreck hers:

LOL PATROL
DONA SCHRECONGOST
LIEUTENANT LAN

“Cool!” Schreck said.

“Okay, this is just an idea. You can always change it,” said Ethel, handing Yuki hers.

LOL PATROL
YUKI YAMAZAKI
CAPTAIN COOLIO

Yuki grinned.

“ME next!” Weezy said. Hers read

LOL PATROL
LOUISE SUNANDA
SERGEANT SLICK

“What’s yours going to be?” said Schreck, and read Ethel’s paper.

LOL PATROL
ETHEL F. EFFELBY
GENERAL GENIUS

“It’s a joke,” said Ethel. “Like I’m making fun of myself.”

“Hold your nose,” said Yuki, repelled by something she saw on her iPad screen.

“What? What? What?” Weezy gasped, and they all crowded around Yuki. Each club had the ability to add “friends” to its list, and the Broadway Dahlings club had the FameDancers club listed as their official friends.

“Look,” said Yuki. “FameDancers are Nessa, Bayley, and a couple of other girls I don’t know.”

“God,” said Schreck. “Are we the last ones at Seaside to create a club on here?”

“Hold on, this is what I have to show you,” said Yuki. “Look, now, if you click on FameDancers to see who their friends are, see?” Yuki clicked on the Cherrybomb Girlz. Yuki sat back. “Just take a wild guess who they are.”

The Cherrybomb Girlz avatars were dressed up in what Ethel thought were the tackiest getups she’d ever seen. Worse than the Paperdollz avatar with her belly ring, these virtual girls had on sparkly bras and thigh-high boots, barely-there minis, and three-inch leather heels. All of them had that bratty, sneering look with impossible waists and bulging chests. Each avatar boasted how many Paperdollarz had been spent on these outfits. The one in the middle had a dark brown ponytail and blue framed glasses. Her avatar was named Supafly Cherry and the number on her sidebar indicated that she’d already spent sixty dollars on this outfit.

“Stephöne,” Yuki said.

“Eh. Ma. Gawd,” Schreck said, clicking on Supafly Cherry’s journal entry.

Yo wat up, im the supast of the supafly and u need to bow to my authority. JK!

Come join our Club if you want to be seen in the best places on Paperdollz—my crew will get you VIP access, and MTV realities and Mall dreamz. Peace out.

“I seriously need a barf pail; I’m gonna york,” said Ethel.

“No kidding,” Schreck said, disgusted. “Look. Nessa’s in this club too. She has got to be Diva Cherry—look at the way her avatar is dressed with that pageboy cap. She wore that Thursday. Same color too.”

“And that’s got to be Carrie,” Ethel said, looking at the avatar with long auburn hair called Sassy Cherry.

“And Taylor,” whispered Weezy, pointing to the tall blond avatar with the bullwhip on her hip. “I didn’t even know she was part of their group.”

“Oh yeah,” said Yuki, trying to eat peanut M&Ms carefully so they didn’t stick to her braces. “Ever since the schooner trip, they’ve all been stuck up each other’s butts.”

“That can get crowded,” Schreck snorted.

“I think we should all wear camo,” Ethel sniffed, more interested in dressing her avatar. “The LOL Patrol needs to look like we’re a unit. Ooh—what about space uniforms?” Ethel crouched over her keyboard, searching for space helmets in her “closet.”

“Pshhh,” Yuki said. “I’m not wearing camo. I’m wearing this purple top and sitting on a motorcycle.”

“But why?” Ethel said. “We have to look like we’re all together!”

“No, we don’t.” Yuki got up and stretched. She pulled her dark hair out of her messy bun. “We can look like whatever we want. It’s not like we all dress alike in real life. Hey, Ethel, I’m gonna pull out Clyde if you don’t care. I’m tired.”

“Yeah, sure,” Ethel said as Weezy and Yuki began to take the couch cushions off Clyde. “I’ll help you in a sec. I’m still going to try to find a uniform,” she said, intent on searching the vast number of options in her Paperdollz closet. “Hmm,” she said, chewing on her thumb. “I never did find out how they go to the bathroom in those uniforms.”

At midnight, the girls had finally tired of the Paperdollz, except for Ethel, who would not be able to get to sleep until their first LOL Patrol journal entry had been finalized. As Weezy and Schreck brushed their teeth, Ethel thought about how she wanted to present the LOL Patrol to the world. It wouldn’t do to be overly serious, or sound superior, or try to be too-cool-for-school. She rather liked Val’s tone and wanted to emulate it. After getting input from all the girls, Ethel typed

Hey every1, we are the LOL Patrol and we’re here to have FUN and be FRIENDS with everybody. Um, er, okay, here’s a list of the things we luuuurrv:

1. animals
2. friends
3. chocolate chip cookies
4. dancing/expressing ourselves
5. the beach
6. the cosmos and its mystery
7. existence (is that how u spell it?)
8. in between morning and night and evening and night
9. individuality
10. family

aren’t we special? I mean special in a good way? LYLAS to the moon!

A little past midnight, Gram shuffled out of her bedroom in her pink, fuzzy robe, her slippers slapping the hardwood floor. She stared at the sleeping bags, which had all been abandoned on the floor, and then at the four girls, who were crammed all together on Ethel's bed: Ethel lay in the middle between Weezy and Yuki. Schreck curled up at their feet.

Gram said nothing at first, and got a glass out of the cupboard. She turned on the tap. Then she turned back to the girls and took a sip of water.

"Dona," Gram said wearily. "You have about four inches to sleep on, dear. You sure you wouldn't be more comfortable on the floor?"

Ethel couldn't help but giggle. That got Yuki and Weezy giggling too.

"I'm okay," Schreck said, curled up. "I'm their dog. *Woof!*" This caused the bed to shake with laughter.

"We all want to be on Clyde, Gram," Ethel said. "No one wants to be on the floor."

Gram shook her head. "Good night," she said, shuffling back to her room with the glass.

"Night, Gram!" they all called out. After the lights had been turned out, Ethel lay there happily. No one spoke. She couldn't move, shoulder to shoulder with Yuki and Weezy, the blankets up to her chin. Snuggled up next to her friends with Schreck curled up at her feet—this was all she ever wanted or needed. In moments, her eyes closed and she was asleep.

Chapter 6

At lunch on Monday, Ethel was deep in concentration. She had a fractions quiz next period and tried to focus on her notes in her math notebook while getting her mouth around a cold, ketchup-slathered meat-loaf sandwich. A clump of meat loaf hit her notebook and she picked it up, smearing ketchup on the page.

At their lunch table, Schreck happily nattered away to Yuki and Weezy about the gaming site Second Life. Ethel tuned her out until Schreck casually threw out, “Oh, by the way, Ethel, I asked my mom, and she says astronauts wear special space diapers.”

Ethel looked up with her mouth full. “WHAT?”

Yuki began laughing. Milk came out of her nose as she tried to find a napkin. Weezy giggled alongside her. “I wish you could’ve seen your face when she said *space diapers* . . .”

Ethel shook her head, trying to comprehend this. “You are telling me,” she said once she could swallow, “that when they go up in shuttles, they have to wear diapers?”

Schreck nodded, sipping orange juice through a straw.

“This is worse than the pee bottle on *Alvin*!” Ethel said. “How do you tell an astronaut when he comes in for psychological testing, ‘Um . . . sir, I hate to break this to you, I know you’re a grown man, but I need to fit you for a pair of space diapers . . .’”

Everybody started laughing.

“I think they already know that when they apply for the job,” Schreck added.

“Oh my God,” Ethel said. She didn’t know if she could finish lunch.

Weezy slurped noodles from a cup of soup. Suddenly, her brows constricted. “Who do you think changes them?”

“Huh?” Ethel said.

“You know, changes the diapers.”

There was a silence before they all started laughing again. “Uh, I think they change themselves, Weezy,” Schreck said, covering her mouth. “I don’t think there’s like a giant fold-down changing table in the shuttle.”

“Oh,” Weezy said, smiling sheepishly. “Right.”

“Oh *yay*,” Yuki said dispassionately, watching the cafeteria doors. “Here comes the Cherrybomb Girlz.”

Everyone turned their attention to Stephönë, who entered the cafeteria in a cropped jean jacket and tight white pants. Striding behind her, Nessa passed by the dancer/theater table without so much as a “hi” to her best friend, Bayley. Ethel noticed Bayley frowning as her eyes followed Nessa. Were Nessa and Bayley no longer friends? Beside Nessa, Taylor had become almost unrecognizable. Taylor used to be a basketball jock, her wavy blond hair always loose under a ball cap. Now it was styled into a high glossy ponytail. She and Nessa each had on tiny undershirt tops and low-rise jeans, which were almost ridiculous on Taylor, as she had such a meaty frame. It was as if they were trying to resemble their avatars. And the way they all walked into the cafeteria wearing the same haughty expression, how annoying was that?

Stephönë headed right for their table, and Schreck stopped chattering away. Ethel felt tight inside. *Great. What now?*

Ethel looked up to see Stephönë smirking at her. Taylor and Nessa hung back, watching with their arms crossed. At first, Stephönë said nothing, prolonging the silence as she scrutinized Schreck, Yuki, and Weezy. Finally, she turned her full gaze back to Ethel.

“LOL Patrol,” Stephönë smiled. “I couldn’t have picked a more perfect name.” Nessa and Taylor, as befitted their new roles, were obligated to titter behind their hands. As they did, Ethel noticed they were all wearing cute little bracelets with dangling cherries. All three began to walk away. Over her shoulder Stephönë called, “Check out the comments we left on your guestbook!”

“I despise and loathe her,” Schreck said, using this week’s vocab words.

“Me too.” Weezy frowned.

“What the *heck* is her problem?” Ethel stabbed her fork into her meat loaf. “She’s not happy running the school? Now she’s got to rule the virtual world?”

Yuki placed several corn chips in her bologna sandwich. “Who cares? We can delete their comments.”

Ethel turned reluctantly back to her math notebook, but now it was impossible to study. Yuki treated Stephönë and her new followers as no big deal, so why couldn’t Ethel do the same? She wondered why it bothered her so much. It wasn’t as though the PPs, now the Cherrybomb Girlz, were intrinsically interesting. They copied one another the way ducks stumbled all over each other, vying for the same crumb. For months now, they came to school, wearing tiny tees and camis even now, late into the fall. And now they carried themselves as though they were the self-appointed queens of the school. Just because they were now popular on Paperdollz? It was infuriating!

“Oh man, looks like the PPs got to Amanda too,” Schreck muttered. The girls looked on as Amanda (another girl willing to shell out \$100 every month to highlight her lank hair and throw it into a ponytail) sat down at Stephönë’s table. Ethel tried to find a point of reference for Amanda, but could come up with none. She was one of those too-quiet girls whose personality was a mystery. Ethel didn’t even remember Amanda’s last name.

Stephönë pulled tortilla chips out of a bag in the middle of the table and poured salsa on individual paper plates. The other girls followed Stephönë’s every move, using a tortilla chip to cut the salsa in four neat rows.

“What are they doing?” Weezy frowned.

“I’m surprised they are even eating,” Yuki said, her mouth full of cookies.

At that moment, they saw Carrie come barreling through the cafeteria in a tiny T-shirt with a big red cherry on it and skinny red jeans. The expression on Carrie’s face was thunderous. Her cheeks had gone splotchy, and her mouth formed the tiniest pucker humanly possible.

“Stephönë!” she screamed across the cafeteria. Normal lunchtime murmuring ceased. “You stupid, ugly . . .” and here she said the word that *no one* ever said, God forbid, in public—maybe in the chat room under a fake name, but certainly *not* in front of teachers.

Dozens of mouths stopped chewing and talking. Stephönë's face remained placid with just a hint of a cool smile. But Carrie was still on a tirade and plowed right up to their table.

"You don't get to decide if I'm out," Carrie said, smacking the lunch table. "I came up with the Cherrybomb name!"

Stephönë's razored bangs covered one side of her turquoise glasses. "Sorry, but the club has rules now."

"Yeah—bull!" Carrie screeched.

"Carrie, seriously, it's kind of pathetic," Stephönë said, picking up a tortilla chip. "You buy us cheap stuff every week—for what? To make us closer to you? I'm over it."

Taylor, Nessa, and Amanda snuck glances at Carrie, but this was clearly Stephönë's spotlight. She was as cool as if she'd done this show eighty-five times on Broadway.

"I don't have to buy you or any of my friends. I just bought these bracelets to make people happy!" Carrie rattled her cherry charm bracelet in Stephönë's face. She was so upset, she didn't even notice Mr. Honig, the math teacher come up.

"*Carrie*," he said, clearly ticked off. "That was completely inappropriate language. Let's go take a walk," he said, trying to take her away by the arm.

"No!" Carrie yelled, yanking her arm out of Mr. Honig's grasp. She disintegrated into loud, ugly wails. Ethel had never heard the cafeteria so eerily silent. The sobs coming out of Carrie seemed to reverberate off the cavernous walls, amplifying to such a degree that Ethel almost began to feel sorry for her. What could Stephönë have done that would cause Carrie to flip out like this in front of the entire cafeteria? Stephönë just looked at her friends and turned back to her neat rows of salsa with that steely smile. Ethel had never seen anything like this. It took the two cafeteria ladies in their light blue smocks to come up to Carrie and speak to her gently for a few moments before she could be coaxed out of the cafeteria with Mr. Honig close behind.

"Wow," Ethel said. "That was crazy town."

Weezy's eyes widened and she nodded. Weezy never did say much during confrontations, preferring to be invisible.

“Looks like Carrie is no longer a Cherrybomb Girl,” Schreck mused. “Why would Stephönë get all mad because Carrie bought everybody those dumb bracelets?”

“Psshh,” Yuki said. “Don’t get sucked into it. They probably got into a virtual fight at the Paperdollz Mall.”

“Yeah,” Ethel smiled, warming up to this idea. “Stephönë probably wanted some trashy leather mini for like a hundred Paperdollarz and Carrie ended up buying it first and then their avatars got into a catfight on the bottom floor of the mall and ended up knocking each other into the virtual fountain, ruining all of their clothes.” She took another huge, honking bite of meat-loaf sandwich.

“Ha!” Weezy laughed, emerging from her invisible zone.

“You got the dramz? Go cry to my moms,” Yuki said. Everybody snickered.

“Didthu juth mek that up?” Ethel said, her mouth crammed with meat loaf.

“I love it!” Schreck said. “We gotta use that in the chat room!”

“Aww,” Ethel said. Once again, Yuki had scooped the catchphrase.

**

Fifth period was a free period, and Ethel headed straight to the library. How could anyone NOT love a library? There were books on King Arthur’s court and fairies, travel books to Uzbekistan, and encyclopedias full of the weirdest stuff in the world. She liked to go through the aisles and just randomly open up a book. Each time, she would learn something new, like for example, how Sir Isaac Newton’s dog, Diamond, knocked over a candle and accidentally burned up Newton’s important manuscripts. How cool was that? The genius who discovered the laws of gravity and motion could actually blame his own dog for ruining his homework! Every time she was in the library, it was as if the books themselves were barkers on the street, calling her as she passed down each aisle.

Psst, little girl, how wouldja like to check out the far side of the moon? Or Hey, sunshine, did you ever want to know what a Komodo dragon looks like? C’mere!

Ethel spied Carrie all alone at a study table with a book in front of her while Amanda and Taylor pointed daggers at her from a corner of the library. Ethel was relieved to not find Stephönë anywhere near them. Carrie rested her elbow on the table,

propping up her head. She was crying, trying not to make noise, her auburn hair a curtain to hide her face.

That scene in the cafeteria had been pretty brutal. Ethel had spent enough time with Carrie this past summer to know she had a pretty shaky self-image. On one of their canoe trips to collect lake samples, Carrie admitted that her parents dumped her off at camps every summer so they could go on vacation by themselves. Carrie hadn't even wanted to go to the Kineo Science Camp for Girls, but her parents were leaving for Europe the next day. "Just hang with me," Ethel had said as they paddled. "We'll have a good time." The grateful look on Carrie's face had said it all. Soon after, Carrie and Ethel had become best buds, tearing around the camp, singing together at the talent show, and belaying each other on the rope-climbing tower. By the end of three weeks, Carrie told Ethel it had been the most fun she'd ever had at camp.

Ethel felt a twinge, watching her. Was the old Carrie somewhere still in there behind that ironed hair? Carrie had wanted friendship so badly, she'd jumped into the wrong crowd. Now she was feeling the pain of her mistakes. Ethel stood right at Carrie's shoulder. When Carrie sensed her presence, she looked up. Her eyes were red, and her straight hair had started to stick to her blotchy face.

"What?" Carrie muttered, casting her eyes back down.

Ethel stood, looking down at her. "I think what they did to you really stinks."

Carrie looked up again.

"And um, I just came over to say that if you need someone to sit next to in class, I'll save you a seat."

A muffled giggle distracted them both; they looked up to see Amanda and Taylor on the other side of the library staring at them. Ethel prickled. Why did girls laughing all hushed up and secretive like that sound like the most diabolical noise in the world?

Carrie's face, lately so tanned and blushed, seemed hollow, drained of color. Ethel could see how mean the other girls were being. It was so stupid, really, since they had already kicked Carrie out of their little group. Ethel stared down Taylor, who only a few weeks ago had been a friendly acquaintance. And she'd never before had an issue with Amanda. Sure, there were times when girls called Ethel a nerd or said, "Nice high waters," but she always countered with a breezy "Thanks!" because that was her shtick.

But Carrie didn't have a shtick; in fact, she looked like a cornered, angry little animal. They had really gotten to her.

"Forget them," Ethel said. "You don't want to be a Cherrybomb Girl. I mean, you'd have to do everything Stephōnē told you to do . . . and she's a moron. She's worse than moronic, she's . . . vapid and obtuse!" Ethel said, whipping out some choice vocab words. She stood beside Carrie for a few more seconds until she realized this was going to be a one-way conversation. "Okay, uh . . . anyway, I gotta go. Maybe I'll see you later."

Carrie nodded, tucking her hair behind her ear. At least she was no longer crying.

As Ethel made her way through the corridor to her next class, she bit her bottom lip, thinking about how that conversation with Carrie had not gone exactly the way she wanted. Whenever she got the frosty shoulder from people, she stumbled over her words, filling the silence with things she didn't even know what she was saying. *Vapid and obtuse! Gahhh!*

**

The door was closed to their Growth & Development class; the shade was drawn on the door window. Girls were assembled outside the room, talking as Ethel walked up.

"What's going on?" she asked Ayanna.

"Mrs. Bennett told us to wait out here."

"Oh." She checked her watch. This was the only class she didn't have with Schreck, Weezy, or Yuki, which was a bummer, because this class was usually pretty interesting. Though they really needed to change the name of it: girls were constantly sticking out their chests as a joke whenever someone said "Growth & Development."

Taylor came around the corner next, and Ethel squared her shoulders. She fully expected Taylor to say something snappy, but instead, Taylor deliberately ignored Ethel and went up to chat with Elise. Elise was one of those girls everybody liked. She fit in easily with every group at Seaside, even the Cherrybomb Girlz. Ethel wanted to be liked by everybody like that. With a pang of envy, Ethel watched them talk. She tugged on her green velour jacket. If she had to have a mutual dislike with one person in this school, she

would reserve that spot for Stephöñë. But she didn't like the sharp alliances that were cropping up with all these girls like Nessa and Taylor, who'd been friendly up until last week. After all the times in those awful public schools in second and third grade where it seemed all the kids hated her, Ethel had finally found her place at Seaside. She didn't like the way things were starting to change.

The door to Mrs. Bennett's room opened a crack. The girls hushed. Behind the door, Mrs. Bennett's voice sounded low, as if she were recounting a ghost story.

"You are all passengers on the *Titanic*, bound for America. It is three in the morning on a foggy night. You are asleep in your comfortable bunks when suddenly you feel a terrific jolt and hear an eerie groan. At once there is a rap on your door." Mrs. Bennett knocked on the wooden door. Her voice changed to sound like a man with an Irish accent. "Ladies and gentlemen, please dress quickly and put on your life jackets. We need you to come to the top deck of the ship—*immediately*."

The girls outside Mrs. Bennett's door grinned, eyeing each other. *What a wacko!* At that moment, Ethel noticed Carrie shuffle around the corner. If Carrie was surprised to see the entire class standing in the hallway, no noticeable change registered upon her face. She looked distracted and stood at the edge of the group. At last, the door swung open. Mrs. Bennett stood in the doorway in her long flowy hippie skirt and fifteen necklaces. "Quickly, quickly," she commanded, ushering all the girls into her class.

The entire classroom had been rearranged; all of the desks and chairs had been pushed to the corners of the room. In the center of the classroom, an old fisherman's dory sat propped up on a wooden frame. Ethel recognized the dory from last year's play, *Peter Pan*. The classroom was dim, the window shades pulled down. A single spotlight shone down on the dory.

"You," Mrs. Bennett addressed Elise, pasting a giant sticker on her back, "are a doctor."

"And you"—she put stickers on the backs of Ethel, Jen T., and Ayanna—"are a young couple with a child."

Mrs. Bennett assigned the rest of the girls their roles. Ethel noticed how pleased Taylor was when Mrs. Bennett told her she was "an entertainer." Carrie looked none too

happy with her role of “embezzler,” but Bayley seemed to get the worst of all: “old man dying of cancer.”

“Get in,” Mrs. Bennett suddenly shouted, startling a few of the girls. Her necklaces and bracelets jangled as she pretended to shove people away from the boat. “No, no!” she yelled, her face actually reddening from exertion. “Enough women and children! There is no time. The ship is going down!”

What was with the *Titanic*? All the teachers seemed to reference it lately. But Ethel kept a straight face and stayed in character, climbing into the dory with all the rest of the girls. She and Jen T. pretended to soothe Ayanna, who was now their “child.”

Mrs. Bennett stepped away from the dory, lightly back-stepping to a chair in a dim corner of the room. She grabbed her long gray hair and whipped it into a bun, securing it with the ever-present hair clip she had attached to her sweater sleeve. “You are all adrift at sea now. It’s nearly four in the morning, and no one has been called to rescue you. You have no paddles, and the boat has scraped against an iceberg so hard that it is beginning to leak and take on water. The only way to save yourselves is to decide as a group who has to go overboard. Two of you must go to keep the boat from sinking. Now go.”

Mrs. Bennett sat down, crossing her arms. The girls sat crouched in the dory, waiting for someone to speak. Ethel wished Val and Georgia were in this class; their natural enthusiasm for acting would’ve inspired her to jump fully into character. But with Taylor in the boat, Ethel didn’t feel comfortable. Finally, Elise broke the silence.

“Well, I’m a doctor, so I should probably be left on the boat to help with sick people.”

No one wanted to argue that point; after all, it seemed practical. Plus, no one had any grudges against Elise personally. Even so, a strange feeling of self-preservation began to creep into the exercise. If a doctor was spared, who else was on the chopping block?

“I’m the baby,” Ayanna said and sucked her thumb. Another one saved.

“The old man with cancer and the embezzler ought to go,” said Taylor, bored as if the answer to this exercise were obvious.

“Um,” said Bayley, standing up to Taylor. “What makes an entertainer any better?” She squared her slender dancer’s shoulders as her chin jut out.

“Don’t take it personally, Bayley,” Taylor said. She towered over Bayley, her tight clothes emphasizing how muscular she was.

“Remember, this is not about *you*, this is about your role,” Mrs. Bennett interrupted from the corner of the room.

As Ethel watched the girls begin to debate about who had the right to stay and who didn’t, she realized Mrs. Bennett had no idea how the real game was being played. Nobody wanted to kick Elise out because she was everyone’s friend *and* a doctor. And Bayley didn’t appreciate being targeted by Taylor, especially because her best friend, Nessa, had just defected from the dancer’s table to be a Cherrybomb Girl. These were all things Mrs. Bennett didn’t know.

“Throw out the embezzler,” Bayley said coolly. Everybody’s eyes turned to Carrie.

“Goodbye, embezzler,” said Taylor, waving at Carrie. “Time to jump out.”

Carrie put her hand on the side of the boat, preparing to get up without protest. This was just like real life, the way the Cherrybomb Girlz ganged up on her. Ethel couldn’t believe how much Taylor’s personality had changed in one week; it was as if she were drunk with power, morphing into Stephöñë.

“You don’t get to make the decision for the entire group,” Ethel told Taylor.

“Oh, and you do?” said Taylor. “You can jump out too.”

“I’ve got a child to take care of,” Ethel retorted.

“You only need one parent to take care of a child,” Taylor threw back, and for a moment, Ethel hesitated, wondering if this was a direct, personal attack. Did Taylor somehow know about her mother? Now Ethel was angry.

“What is so special about an entertainer? So you can act in movies? Maybe the embezzler is a good person who made a mistake and you, the entertainer, are a shallow, mean person who doesn’t deserve to be here!”

The room went silent. The only sound was the rise and fall of everybody breathing, close as they were, all hunched in the boat.

“Go on,” Mrs. Bennett said.

“Aren’t we all special?” Taylor said. “I mean, special in our own way? *Love ya like a sis to the moon!*” she said, wrapping her arms around herself. She kept her eyes locked to Ethel’s as she rocked back and forth in a coy, babyish manner. That was the phrase Ethel had written in the LOL Patrol’s journal page on Paperdollz. Taylor had just used it to make fun of her!

“Think about Taylor’s answer,” Mrs. Bennett said. “Aren’t you all special in your own way?” Ethel realized as she looked into the faces of the other girls in the boat that they knew Taylor’s double meaning behind that phrase. They all had profiles on the Paperdollz site now; they’d all read each other’s journals. Worse, Mrs. Bennett had unwittingly used Taylor’s slam as a part of the class lesson just now. No wonder everyone was smiling!

Ethel stepped out of the boat. “This will solve your problem,” she said, walking toward the door. She didn’t bother to look at Mrs. Bennett. “Going to the bathroom,” she muttered. Ethel waited until the door closed behind her before giving one of the lockers a sharp kick as she walked by. She didn’t know what had just happened, but she was sick of locking horns with the Cherrybomb Girlz. It had been a mistake to stick up for Carrie, who didn’t even bother to defend herself. This was supposed to be such a fun exercise in Mrs. Bennett’s class, but the whole thing *sucked!*

**

While Gram made dinner, Ethel sat on Clyde and texted Schreck. Ethel usually texted her seventy times a day. Her phone chirped and the answer came back:

Get on IM.

It was faster than email, and she could talk to multiple friends at once. Ethel pulled her iPad out of her backpack. She had about thirty friends at Seaside on her approved buddy list. In the drop-down Buddy List, she could see several girls had their IM program open, including Schreck. Yuki’s and Weezy’s screen names were grayed out, which meant they hadn’t gotten on yet, not a surprise, as Yuki had to practice piccolo and Weezy had to do homework first before either were allowed to text, IM, or get on their iPads. On IM, everyone could post a thumbnail picture next to her screen name as

well as an “away message” when she wasn’t there. Yuki’s away message was typical of her witty catchphrases: under her grayed-out icon of a smiling funny face, the away message read “Don’t Google me, I’ll Google you.”

A chat box immediately popped up on Ethel’s screen. In the cartoony bubble, Schreck’s icon featured an image of a Triceratops.

Schreckno: wat up effy!

Ethanol: hey schreck

Schreckno: i just deleted StePHONY’s stupid guestbook comments on paperdollz & changed it 2 private so no 1 else can write stuff to us w/out us knowing

Ethanol: good job, arrrgghhh I just H8TE her

Schreckno: wuts yuki’s word 4 her? flipping warthog

Ethanol: ya lol—btw whens yuki-n-weez getting on 2nite

Schreckno: after they eat dins, theyll b on in an hour

Ethanol: kewlio

Schreckno: oops NOS

Ethanol: kk

Ethel waited for Schreck to come back. *NOS* meant “nanny over shoulder.” Usually if a parent was in the room monitoring what they wrote, kids used the code POS for “parent over shoulder,” but since Schreck’s parents were divorced and both worked all the time, her father had hired a nanny for Schreck. To have a nanny at age eleven was a total embarrassment. Schreck always joked about it.

“Oh lovely,” Gram said, fiddling with the drain cup on the sink. “*Lovely.*”

“What is it, Gram?” Ethel said, now absorbed in the Paperdollz site.

Gram used a chopstick to poke around in the drain. “We’ve got a clog; it’s backing up. Sweet Lord, like I need a plumber bill right now.”

More words appeared on Ethel’s IM window: Schreck was typing:

Schreckno: oh GRATE. Dad just called from work and NOS just told my dad abt paperdollz!!! my dad told her it was banned—im so freakin MAD!

Ethanol: OMG that stinx. i haven’t told gr@m anything abt it.

Schreckno: ya don’t or we wont know if they write any more guestbook comments abt us

“Ethel,” Gram snapped irritably. “Please put away that godforsaken iPad and hold this flashlight for me or else we’re not making dinner.”

Ethanol: yikey! gr@m alert gtg

Schreckno: kk cya tomoro

Ethanol: lylas

Schreckno: u too ((virtual hugs))

“Sorry, Gram,” Ethel said, shutting down her IM program. “I just had to tell some stuff to Schreck.”

Gram’s knees cracked as she knelt down and opened the sink cabinet door. “What is it you two have to endlessly talk about that you can’t finish talking about at school?” she grouched, pulling cleaning products out and setting them on the floor. “All these programs open while you’re doing homework . . . all the emailing and chatting and texting and Mling, honestly.”

“IMing,” Ethel gently corrected.

“Whatever you call it,” Gram said, sticking her head far under the sink cabinet to get a better look. She clicked on the flashlight. “I don’t like it. If your grades start to slip

because of all this back-and-forth chatting and IMing while doing homework, it's gonna be a wake-up call and we're gonna change some things around here . . ."

This was a familiar speech, and Ethel bore it with patience. She didn't dare tell Gram about Stephōnē and the Paperdollz site or the Cherrybomb Girlz, because Gram's solution would just be to ban her from using the site like everyone else's parents.

Gram held a wrench and tried to bang on a piece of old metal pipe, as if that would magically fix the problem. "Son of a . . ." She let fly with a couple of her standby "French" words.

Ethel opened another window on the browser. "Gram, hold on, let me just look up a home improvement site. We can do this. I'll find us the directions." Ethel concentrated, her fingers flying over search engines.

The phone rang at that moment and Ethel's heart sank. *Don't let it be Mom. I don't feel like talking to her.* Gram grunted, backing out of the sink counter. She used her arm to brace her knee as she stood up and answered the phone.

"Hello?" Gram didn't have a cheery phone voice like other households, especially around dinnertime when telemarketers or Charlene called. The way she answered the phone sounded like a challenge. For a few minutes, Ethel listened, trying to figure out whom Gram was talking to. There were a lot of "uh huhs" and "mmm hmms" and then Gram shot Ethel a look. *What? What? What?*

"Well, I'll let you tell her yourself, thanks, Miss Tucker."

A teacher calling at dinnertime. Uh oh. Ethel took the phone nervously. "Hello?"

"Hi, Ethel, I just got off the phone with Mrs. Bennett. She told me you were upset about something in her class today, and I was wondering if it had anything to do with the fact that the chat moderators picked up on some bullying that Stephōnē Gallagher and Taylor Greenfield were doing to Carrie Swan on the Seaside chat room over some site called Paperdollz."

Ethel swallowed. "Um. A little."

"We're also putting the Paperdollz site on the school's ban list, so I think all this stuff is now nipped in the bud. I just want you to know you can always come to me if you ever see this kind of thing happening again."

“Okay . . .” Ethel looked at Gram, not sure how her grandmother was picking up from this conversation.

Mizz T. continued. “Mrs. Bennett said you were trying to stick up for Carrie and I just wanted to call and tell you I think you’re one of the good kids who stands up for others and I’m really proud of you, Ethel.”

Ethel smiled into the phone. “Thanks,” she said quietly. When she hung up the phone, Gram was looking at her.

“What was that about?” Gram asked.

“Mizz T said some girls got banned for being mean and wanted to thank me for sticking up for someone.”

Gram stared at her for another moment, the way she did when she didn’t quite buy Ethel’s story and wanted to give her another chance to explain herself. Ethel busied herself back on Google. “Okay, Gram,” she said, pressing a button to print out the plumbing directions. “First you’re going to need a socket wrench. And we need a bucket.”

“Hmmp. Like I even know what a socket wrench looks like,” Gram muttered, picking up the phone. She snapped her fingers. “Get me the landlord’s number off the fridge, please.”

Chapter 7

Ethel pushed through the glass doors of the library looking for Schreck. Just moments ago she'd been on the chat room and Schreck had typed, "Come 2 lib quick quick! Aiiiee!" Ethel had run all the way from the science wing, afraid something was wrong. The round tables by the oversized windows were all empty, and no one seemed to be around except for Ernie, the young librarian behind the oval desk. Ernie smiled at Ethel and went back to scanning bar codes of books piled on a metal rolling cart. Ethel searched the stacks, puzzled, and peered around a bookcase. Heather Damon and Janelle Wichenbach were the only two people in the library, from what she could see. They were working together at one of the study carrels, but the rest of the computer stations were empty. No Schreck. *Weird*, thought Ethel.

Someone grabbed her shoulder. "Gotcha!"

"Ahh!" Ethel jumped back, almost knocking into the bookcase. Before her stood Carrie, her auburn hair back to its frizzy state. She was chewing gum and grinning.

"What are you doing?" Ethel asked. She craned her neck to see if anyone else was with her.

"Nothing," Carrie said, popping her gum. She plopped herself down at one of the computer stations. "I just wanted to see if you'd come."

"Huh?" Ethel could see the familiar Seaside School chat room screen up on the computer Carrie had been using. Carrie had been writing under the screen name Schreckno!

"You pretended to be Schreck?" Ethel said, shocked.

"Sorry," Carrie said, typing quickly. "I had to use her screen name because I'm banned for a week and I really needed to get you here to show you something. Come here, check it out."

"But how did you . . . ?"

“I just created it and put an exclamation point after her name and the chat room recognized it as a new screen name.”

“Huh,” said Ethel. She hadn’t noticed the exclamation point after Schreckno, but now realized a screen name could be duplicated with a slight modification. Did the chat moderators know this? Before Ethel had a chance to register this information (how was she supposed to feel about being tricked like this—flattered?) Carrie typed in a new url on her browser window and a screen emerged: a smoky-gray website with Stephönë’s photo as the center image. The website had elegant fonts. Her name appeared under the photo, and then, another elegant line of type emerged beneath that: “Teen Model/Actor/Child Talent.”

“Whoa,” said Ethel, grabbing a chair to sit next to Carrie. “What is this?”

Carrie smiled. “This is what Stephönë’s been building in Mizz T’s class.

“No way. It’s too professional.” Ethel frowned.

Carrie gave her a look. “Uh . . . gee, her mom’s a website designer. Ya think she did it all by herself?”

“Click on the Model tab,” Ethel suggested. Despite herself, she was fascinated.

Carrie used her index finger to press on the tab. The site opened to a page that featured a dozen soft-focus photos of Stephönë in her ubiquitous cami top and low-slung jeans with some sort of bandito belt across her hips. One photo featured Stephönë holding her finger to her lips in a coy pose; another displayed her bending over and sticking her butt out while looking as if she were picking up a dropped pen. Still another had her in an Abercrombie and Fitch bathing suit top, cuddling next to a shaggy-haired boy with a lopsided grin, presumably another model.

These photos were outrageous! It wasn’t that a whole lot of skin was showing; it was just the suggestiveness of it. It hit Ethel in the face like opening an oven door at 400 degrees. She found herself actually blushing.

“Look here,” Carrie said, pointing to the bio:

Location: Leguna, CA

Age: 12

Height: 5'3" (162 cm)

Measurements: 34(A/B)-26-34

Weight: 105 lb (48 kg)

Hair Color: Dark Brown

Eye Color: True Green

“True green,” Carrie snickered. “And look—she lists Leguna because she said she’s ashamed to tell them she’s now in Maine.”

“Wow,” Ethel said, breathing the word. She couldn’t get over this website. If she ever posted something like this, Gram would hit her across the forehead with a hush puppy. What if some creepy guy saw it and wanted to track her down?

“You think her mom helped her with this?” Ethel squeaked.

Carrie nodded vigorously. “Get this, they also paid something like six thousand dollars for her to go to this summer camp for kids who want to get into acting. She told me she had these special image makeover classes and model classes and had to work with voice and diction coaches. They also told her that she would get more contacts at talent conventions if she changed the spelling of her name.”

Ethel’s wide eyes were lured back to the site. There under the “Credentials” tab Stephönë had one gig listed: “Modeled for property and casualty insurance.” Ethel’s nose wrinkled. Was this that California commercial she was always talking about? The big deal was modeling for some insurance company?

Ethel stood up. “Well, that was . . . interesting and all, but . . .”

Carrie’s hand floated to Ethel’s arm. “Wait. You want to email her through this site and pretend like we’re a talent agency?”

Ethel frowned. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Carrie chewed her gum, riveted by the images on the screen. Ethel didn’t know whether to go or stay, although she was glad to see Carrie being friendly to her again. On the other hand, Ethel hadn’t planned to get in the middle of the problems Carrie was having with Stephönë. Ethel brushed back her short bangs. She still wanted to know a few things.

“Why did you get banned on the chat room yesterday?”

Carrie slumped. “They were making fun of me and I got really mad and called them all a bunch of names. I forgot I was on the chat room where they see everything or I wouldn’t have said it.”

Ethel thought back to that cafeteria scene the day Carrie lost control. “What happened? I thought for a while you were, like, Stephönë’s best friend.”

“Yeah,” Carrie replied, her words snapping with sarcasm. “So did I. I’m the one who showed Stephönë the Paperdollz site in the first place. And, I came up with the Cherrybomb Girlz name. Then Stephönë started making these rules about who could join the Cherrybomb Girlz: only dancers or cheerleaders, no drama or band geeks. She said no one could join if they were on scholarship here at Seaside.”

A jolt of indignation hit Ethel over this, as she *was* on scholarship. So were Ayanna and Elise. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, I know,” continued Carrie. “She said she didn’t want anyone who wasn’t going to ‘shine.’ So, she invited Nessa and Taylor to be part of our group. Everything was going really good. We went shopping together all the time and had slumber parties. Stephönë’s mom took us out to dinner and to movies. Whenever I won at a tennis match, they’d all be in the bleachers clapping for me. That was before everything changed.”

Ethel, drawn into Carrie’s confessions, could clearly hear the bitterness in her voice, but still, she was wary. How easily Carrie went along with Stephönë’s rules of exclusivity just to bask in the glow of popularity. Had she not gotten what she deserved?

“Then two days ago, I found out that Stephönë made a new rule. She wanted the Cherrybomb Girlz to be like a reality show, so she decided that every month, they were going to have to secretly vote someone out and invite someone new in. I didn’t know any of this. I only found out after I bought everybody those cherry charm bracelets. I heard from Bayley that Stephönë started telling everyone the only reason I give gifts is to buy my friends. And that’s when they all turned on me.” Her expression darkened. “Then Stephönë texted me that I was out and Amanda was in.”

“That is *crazy*,” Ethel said. As if Schreck, Weezy, or Yuki would *ever* do that. Ethel now understood Stephönë and her followers more than ever. Still, she couldn’t help but feel bad for Carrie. She had been so blind to the warning signs, she had been dumped like garbage.

“True friends would never do that to you,” Ethel said. “Sometimes we get into little fights over dumb stuff, but for the most part, we all get along and always stick up for each other. That’s the way it should be.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Carrie muttered bitterly. “Every time I’ve ever had a best friend, she has turned on me.”

“Well, you need to show them you don’t care. Sit with me in tech class, so that people know you’re fine without the Cherrybomb Girlz. They want you to feel all sad, because you got kicked out, but you should do the opposite and just pretend it was the best thing that ever happened to you.”

The light returned to Carrie’s expression. “I wanted to be friends with you from the beginning of the year, but . . .” Carrie bit her lip. “I’m really sorry, Ethel.” She looked up at her.

Ethel regarded her, glad to finally hear these words. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

Carrie smiled.

“But I’m warning you, we’re dorky,” Ethel said. “We don’t really care about fashion or all that. I mean I’m good at *science*. And I actually like HTML and color codes. And this hair? Uhhh”—Ethel’s fingers tugged at dark strands of it—“it’s never going to be long and down to my back. Or highlighted. I tried to iron it once, but I didn’t realize there were actually hair irons for that purpose, so I used a real iron and laid my head on the ironing table and burned one whole side of it.”

Carrie laughed. “Seriously?”

Ethel nodded importantly. “Oh yeah.”

“Oh, ’cause one time in third grade, I stood too close to the grill when my dad put lighter fluid on it and I burned off all my eyebrows!”

“Really?” Ethel said with respect.

“Yeah,” Carrie said. “We can be burnt hair and no eyebrow sisters!”

Ethel laughed, just picturing it. “The two most *popular* girls at Seaside.”

**

Afternoon study hall was nearly over; only one class left for the day. It was always a sad feeling when school had to end, kind of like staring at a Christmas tree in the living room on December 26. Or the last day of Fat Camp, waving goodbye to all of your friends. A minor depression set in every day at this time as Ethel watched girls go to their last class.

The Seaside School for Girls felt drearily empty, even when bright sunshine spread out across the polished granite floors. Why did school have to end? *Whyyyyyyyyyyy?*

The only bright spot to propel her through was Mizz T's tech class, the last period of the day.

Ethel strode down the hallway, brushing her fingertips across the baby blue lockers, making each combination lock clang in the process. Last year she used to do this so frequently, even while people were standing at their lockers, that the nurse asked Gram in for a special meeting to consider whether Ethel needed to be assessed for OCD. Turns out, they determined she was just being annoying. Still, every once in a while when no one was around, Ethel liked to run down each locker and give the combination locks a little flip with her fingers.

Yuki and Weezy were the first ones in class, huddled together over some paperwork. With a pencil behind her ear, Yuki clacked away on the calculator while Weezy stared hard at a piece of paper, her eyes scarily enormous behind her round glasses.

"Weez, if we both deduct about five percent to start with, we won't even miss it." Yuki slid her pencil from behind her ear and made a mark on the piece of paper.

"What are you doing?" Ethel said, sitting down across from them.

"We're working out how we're going to put our new business up on the website," Yuki said without looking up.

"Oh cool. I didn't know you even had jobs."

Yuki erased a number with her pencil and rewrote another one. "We will this summer."

Weezy smiled. "Yeah, we're going to go into business together. We're going to make sweaters for cats."

Ethel leaned forward, interested. "*Really?*"

"Yes," Yuki said rather seriously. "We both know how to knit, and once I found these cool patterns on the 'Net, I brought the idea up to Weez."

"Yeah—and Schreck's mom is going to help us with a marketing plan!" Weezy said, growing more excited. "We're knitting as many sweaters as we can right now. Luckily they're small, so we'll have an entire stockpile by this summer."

“What are you going to call your business?” Ethel asked.

“Cat Jumpers,” Weezy said. She looked hesitantly toward Yuki.

Yuki seemed to consider this. When she spoke, she enunciated carefully through her orange-colored braces. “The thing is, Weez, it sounds like we’re jumping over a cat. And it just might confuse people.”

“Okay. Oh, I know,” Weezy said, smiling. “How about the French words, *pullover* and *chat*.”

“Pullover and chat?” Yuki said mildly. “When people see our business, they will think it’s about driving with a cell phone—not cats and sweaters, Weez.”

Ethel stared at the ceiling. “How about Kittens Mittens?”

Yuki stared at her. “We’re not knitting mittens for kittens. This isn’t a Dr. Seuss book.”

Ethel pressed the button to turn on her computer. “Okay, jeez.” She muttered under her breath. “Didja ever consider that maybe cats won’t *like* sweaters?”

Yuki laid down her pencil, regarding Ethel with pursed lips. “When you came to me and said you were starting a business to pick up dog poop off lawns, did I nay bob your ideas?”

Ethel slumped.

“Tell me—did I nay bob you?”

“No, you didn’t,” Ethel said under her breath.

“Didn’t what?” Yuki demanded.

Ethel sighed. “Nay bob me.” Inwardly, Ethel cringed, not only because Yuki had her on the hot seat, but also because now, she’d gotten Ethel to repeat what was most definitely the new catchphrase of the week.

“I’m sorry,” Ethel said quickly to Yuki and Weezy. “I think it will be a good business.”

“*Thank you*,” Yuki said, and went back to her calculator. Weezy gave Ethel a squeezed little smile, as if to say, *Try living in my world*.

Mama Pajama, what is with all the conflict today? Ethel thought. Had everyone had prune juice for breakfast? Was the moon in retrograde? Luckily, Val, Elise, and the Robot Chicks had just arrived and class was about to start.

“Okay.” Mizz T stormed into the room, clapping, making everyone jump. “I’m here, let’s get this show on the road. Where are Dona and Carrie?”

“Right here!” Schreck said, scooting in after her, breathless. She had a Second Life manual under her arm, which she plonked down next to Ethel. “Just got this on eBay,” she whispered. “They’re all yelling at me that I’m a newbie on Second Life, so I’m learning Judo.” She hunched her shoulders. “I’m gonna kick some avatar butt.”

Mizz T went back to peer outside the classroom door, scanning for Carrie. After a moment, she gave up. “All right then, we’ve got a lot to cover today, but we’re going to have a lot of fun.” She switched on the whiteboard. She clacked on her MacBook and soon the whiteboard lit up. “Watch and learn, ladies; I’m going to show you a little more HTML. Then we’re going to start putting together your websites for your future career or business.”

“Mizz T,” Val said, raising her hand. “Are you chewing gum?”

Mizz T halted, smiling. She reached into the back pocket of her jeans. “Yeah. Here ya go.” She threw the pack at Val. “Everybody can have a piece.” Val happily took a piece and shared the pack with everyone else. Mizz T was cool like that.

“Um, Mizz T,” Ethel interrupted. “Would it be okay if I made this website for my future self instead of a future business, since I’m going to go into business for myself?”

Mizz T thought about that as she typed on the keyboard. “It’s not going to be like a social media profile with things like your favorite type of boy band, is it?”

“No, no. A real site featuring NASA and my future credentials.”

“Okay, I guess I can make an exception.”

Ethel jumped off her chair and brought her fist high up in the air, then straight back down. “YESSSSSSSSSSSSSS! Oh my God, I am going to wee myself.”

That got Yuki to laugh, which was even better, because Yuki almost never cracked a smile. “*I’m going to wee myself*,” Yuki said, her orange braces fully visible. She wrote that down on her piece of paper. “That’s got to be the new catchphrase.”

Just then, the door to the computer room opened and Carrie strode in. “I’m sorry, Mizz T, sorry, sorry, sorry.” As promised, Ethel had left a seat open next to her, which Carrie slid into gratefully.

“If you’re late like this one more time,” Mizz T said, sounding a little testy, “I’m going to lose my good humor. ”

“Sorry.” Carrie surveyed the room hesitantly. Unlike every other time she sat in tech class, now Carrie made eye contact with Yuki, Schreck, and Weezy and gave them a smile. Yuki and Weezy exchanged a look, which Ethel immediately understood. *What is she doing here?*

“And that,” Mizz T said, typing with flourish so that one hand came off the keyboard like a master piano player, “is how you make your text big or small.”

On the whiteboard, everyone could see how she’d done it.

“Cool,” Weezy said. “Can we try it?”

“Go for it.”

Everyone began practicing HTML in bold, italic, and in teeny 6-point font as well as in huge 72-point font.

“So, what kind of website are you going to make?” Carrie whispered to Ethel.

“I’m gonna make a site for my future self when I become an astronaut psychologist for the Mars mission.”

Carrie crinkled up her nose, smiling. “Really? Why?”

Ethel stared at her. “So they don’t go crazy.”

“Huh.” Carrie seemed to consider this.

“An astronaut psychologist has to do all this special training,” Ethel explained. “Because everything that goes in that shuttle will affect the astronauts’ moods, even down to the type of food they can eat. Like, for example, they can’t take microwave burritos up there—a microwave would interfere with the rocket’s communications. So, they have to eat all this special stuff in pouches instead.”

“Oh,” Carrie said, turning on her computer. “That’s weird.”

“Yeah, it takes about seven months to travel each way,” Ethel said.

“What?” Carrie said, shocked. “I couldn’t live without a microwave that long—that’s insane.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ethel said.

“I’m going to be an executive chef someday in a really nice L.A. restaurant so that all these stars will come in to the kitchen and say, ‘Compliments to the chef’ and stuff like that,” Carrie said.

“Uh huh,” Ethel said, creating a purple background for her website by adding in a color code.

Carrie peered over at Ethel’s screen. “Hey, how did you just do that?”

“Oh, easy,” Ethel said, and began typing code on Carrie’s keyboard. She opened up a color wheel. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Salmon pink,” Carrie said. “That will be the color of my senior prom gown.”

Ethel glanced sideways at her. “Okay, well, just click here and we’ll try to find the closest color to salmon pink.” She watched Carrie hunt and peck on the keyboard, trying to find the right keystrokes. It was the first time she had actually seen Carrie take an interest in this class. Before now, she had always sat looking bored and listless.

“I wanna do one on my future self too,” Carrie said, pleased with what she had created.

“Uh,” Ethel backpedaled. “Mizz T only gave me special permission.” After she’d said it, she felt a little guilty. Still, she didn’t want anyone copying her original idea.

“Oh.”

“Mizz T, how long did you know you wanted to be a teacher?” Val asked casually, typing away.

“Hmm.” Mizz T looked at the ceiling. “I don’t remember. I always wanted to play outdoors as a kid. I guess I thought I’d be an adventurer. But it probably makes sense that I ended up a teacher—I always wanted to teach.”

“Do you make a lot of money?” Carrie said, animated. She seemed to glow in a way that she never did in this class.

Mizz T snorted as if that was a private joke. “I chose teaching ’cause I happen to like opening your clever little minds.”

Ethel was half listening. With a series of keystrokes, she typed **OMG Look! You have no eyebrows! See?** and nudged Carrie to look at the emoticon she just typed with no eyebrows.

:0

Carrie did her best not to laugh, but it came out as a muffled snort. Luckily Mizz T was busy helping Val a few desks over. Carrie typed in the text box of her website <u>WEARD! U have burnt hair. Look! </u>

<:0

Ethel's shoulders hunched. It was so hard not to laugh when you weren't *supposed* to laugh, but when there was someone sitting next to you trying just as hard to keep quiet, it was impossible.

"A ha ha ha!" Ethel clamped both hands over her mouth as Mizz T looked up from Val's computer.

"Sorry, Mizz T," Ethel said. The website! Time to refocus on the website. Her eyebrows clenched in concentration. Her tongue stuck out. Not willing to make Mizz T mad, she tried not to look at Carrie again. Yuki elbowed her, and Ethel looked up to see Yuki's eyes dart to Carrie and back to Ethel again. Ethel shook her head as if to say, *It's nothing, don't worry*. Her thoughts kept coming back to the little emoticon Carrie had typed to represent Ethel and her burnt hair and she thought she might dissolve into laughter again. How could a couple of keystrokes be so flipping funny?

At that moment, the PA system crackled on for the afternoon announcements, though no one stopped typing. Mr. Frederick always cleared his throat the same way every time. "Mmm hmmph. Good afternoon, ladies, just want to let you know that because of a teacher meeting, all afternoon activities and sports will be canceled today . . ."

Hearing that, Val and the Robot Chicks slumped. "Aww . . ." That meant rehearsals and the Robotics Club were canceled too.

"As you know," Mr. Fredrick continued, "in about a month we're going on our second big class trip for the semester . . ." That got everyone's attention. They all knew they were going *somewhere* cool before the Thanksgiving break but exactly *where* had been a secret for weeks. Mizz T surveyed the room, smiling.

"And uh . . . it's been confirmed today. Mmm hmmph. I'm happy to announce we're all going to the Boston Museum of Science for an overnight trip." Ethel gasped. The Robot Chicks squealed and turned to each other, excited. No one could be heard over everyone's chatter as Mizz T tried to talk. "I'm going to hand out the permission slips in

homeroom tomorrow, so tell your parents tonight.”

Squeals turned to loud cheers. Schreck and Weezy high-fived. Ethel hugged herself. This was *awesome*. This school rocked her socks off. She’d had the Boston Museum of Science on her radar since last Christmas. She’d always wanted to go. Why bother reading a book about inertia and centrifugal force (and take a test on it—bleah) when the museum could *show* you how it worked with a giant indoor roller coaster using a primitive car with a motor shaft and flywheel?

Ethel turned to Yuki. “I can die now.” She then turned to Carrie on her other side. “Yup, yup. I can die now.”

Chapter 8

Feathery Indian summer breezes met her once Ethel skipped off the public bus. She gazed at the green carpet of the Promenade, past a swell of hills leading down toward the ocean. She loved this aerial view of her neighborhood, and every day after school, she lingered a few moments at the bus stop to smell the air. Some days she smelled nothing; others, it was like a fish market right under her nose. Today she could see clearly for miles. Families were still gathering on the green, getting in the last remnants of good sunny days before the fall snapped into a long, cold winter. Ethel hoisted her heavy L.L. Bean backpack on her left shoulder. Going to and from the bus stop, she sort of had to shump along, like Igor the Hunchback.

Her first stop was D'Annunzios, a little family-owned Italian grocery around the corner from Gram's apartment. Ethel walked into the dim little store, which was big enough to display only three aisles with necessities like bread and coffee. A reach-in freezer at the front of the store held all kinds of ice cream, the kind that could usually be found at an ice cream truck. But, Ethel didn't come in for ice cream.

Autographed, framed pictures of Frank Sinatra and Governor Angus King hung behind the counter where Mr. D'Annunzio stood with a can of Moxie and a small bag of Funyuns onion rings waiting on the counter. He had a large pocked nose, bushy gray eyebrows, and a kind smile. Mr. D'Annunzio never remembered her name, but every day after school, he had these same items waiting for her. He pointed to each item. "Fif-a-ty cents for this and fif-a-ty for that," and Ethel handed him a dollar and seven cents for the tax. "Thank you!" she said and breezed out.

She walked home rapidly. The neighborhood was made up of Victorian houses and tree-lined sidewalks in the quiet part of the city. A lot of the trees had already started to turn with fall colors. Gram had lived a lot of places in Portland, but she liked the eastern side the best. The old Portland she'd grown up in had been a busy working waterfront with cargo ships, fishmongers, lobster fishermen, and sailors. Now, in a lot of

ways it had become a bustling boutique town, with galleries and restaurants, and shops dedicated to pets and outdoor gear. Thousands of people were moving there every year, which made renting more expensive.

Their apartment was part of a pale blue Victorian, one of many houses that lined the street. The house had been divided into four residences; theirs was the first-floor apartment on the left.

Ethel took the concrete steps leading up to the house two at a time and put her key in the tumbler of the leaded-glass door. Once inside the entry hall, she took out her other key. As she walked through the door, she realized Gram had come home early. Ethel set down backpack, excited to tell Gram about the Boston trip.

Gram was on the phone, her back turned. She wore her persimmon wraparound dress and silver heels. Her dressy clothes signaled she was going on a date. From the back, Gram's blond updo was teased up high, secured with a ladder of bobby pins. A few pin curlers were still attached to her bangs.

"Well, you know, you make your choices, that's all I can tell you," Gram said, leaning her hip against the kitchen counter. Her tone was not flirty and high, or the voice of someone talking to her suitor. Ethel caught the somber and frank undertone of the conversation right away. Gram took no crap, and she was a fearsome mistress at giving it out.

"She's not old enough yet," Gram snapped. "I'm not going to have her mind scarred with images of prison and glass between you." *Ah*, Ethel realized. *It's Mom on the phone.*

"Do I honestly have to say this again? Are you that self-absorbed? Prison is no place for a twelve-year-old." There was a pause. "I'm sorry, but your needs don't outweigh Ethel's." Gram was about to say more, but she sighed and hung up the phone. Ethel could tell that her mother had hung up first. This was a weekly occurrence.

Ethel closed the front door gently. "Oh, hey," Gram said. She came over and kissed Ethel on the cheek, her vanilla perfume and warm hand on Ethel's face a nice surprise. She rarely kissed Ethel like that.

“I’m having a friend over for dinner tonight,” Gram said, thumbing a twenty-dollar bill out of her Betty Boop purse and handing it to Ethel. “So after you do your homework, I’m taking you over to Uncle Fritz’s.”

“Oh,” Ethel said. “You know, I don’t always need a babysitter. I can just go over to Schreck’s.”

Gram shook one of the curlers out of her bangs on the way to the bathroom. “I’ll let you know what the plans are,” she said. It wasn’t unpleasant in the way she’d said it, but there was no question about who ran the show.

Ethel made herself wait until she had all of her books and iPad laid out on the coffee table before opening her snacks. What a blissful ritual to tear into that poofy green bag and take a huge sniff of onion flakes. Eating a whole bag of Funyuns made her breath absolutely disgusting afterward, but she could never get enough of that first crunchy bite. Then she’d pop the tab on the Moxie. That first taste of the acidic, medicinal soda was like a karate kick in the mouth. In fact, this ritual was necessary before getting down to homework each day. It was one of her thingy thangs.

**

Uncle Fritz had seen *Lord of the Rings* thirty-four times in one year. Even before the movie had come out, his apartment resembled the set of Frodo’s Hobbit House, minus the giganto round door.

In the entryway of his dark and cramped apartment, two squirrels met Gram and Ethel at the door. They stood on their hind legs, squeaking, and skittered back into the clutter of the living room.

“Jesus Christ!” Gram jumped back from the door. “Fritz!” she called. “Get your rodents on a leash before we come over, or I’m serious—I’ll call Animal Control this time.”

Uncle Fritz emerged smiling from the kitchen. He was wearing a basketball sweatshirt, his mop of brown hair falling across the tops of his thick brown glasses.

“Hi Mom, hey Ethel,” he said, patting Ethel gently on the head. Uncle Fritz showed his affection by patting everyone on the head.

“Why aren’t they dead?” Ethel asked, watching the squirrels mangle the Cheezballs that they held in their tiny paws.

“Oh.” He looked at the squirrels by the couch. “Yeah, I saved them last week.”

“You’re not going to kill them, are you?” Ethel asked.

“Oh heck no,” Uncle Fritz said, laughing. He lovingly touched a giant stuffed squirrel on the entryway table. It was standing on its hind legs, its paws stiffly held out like Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, its eyes bugged out and its teeth in a fierce grimace—as fierce as a squirrel could look. “No, these only get the ‘treatment’ when I find them in the road.”

The *treatment* was taxidermy, a hobby Uncle Fritz had had since he was a teenager. Everybody in Ethel’s family had a thing for animals, but Fritz’s favorite medium was squirrels, ermine, mink, and ferrets, and occasionally gerbils. His entire apartment was filled with a standing testimony to roadkill; he displayed stuffed squirrels on every surface, like trophies in various poses. Ethel’s favorite were a couple of squirrels mounted on a wooden stand dancing a waltz together. The female squirrel wore a little red dress with a strand of pearls, and the male squirrel was dressed in a black felt tuxedo, complete with a top hat.

Fritz’s coffee table was a glass coffin, like Sleeping Beauty’s, but inside, the scene looked like something out of a museum; stuffed mink played hide-and-seek behind fake bushes and a fake log. It was something to behold.

Gram patted her blond beehive; she licked the tip of her finger and smoothed back several wisps. “Okay, Fritz, me boy, I’ll swing by later. Have a good time, doll,” she told Ethel.

“Bye Gram,” Ethel said. She sighed, watching her go. Uncle Fritz was fun, but sometimes it was as if *she* were babysitting *him*.

Fritz began straightening his apartment, balling up clothes that were on the couch and chucking them into the corner. “I got a new weather radio,” he said, sticking his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt. “Wanna see?” When Uncle Fritz smiled like that—as if he were the luckiest kid in the whole wide world—Ethel felt protective toward him, even though he was almost twenty years older.

“Okay.” Ethel sat down on his brown corduroy couch, the springs groaning.

He brought out what looked like a regular old transistor radio from the bedroom and snapped the volume button on. As she expected when turning the dials, every station tuned into a droning report of the weather. “There is an expected chance of showers . . . with an 85 percent chance of . . .” Fritz seemed enamored of it.

Ethel zoned out with the forecast. She imagined that to get a job as a radio weather forecaster one had to work hard at being unenthusiastic on a day-to-day basis. She pictured the weatherman coming home from work and watching his young daughter ride her bike without training wheels for the very first time while he cheered her on from the sidewalk. *There’s an 85 percent chance that if you take that corner hard, sweetheart, you might fall—whoopsiedaisy, down you go. I believe there will be a slight chance of bleeding followed by scattered periods of crying.*

“So,” Ethel said, sitting on her hands. She looked around Uncle Fritz’s dreary apartment. He had no TV, and this weather radio seemed to be his only entertainment. “What do you want to do?”

“Let’s go down to the rotary and look for squirrels,” Fritz said, and put on his red flap hunting hat. “Statistically, more squirrels get run over by evening rush hour traffic than any other time.”

“Oh,” Ethel said, reluctantly getting off the couch. “Neat.”

**

“You know, they sometimes try to fake each other out,” Uncle Fritz said as they walked briskly side by side. Fritz lived in Munjoy Hill in a brick apartment complex, similar to the one Ethel had once shared with her mother in New York. They walked together toward the rotary, which was near the highway entrance, and strode through a narrow strip of grass and trees beside the road. “The thing about squirrels is that they’ll pretend to bury a nut and then actually stick it in their cheek and scamper away so that other squirrels will look in the wrong place.”

“Why?” Ethel asked.

Uncle Fritz bent down to look her in the eye. “Because they’re crafty.” He rubbed his hands together like an evil scientist. She could see his breath as they talked. Now that

it was late October, the sun had begun to lower earlier in the day, but there was still some good, pinkish light for squirrel spotting as of yet.

“So, I had a date with this girl last Saturday,” Fritz said, most of his face obscured by the flaps of the red hunting hat. “And this week I’ve called and left four messages, but she hasn’t called back. Do you think I should call her again?”

Ethel pondered this. “What did you say on your messages?”

“Not much, just how much I enjoyed our date and was looking forward to going out with her again. She’s a nursing aide, and she told me she files all these color-coded files each day, so I kind of made a joke about that.” Fritz turned to Ethel, his brown eyes sparkling behind his glasses. “I said she could file herself under *H* for Hot. Get it? So anyway, I’m just wondering if somehow her phone’s not working and she hasn’t gotten her messages, and I’m thinking of calling her at work to find out.”

“Hmm,” Ethel said, and placed her hand on Uncle Fritz’s arm. “I wouldn’t.”

“Really?” He looked surprised.

“Yeah, she might get in trouble with her boss for taking a personal call.”

“Oh, right,” Fritz said, fingering the binoculars around his neck. “I didn’t think of that.”

They came up to a crooked bench next to the road. The bench’s wooden green slats were chipped and weathered. As they sat down, Fritz told her this was the best spot because it overlooked the bend in the rotary where many of the poor squirrels had met their fate. “So, do you think I should call her cell one more time?” Fritz asked.

“Mmm, I’d probably leave it up to her.”

Uncle Fritz slumped. He was always going on first dates with girls he got really attached to, who never called him back. He took out his binoculars and held them up for what seemed a long time without talking.

“If you died and could come back as an animal, what would it be?” Ethel asked, trying to cheer him up. She was hoping to get him back on his enthusiastic topic of squirrels.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Uncle Fritz said, his red flaps turning to her. “I’d come back as a newt.”

“Oh,” Ethel said. Not what she’d expected. “Why?”

“I think it’d be kind of special to be green.” Fritz was warming up to this game. “How about you?”

“Ohhhhh, let’s see, let’s see . . . ,” Ethel said, tapping her teeth with her index finger. “What would I want to be?” She thought about it. “A praying mantis.”

“Ooh,” Uncle Fritz said, delighted. “They’re green . . . and kind of weird.”

“I could bite people’s heads off,” Ethel said. “And swivel my head around like this—” She turned her head slowly, eyes wide. Uncle Fritz laughed nervously.

“But you wouldn’t bite my head off if I came over,” Fritz said. “We’d just hang out on the couch and eat leaves and stuff, right?”

“Yeah, but I still might bite your head off,” Ethel said seriously. “I mean, if the mood struck me.”

“Well, I’m not coming over, then,” Fritz said. “If you’re going to be that way, I’ll just go hang out with my newt friends.”

“But what if I can’t help it?” Ethel asked. “What if I’ve been going to all of these Head Biters Anonymous groups, and it’s like this . . . this disease . . . I just can’t stop myself?”

“I guess,” Fritz said, scratching his chin. “I’d still come over and be your friend, but I’d have to wear one of those plastic dog cones to go around my neck. So you couldn’t get to my head.”

“Okay,” Ethel said, trying to picture a praying mantis sitting on a couch next to a green newt wearing a plastic dog cone around its neck. Once there was some logic behind it, it made sense.

“Shh,” Uncle Fritz said, stopping. “Look—”

Before them, perhaps twenty feet in the distance, a red squirrel loped across a patch of green grass and hopped up onto the trunk of a tree. It chattered at them, sounding like a brisk rattle. Fritz stared at it, fascinated.

“Are you going to try to capture it?” Ethel asked, her arms wrapped around herself now that the sun was going down.

Uncle Fritz scratched at his sparse chin whiskers. “No, I just like to take a picture of it in my mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow, if I have a hard day, I can remember it and it makes me feel better. ”

“Oooohh,” Ethel said, watching the red squirrel loop itself up the tree like a maypole streamer in reverse. “It’s like sunsets. When I watch them sometimes, I like to think about the colors of them when I’m in a bad mood.”

Uncle Fritz smiled one of his brilliant, all-teeth-showing smiles. “Yeah, that’s a lot better than medicine any day.”

“Yeah,” Ethel said, feeling good. Uncle Fritz was warm sunshine like that. Gram was always there in a make-your-lunch and *your-what-hurts?* kind of way, but she was very cut and dried—not the type to spend a whole conversation around newts and praying mantises going to support groups together. Ethel got up from the bench and rubbed her shoulders. “I think it’s time to go,” she said, and Fritz agreed. Together, they began walking back to the apartment.

“Uncle Fritz, what do you think Mom would be if she came back as an animal?” Ethel said.

“Mmm . . .” He scratched his beard. “A raccoon?”

“A raccoon,” Ethel said.

“. . . who sneaks into your room at night and steals your money from a coffee can.”

“Oh.”

“Ah well,” he said, smiling, and waved the thought away. “She had a lot of things to buy.”

“Did she used to pretend like we do?” Ethel asked.

“Oh yeah,” Fritz said, his red flaps bouncing as he walked. “We used to fill up water balloons, and she would pretend that they were sound charges and throw them at people when they weren’t looking.”

Ethel’s brows constricted. “Mom did that?”

“Oh, and other stuff—she used to tape up my mouth and hide me under a bunch of clothes in a closet and pretend I wasn’t there.” He began to laugh. “And Mom and Dad would look for me for *hours*. One time the police came and *still*, nobody knew where I was.” He smiled at the memory. “Lots of fun, those days.”

“What do you want me to make you for dinner tonight?” Ethel asked as they left the strip of grass and veered back onto the sidewalk, kicking away dead brown leaves.

“I don’t know—we can go to the store on the way back home,” Fritz said. “I’ve got cans o’ beans, microwave turkey, and Hostess fruit pies.”

Ethel winced at the thought. “We’ll just go to the store,” she said, reaching into Fritz’s hunting jacket pocket. She took out his wallet and counted twelve dollars. She had Gram’s twenty dollars—they were all set.

“Maybe I’ll make some chicken and potatoes,” she mused.

“Oh yum,” Fritz said, delighted.

“With some baby red potatoes in a nice, brown squirrel sauce . . .”

She waited for it. It was too easy. Fritz’s head swiveled, and before he could open his mouth, she yelled, “KIDDING!” and hung on his arm, laughing.

Chapter 9

11:32 AM **Weezy**: Hi Ethel, durr I mean, General Genius Wazz up
11:32 AM **Ethanol**: 1/2 hour til lunch—im starving!!
11:32 AM **Weezy**: ya whoopee, it's fried chickie day
11:33 AM **Ethanol**: soooo hungry!
11:33 AM **Schreckno**: ELLO EYAH MATE OWS ETT GOWING
11:35 AM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: hey gally wallys
11:35 AM **Celebritychef**: hey wat up yo
11:35 AM **Schreckno**: kewl
11:35 AM **Ethanol**: hey carrie, welcome to the LOL Patrol
11:35 AM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: hi cc
11:36 AM **Celebritychef**: thx ;)
11:36 AM **Weezy**: Yuki, I told Schreck we'd show her the chicken noodle soup dance at my bday party—kk?
11:36 AM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: ya we will
11:36 AM **Celebritychef**: whose bday party?
11:36 AM **Weezy**: um . . . mine this weekend.
11:36 AM **Celebritychef**: coolio. I luv bday parties
11:36 AM **Weezy**: I cant wait
11:36 AM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: it will be so much fun.
11:36 AM **Ethanol**: arrghghh im starving! Two min to lunch! *EATS OWN HAND*

Fried Chicken Day drove everyone out of her skull, with its crackly, warm smell that seeped into the main hallways and under the doors. At eight in the morning, the cafeteria cooks began deep frying, and by 10:00 a.m. in homeroom, everyone's stomach sounded like a frozen lake, groaning and shifting. Who could eat a bologna sandwich with mustard when it was Fried Chicken Day? Ethel had done the math. They served

fried chicken every other Friday—\$4.50 twice a month. With her weekend job and the bottles she recycled, she had her money for Fried Chicken Day if she brown-bagged her lunch the rest of the month. It was not a hard compromise to make.

Ethel stood in a long line behind the other girls, Jess and Kate, the Soccer Chicas, Val and Georgia, and Elise and Ayanna.

“Dah-ling,” Val said when she saw Ethel. “Do you have an extra quarter, so I can buy a brownie?”

Ethel checked her corduroy pants pocket for her money, then her vest, where her plaid wallet remained tucked in. She pulled it out and handed Val a quarter. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, dearie dear, I owe you my life, my future house, and all my future children,” Val said.

“That’s okay,” Ethel said. “Keep the kids. If you pay me back next week, I won’t charge you interest.”

“What is that—a penny?” Val said.

“No, I’d take a chocolate chip cookie.”

“Stop talking about cookies,” Georgia said, holding her stomach. “I’m so hungry, I’m going to fall down.”

Ethel smiled as Val and Georgia picked up their green trays from the metal bin and moved on forward. The smell of hot, greasy chicken wafted into the hallway where everyone stood in line.

“Nice high waters,” said a voice coming up behind her. Ethel turned to see Carrie, smirking. She gave Ethel a friendly nudge to show she was kidding.

“Thanks,” Ethel said. Carrie wore a purple knotted shrug over a Billabong T-shirt and skinny jeans.

Carrie crossed her arms, assessing Ethel’s corduroys. The cuff of Ethel’s pants ended a full three inches above her socks. “Don’t your ankles get cold?” Carrie asked.

Ethel looked down at her orthopedic brown shoes and brown socks with pink kittens on them. “Yes, but when you are rocking the kind of look I have,” she said, hand on her hip, “you have to make some sacrifices.” The line moved up farther. Ethel craned

her neck to see if any more fresh trays of fried chicken would be added under the heat lamp.

Carrie nodded. “Yeah, I wouldn’t say everyone has your look.” Nobody would ever come close to Ethel’s look, for besides the pink corduroy high waters, she was wearing a rainbow knit pullover vest with a flower patch on the front. Every day, at least four or five girls at the Seaside School told her how “weird” she looked. And it became a thing; now everybody looked forward to see what she’d wear. Except, of course, Stephönë, who couldn’t let a day pass without a snide comment.

Carrie peered closer at the patch of skin between Ethel’s jean cuffs and her socks. “You don’t shave your legs either?”

Ethel shook her head. “How do you think I keep my ankles warm?”

“Yeah, but you’ve got dark hair. I mean, you’re going to look like Sasquatch. I shave my legs every day.”

The line moved closer. “Every day!” Ethel said. “That would take so much time!”

“Yeah, for a while there, I used to spend two hours each morning on my hair, too. It took an hour to dry and an hour to straighten. My dad just screamed at me every morning, because we were never *anywhere* on time,” Carrie admitted, smiling. “Drove him crazy.”

“Jeez,” Ethel said. “I’ve got stuff to do in the morning. I don’t have time for all of that. First I read CNN, and then I make my lunch and my grandma’s lunch. And then I gotta take the public bus to get here, which is like a half hour.”

“Why doesn’t your grandma drive you?” Carrie asked.

“She has to work.”

“Oh.” Carrie squinted at her. “I forgot. Why don’t you live with your parents again?”

“Because of life’s circumstances,” Ethel said, reciting a phrase Gram had made her memorize when she was eight. “Not everyone lives like Ozzie and Harriet.”

Carrie’s nose wrinkled. It was clear she didn’t know who Ozzie and Harriet were; in fact many people didn’t. Ethel made a mental note that she and Gram needed to update that line, but it usually made people stop asking questions, regardless.

“So um . . . do you think you could ask Weezy if I could come to her birthday party?” Carrie said, rushing her words together. She bounced on her heels.

Ethel found that an odd request for someone who wasn’t even friends with Weezy, but she didn’t want to hurt Carrie’s feelings. “Um, I don’t know.”

“Well, could you just ask her for me?” Carrie persisted.

Ethel looked toward the cafeteria doors. Right now she could think of nothing but food. “I guess.”

Ethel picked up a freshly washed green, speckled tray out of the bin and placed it on the metal rail, sliding it along. Behind the plexiglass, steam rose from the trays of fried chicken. Next to that were bins of hot mashed potatoes, peas, and corn. Out of habit, Ethel picked up another tray and handed it to Carrie, who shook her head.

“That’s okay, I don’t need one,” Carrie said.

Ethel clucked. “What are you going to get, like your typical apple and a bottled water just so you can stay in your size zeros?” If Carrie could josh around, so could she. Ethel nodded to the lunch lady behind the Plexiglas. “Two pieces, please. Oh—can I have the . . .,” but the lunch lady cut her off, barking, “Y’all get what ya get!” as she did every time it was Fried Chicken Day.

Carrie moved beyond Ethel to the cashier. As she passed by, she cracked, “Wow, two pieces? Okay, if you want your butt to look huge, go ahead.”

Carrie had meant it just for Ethel’s ears, but the Soccer Chicas, Val and Georgia in line ahead of them, looked down at their own trays of fried chicken. Jess, a girl with long brown hair and a sturdy body (which in no way Ethel would categorize as *huge*) glared at Carrie. “Hey, are you calling us all fat?”

“Yeah, Carrie, I wouldn’t be trying to make new enemies if I were you,” Georgia added.

Carrie blushed dark pink. She stood frozen at the cash register, fumbling in her purse to pay for an apple and a bottle of water.

“Oh, you *guys*,” Ethel said, facing the entire line. “That was just a joke between us. She didn’t mean you guys.” She turned to Carrie. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Carrie said. “Seriously, I didn’t mean it.” She flashed a glance at Ethel.

Ethel paid for her lunch and walked into the noisy cafeteria, huffing out a short sigh. Being in an all-girls' school was sometimes like walking on hot coals—you never knew where the next little fire would flare up.

Carrie appeared by her side immediately. "I'm sorry. I really was joking, you know." She appeared edgy, overly conscious of her surroundings. Ethel could see why. All the girls at Stephönë's table tracked Carrie's every move. They looked like a pack of wild animals. Pairs of intent eyes coupled with tight, expectant smiles; they all looked as though they were waiting to pounce.

"It's okay," Ethel said, looking at the sad little apple in Carrie's clenched fist. "You can sit with us."

"Okay," Carrie said. She darted another look at Stephönë as they crossed the noisy cafeteria toward the table under the window where Yuki and Weezy were sitting.

"Hey guys," Ethel said, putting her tray down. "Where's Schreck?"

Weezy shrugged. "I don't know. I thought she'd be here by now."

"I think she's upset," Yuki said, spreading tuna surprise on rice crackers.

"Why?" Ethel asked.

"Her dad found out she spent twenty dollars on his credit card for Paperdollz clothes and grounded her."

"I thought it was for only five bucks," Ethel said. Carrie sat down opposite Yuki.

"Yeah," Weezy said, making room for Ethel. "She went back for more."

Ethel sighed and opened a carton of milk. "We told her not to do that."

"I know." Yuki shoved two crackers at a time in her mouth. "She said she forgot how much she spent. Now she's in trouble big time."

"She may not be able to come to my party," Weezy informed her grumpily.

"That stinks," Carrie said, opening her bottled water. "I've spent like thirty bucks and my mom doesn't care." Ethel peered at her fried chicken, the one lunch she looked forward to every two weeks. Everything was growing cold. "I'm gonna go find Schreck." She pushed a piece of chicken on a napkin to Carrie. "Here, you should really eat something."

Carrie stared down at it. "I told you I can't; it's fried."

Yuki's implacable expression didn't change, but Ethel could see her zeroing in. "So? Chicken is protein," Yuki said. "The basic building blocks for your body. What did you have for breakfast?"

Weezy watched Yuki, her owl eyes wide behind her glasses.

Carrie took a fork and peeled back the fried skin. "You're not supposed to eat breakfast," she said quietly.

"That's CRAZY!" Weezy yelled before retreating back into herself. Yuki's orange braces appeared without a smile, never a good thing. "Nutrition 101—always eat a big breakfast, a smaller lunch, and a smaller dinner. You'll get fat if you skip, 'cause your body needs the energy and you end up eating more later."

"Yeah, but if you skip a meal, that's fewer calories," Carrie protested. Ethel knew this wasn't going to turn out well. Yuki was like a supercomputer on every fact, statistic, and case study.

"Let's start with simple carbohydrates," Yuki began, interlacing her fingers.

Ethel got up. There was twenty minutes left in the lunch period. She wrapped up a piece of chicken in three napkins. Even if it was cold, she was taking it with her. "I'm going to go find Schreck," she announced.

Weezy licked her lips. "She might be in Mizz T's room," she whispered.

**

Ethel stood outside the computer room and looked in. Mizz T was not there, but the door was wide open. A slant of sunlight came through the vertical blinds slicing up the room, across laptops and birch veneer desks. A mess of computer science notations from the previous class splashed across the blackboard in yellow and pink chalk. Schreck sat by herself at one of the empty desks toward the front of the room. The sun shone upon her wings bangs, her face in repose. She wasn't eating lunch, but instead, writing in a small notebook.

Poor Schrecky Schreck, she looked so sad and alone. When Ethel had first moved to Maine four years ago, Gram had signed her up for a dance class at the YMCA. Dona Schrecongost was the only other kid close to her age in Junior Hip Hop. While all the rest

of the girls moved to the music, perfecting body locking and the Running Man, Schreck and Ethel moved their arms awkwardly, looking as if they were trying to communicate in sign language. Helpless, they watched the class “get it” while they dissolved into laughter at their own pitiful lack of a hip-hop gene. Yuki had Weezy for better or worse and Ethel had Schreck, her goofy half. Whenever she or Schreck felt bad, it was the other person’s job to be the cheer-up squad.

Ethel backed up, tiptoeing halfway down the hallway. Then, she began to run. She got up to speed, sprinted down the hallway through the door to the computer room, and slid halfway across the polished floor on the soles of her slick orthopedic shoes.

Schreck turned around. “Whoa! You scared me.”

“Here,” Ethel said, and dropped the greasy napkin of chicken onto Schreck’s notebook. “Lunch.”

Schreck had her head propped up against her elbow. “I already ate.”

“Hear ye, hear ye!” Ethel bellowed to an invisible audience. “I hereby proclaim today Giggle Day. If none of you in this kingdom starts to giggle right now, I will be forced to unleash the flying monkeys to jump on you and hump your legs!”

Schreck snorted, but a slight smile began to form.

“The flying monkeys will cover you in molasses and roll you in Cheerios—and you will be forced by the kingdom’s guards to give the monkeys five hours’ worth of Swedish massage until your wrists go numb.”

Schreck shook her head. “So weird.”

Ethel stared straight at her, the way they did at sleepovers for marathon staring contests. Ethel had those Slavic eyebrows that nearly joined at the middle; Schreck could not fight it. She began to laugh out loud, not *lol* but really, truly, loudly, out loud.

Ethel wiped her hands. “The monkeys have spared you.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“Yah.” Ethel peeled open the greasy napkin. “So, I heard about your credit card prob. Do you have to pay your dad back?”

Schreck shrank back into her seat, drawing circles in her notebook with her pencil. “Not really. He just yelled at me and told me I was grounded right in front of

Joyce.” Joyce was the nanny and most recently, her dad’s new girlfriend. “Now I can’t go to Weezy’s party.”

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” Ethel said, pulling out her plaid wallet. “Here’s twenty bucks. It’s my mad money, so you have to pay it back. Give it to your dad along with a note I’m gonna help you type. You’ll say you’re sorry and you’ll never do it again.” Ethel licked her fingers. “Scoot over.”

Ethel flipped the laptop on.

“Do you think it will work?” Schreck asked.

Ethel frowned, typing. This was one of Gram’s golden rules. “Yup. Anytime you say sorry and pay someone back, you’ll make it all better.” She began to type as Schreck rested her chin upon Ethel’s shoulder to oversee the note.

Dear Dad

I’m sorry I’m such a brat . . .

“What?” Schreck said, knocking Ethel’s fingers away from the keyboard.

“Tee hee.”

“Let me do it.” Schreck took over the keyboard.

Ethel picked up the chicken, smacking Schreck’s fingers. “Make sure you tell him you have really bad taste in virtual clothes.”

“Pssshhhh.” Schreck waved her off.

“Okay,” Ethel said, ripping away a chunk of chicken with her teeth. “You just let me know if you need my genius for anything else.”

Chapter 10

Usually at birthday parties, the parents answered the door, said hello, and went upstairs to leave the girls to themselves.

Weezy's parties were never like that. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Sunanda, her aunt and uncle, and family friends all greeted Ethel at the door, wearing saris and sarongs of all colors, from moth brown to lime green to sunset orange and red. They hovered around her and grabbed her cheeks, kissing both sides. They whisked her into the kitchen, heavy with the smells of curry sauces, and spoke to her in both English and Malayalam. Mr. Sunanda stood in a *mundu* and batik *lungi* and bent over Ethel, giving her a hug.

"It's been so long since we saw you. Your grandmother, is she coming?" he asked, his English heavily accented. Ethel had to listen carefully to answer him correctly.

"Um, not this time, but she told me to say hello."

"Have something to eat," Mrs. Sunanda said, turning around in her blazing red sari. She walked over to the stove and came back to give Ethel a spoonful of *gulaab jamun*. Ethel liked Weezy's parents. They were always so kind to her.

"Is it too hot?" Mrs. Sunanda asked, smiling. She wore her beautiful black hair pulled back, her lips outlined in red. Weezy's mom was so stunning, Ethel sometimes found herself shy around her.

"No, um, it's really good."

"You're so big now! And those stockings—so cute!" said Weezy's aunt, who had the same hairstyle but a slightly heavier face.

"I hear Louise say you are all making websites?" said Weezy's uncle.

Ethel stood there, holding Weezy's birthday present, trying to answer the questions of so many adults at once. She adjusted her itchy plaid skirt, trying not to pick at the butt of her yellow tights. "Yeah, we have this really cool class that lets us make websites. Mine's gonna be, um, for when I work for NASA." They all hung on her every word—this was *great*.

Weezy's mom's eyes widened and her smile broadened. "Isn't that something?" she said to her sister. "NASA." Weezy's aunt nodded, answering in Malayalam. Ethel

thought this was the right time to find Weezy, so she bowed her head and pointed to the living room. Weezy's dad and mom patted her and shoved her toward the living room with hearty smiles. "Go—go."

Weezy's house had once been a captain's house, and each room was papered with nautical themes. The kitchen had patterns of spoked ships' wheels, and all throughout the living room, masted ships etched like wood carvings stood out against a white background. In the living room, Weezy's younger sister, Leela, and Weezy's cousins were playing a game with dice by the giant brick fireplace.

"Hi Leela, where's Weez?"

Leela was a little cutie, only six, with short, dark curly hair and the longest lashes Ethel had ever seen. She splayed out on the rug, chewing on a fruit roll-up, and pointed. "Upstairs."

"Thanks."

Ethel took a narrow stairway to the second floor of the house, the walls papered in cutters and yawls. It was a small house with only two bedrooms and a bathroom at the top of the stairs. She pushed the door open to Weezy and Leela's room, which was decorated with red lobster boats.

Inside, Yuki and Schreck were sitting on Weezy's bed, hovering around what looked like a miniature treasure chest. Ethel walked in just as Weezy dipped her fingers into the chest and withdrew them covered in gold necklaces, bracelets, and rings.

"Ooh," Ethel said, coming close.

"Hey Effy," Weezy said, making room for her so that she too could sit on the bed. The tiny bells at the hem of Weezy's dark-blue-and-purple sari tinkled as she scooted back.

"Hey, our note worked," Schreck said, giving Ethel a friendly whap across the shoulder. "My dad didn't take the money though, so here." Schreck reached up under her orange dress and fetched a twenty-dollar bill out of the elastic waistband of her pink tights.

"Cool," Ethel said, opening her plaid wallet. "Now my mad money isn't mad anymore."

"It's happy because it's with you again," chirped Schreck.

Yuki pulled out tiny, delicate links of gold from the treasure chest. “Wow. These are so pretty.”

“You want to see what they gave me this year?” Weezy asked. It was an Indian tradition to give daughters gold at birth and on every birthday. Gold was the most precious thing you could give to someone, as if each necklace or ring meant to say, *I love you more than you could possibly even know*.

“Wow,” Ethel said, trying to adjust her tights. She could pull at her bunched undies now that no one was looking. She peered into the miniature chest, a bounty of teeny treasures. Weezy held up a little gold locket in the shape of an oval with her name inscribed on the front. Her fingers touched a tiny button on the side and the locket clicked open. On each side of the miniature oval was a picture of her mother and father. Ethel asked to see it and stared at it in her hand. How nice it would be to have a mom and dad smiling together in a locket! Coming to Weezy’s house always gave Ethel a mixture of feelings: on the one hand, she loved the feeling of warmth and comfort surrounding this family; on the other, she felt strange pangs, as if she were missing something. She looked at Schreck, who wanted to see the locket next. Schreck knew; she felt the same way.

“Maybe I should wear this one today,” Yuki said, holding up a gold band. She slipped it on her ring finger next to the ring she already wore that was embedded with Weezy’s birthstone. “Maybe *he* will get the hint.”

Weezy reached over and tugged the ring from Yuki’s hand, putting it back in the box. “Just forget it,” Weezy sighed. This surprised Ethel, and she looked at Schreck to see if she’d noticed.

Yuki got off the bed and stood by the window. She folded her arms and jerked her chin toward the backyard. “Guess who’s here?”

Ethel suddenly put it together. “Oh my God, is it Dinesh?” Ethel and Schreck jumped off the bed to go look. Outside on the lawn strewn with dead leaves, they could see an Indian boy all by himself, kicking at a soccer ball. Given all of the things Weezy had said about him over the years, including how much she dreaded the day she had to marry him, Ethel had pictured him to be an ugly, snaggle-toothed boy with cruel eyes. This was the first time the girls actually got a real good look at him. Actually, he really *wasn’t* that bad looking. Ethel even found him kind of cute. His dark hair was parted on

the side so it fell across his forehead; he had nice brown eyes, a serious mouth. He kicked the soccer ball hard into the side of the garage. They could feel the reverberation of it up in Weezy's bedroom.

"He has already been *rude* to me," Yuki said, her hand on her hip. She stood in a floral skirt, her belly pushing over the waistband.

Weezy pushed her glasses up on her nose unhappily. "He has been kind of a jerk today."

Yuki turned to the girls. "He thinks he's so great just because he got to come to this party wearing jeans and not a kurta and pajamas. The first thing he said to Weez was . . . 'You're wearing that?' *Then*, when her dad introduced us, I looked him right in the eye, I stuck out my hand, and I was like 'Hello—I'm Yuki Yamazaki, Weezy's best friend.' And he just looked at his stupid soccer ball in his hands. He didn't say anything!"

Weezy chewed her thumbnail. "Well, it was kind of intimidating. You kind of yelled it at him."

When Yuki got a head of steam up, it was frightening. "I *wasn't* yelling. Okay, Ethel, here—stick out your hand. It was like this." Yuki leveled her with a ferocious glare. "Hello—I'm Yuki Yamazaki—Weezy's best friend!"

Ethel blinked. "Okay, that was scary."

Yuki gritted her teeth, her orange braces creeping below her taut upper lip. "I'm going to the bathroom," she announced, and opened the door.

The second she left, Schreck turned to Weezy. "Whooooaaaa." Weezy held up her finger as if to say *shh* and peered around the bedroom door before closing it.

"All right, you guys can't say anything, but Yuki just got her first period two days ago, and she's been like . . . *crazy*," Weezy said.

"Oh," Schreck said, taken aback.

Ethel tapped her chin. "Hmm."

"Have either of you?" Weezy asked. Both shook their heads.

"Me neither. So just act like you don't know," Weezy said. "This could really turn out bad. My parents can't know that we're married—especially with Dinesh here."

"Yuki won't say anything," Schreck said.

"She *might*," Weezy hissed.

“When’s the last time you saw him?” Ethel asked.

“Probably four years ago. We never really say anything to each other. But his parents and mine are always talking about where we’re going to live and how many kids we’re going to have . . .” Weezy put her face in her hands. “Oh God, I can’t take it!”

Ethel put her hand on Weezy’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Weez, I’ll handle Yuki.”

A fog appeared upon Weezy’s glasses after she lifted her head from her hands. “I don’t want her to ruin my party.”

Ethel used her index finger to wipe away the fog, which made a squeaking sound like windshield wipers. “It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Schreck said, and gave Weezy a hug. “Let’s have a good time.”

**

Once Weezy’s mom and aunt brought the food out to the buffet table, Ethel had a hard time concentrating on anything. Weezy’s parties always featured a combination of American food and Indian food with sweets, *dhabas*, and other comforting treats. Ethel surveyed the table of tandoori chicken next to coconut shrimp over aromatic curried rice. There were mini bagel pizzas and spicy pickles, fruit roll-ups and *dosa*. All it lacked were potato chip finger sandwiches.

Weezy’s parents had come from the coastal region of Kerala, which Ethel always remembered because of the romantic description of it being snuggled between the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. Both of her parents were computer engineers, and Weezy’s mother had been pregnant when they moved to Maine. Unlike Yuki, whose parents had been born in the States, Weezy was a first-generation kid, just like her younger cousins, two girls with glossy dark hair and pierced ears. Her cousins wore street clothes unlike Weezy and Leela, little pink-and-dark-blue dresses that looked very glamorous on girls so young. Ethel stole looks at them, hoping that no one could see her trying to pick that infuriating wedgie out of the seat of her tights.

“Molé, come here,” Weezy’s mother said, using her familiar term of endearment, handing Weezy a brightly wrapped gift. “You can open it now.”

Weezy tore at the paper and looked at the ceiling and yelled, “Ella McBella!” She wrapped her arms around her mother. Ella McBella was a singer on Disney, and all the girls were crazy for her albums. Weezy watched her show every afternoon after school. When Weezy got excited or wanted to communicate faster with her parents, she spoke in Malayalam. It was really funny. Weezy’s voice became higher, and her words began to bend with a nasal twang. Ethel watched as Weezy stared up at her mother and jabbered away. Even though Ethel couldn’t understand the words, she could see the joy in Weezy’s face. Weezy’s mother bent over her, her golden bracelets clanging as she brushed back Weezy’s hair.

Ethel held a plate of tandoori chicken, feeling suddenly very upset. She didn’t know why, but something that really hurt rose like a flood in her throat, just watching Weezy’s mom with her beautiful hands laced with thin, jangling bracelets smoothing back her daughter’s hair.

Snowdrifts, dipping telephone wires, a broken heater. Looking over at this woman who called herself “Gram” driving beside her, Ethel had no idea where they were going. Clutching Baby Dreams and Baby Bear, she’d learned to cry without looking as though she were crying. No tears, no visible change in her face, just a racking at her chest, a tearing apart, as if a little man deep inside pounded at her ribs with a sledgehammer. Whispering to the doll and stuffed bear in her arms, “You’ll be all right, just keep looking out that window.”

All she remembered was the TV, a dumb cartoon, a cuddly aardvark talking in an exaggerated voice, trying to be funny. Even back when she was eight years old, Ethel knew the difference between Bugs Bunny’s smart talking, carrot-chomping wit and this pandering sap.

What else is on? sighed Baby Bear clutched in Ethel’s right arm.

Turn to channel seven, Baby Dreams said, clutched in the left.

The heat had been off for a week and the house was a mess. With empty, cold medicine boxes piled in the corner, the coffee table sticky with full ashtrays, a hot plate, and some brown goo fused into the dirty pink carpet, who knew where the remote could

be? Ethel had to unwind the blanket from her body and stand up to manually change the channel. But the apartment was cold, even with her blanket wrapped tightly around her toes. As morning began to tilt toward afternoon, Ethel knew to keep the TV volume low so as not to wake her mother, Charlene.

That was the last thing she remembered before a fierce knocking at the door jolted her, and she dropped Baby Bear. Voices outside the door demanded to be let in. There was another pounding against the door so loud, it seemed impossible her mother could sleep through it. Her eyes whipped toward her mother's bedroom. Why wouldn't Charlene get up! More pounding—

They're gonna break it, Baby Bear said, cockeyed on the floor. Ethel scooped him back up, finding the will to move, and tiptoed to the front door. It reverberated from the pounding, as if it would bite her. She drove the bolt back and flattened herself against the wall. Several men and one heavy woman in uniform piled in. Someone almost stepped on her. *Be careful, here's a kid*. Everybody was using a hard voice. One of the men began shoving stuff off the kitchen counter into special yellow bags as another brought Ethel's mother out of the bedroom in just her T-shirt and underwear. Charlene was angry, Ethel remembered. She had dark circles under her eyes; a yellow scrunchy held her frazzled brown hair in a ponytail. Ethel clutched Baby Dreams and Baby Bear so hard, her palms started to sweat. A big moony face appeared in front of Ethel, the heavy woman in uniform, dark whiskers dotting her chin. "You be a good girl now," the woman said. "Somebody's gonna come get you."

They shuffled her mother out of the apartment door with her hands behind her back. One of the men in uniform kicked in the door directly across the hall. Suddenly the stairwell and halls of the apartment complex were filled with neighbors. Two men pushed her mother's friend Joe George out of his apartment too.

Their apartment had never had been that clean, but after the men in uniforms were done, it was wrecked. Muddy footprints, crushed boxes, and spilled liquid covered the kitchen floor. That big moony face was back.

Your grandma is driving from Maine to get you, honey pie; I'm going to help you pack up your stuff.

Ethel didn't like being called honey pie by this fat woman with the hairy chin. A

fluttery pulse pounded her throat.

Where are you taking my mom? She remembered some answer that didn't make sense. One neighbor stood in the hallway smoking a cigarette with a disgusted expression upon her face. *These people should be sterilized*, she muttered.

It was hard to recall time after that. All she remembered was huddling in a spare bedroom in her neighbor's apartment, staring at two of her mom's large suitcases in the corner. Who'd packed her clothes? She couldn't remember. Later that night, a tall, older woman with enormous blond hair stood over her. The room was still dim.

"You like to play poker?" the woman asked.

Ethel rubbed her eyes. "I don't know."

"I'll teach it to you in the car."

Gram was like a general, with a *hup-hup* command in her voice: "Get some coffee in me and then we're casting off."

A long drive, all night long. A small apartment, and *whoosh*, suddenly, there was a new life with rules and schedules for everything: bath time, supertime, homework time. Everything was flavored brown in those early days after arriving in Maine: sadness and anger, one toppling into the other, fights with Gram erupting over small stuff. Ethel had never been told to make her bed before. Rather than smooth her sheets across her bed, she ripped them off and dumped them out the window. "Oh yeah, you had a lot to get out of your system in those days," Gram liked to remind her. "One big pain in my butt, that was you."

It took a while to get used to everything—to have food on the table every evening at 6:30 p.m., to believe that when Gram said she'd be there to pick Ethel up, she'd really be there. That was the thing. She was *there*. So what if Gram wasn't the overly "huggy" type . . . She was there. In four years Ethel had grown to love Gram with a fierceness she'd never felt for her mother.

But still, watching Weezy now, with her beautiful mother, Ethel felt the tandoori chicken stick like glue in her throat as she tried to eat it. Her own mother was a slack-eyed, burnt-out druggie mess. Her dad . . . Who knew where he was? Charlene never told her she had a dad, so he didn't count. If these people at this party only knew what Ethel truly came from . . . they would have never let her in the door. Ethel had to turn away,

walk toward the buffet, and pretend to busy herself, choosing other appetizers to put on her plate, not that she wanted anything. It was rising up beyond her will, that horrible flooding thing in her throat—there were too many people around who'd notice if she started to cry. *Stop it, stop it.*

Her cell phone beeped in the pocket of her plaid skirt. Ethel took a deep breath and exhaled. She looked at it. The message was from Carrie Swan.

r u at the prty?

Suddenly Ethel remembered she'd never gotten around to asking Weezy if Carrie could come. Oh *shoot, shoot, shoot*, Ethel thought looking around. How could she get out of this? It really hadn't been her place to ask Weezy to invite Carrie to her birthday party. She should've just told Carrie that from the beginning.

Ethel texted back: ya, but it is fam only, expt 4 Y & S

Carrie was just going to have to understand.

There was a pause and another beep from the phone.

thx a lot—have FUN ☺

Ethel snorted, reading it. With everything she was dealing with at the moment, this was so annoying. Carrie really had no right to expect an invitation, even if Ethel had forgotten to ask. Besides, Weezy had made it perfectly clear she wanted only Ethel, Schreck, and Yuki there. At the risk of hurting Carrie's feelings, Ethel hadn't wanted to mention that, but on the other hand, Carrie wasn't even that close to Weezy! Oh, Ethel hated being in the middle.

Just then Weezy ran to put the Ella McBella disc into the CD player. Ethel had no more time to ponder this social faux pas because Schreck sidled up, her lips blue from the fruit roll-up she'd been eating.

"I think I got Yuki calmed down," Schreck said through blue teeth.

"Yeah?"

"We were just in the kitchen, and I made her eat something. I guess she hadn't eaten anything today."

"Why?"

"She says she doesn't feel good."

Oh, join the club, Ethel thought.

“Whoopsie,” Schreck said, staring across the room as Dinesh came through the back door. “We got trouble.” She made a sound like the alarm bells of a submarine descending—*whoop, whoop, whoop*—and Ethel looked at her. Schreck was such a goof sometimes. Led by his mother, Dinesh entered the living room. Schreck and Ethel swiveled to see if Yuki was still in the kitchen. She was. Standing there with a maple doughnut in her hand, her eyes narrowed.

Ethel and Schreck surveyed the scene like a battlefield. Weezy was in the center of the living room, oblivious, dancing with Leela and her cousins to Ella McBella. Weezy flailed to the bouncy song, her eyes closed, ever vigilant to keep her oversized glasses from slipping down the bridge of her nose.

“It could be a close match,” Schreck whispered, holding her fruit roll-up like a microphone. “In one corner, weighing 125 pounds, introducing heavyweight champion Yuki Yamazaki— known as the Killer Tornado in the four corners of the world. And in the other corner, weighing 85 pounds not counting the soccer ball, is the rival for Weezy’s affection, the Great Dinesh. Welcome to the Fight of the Century!”

Oh boy, Ethel thought. But in fact, Schreck was not far off the mark. Now that Ethel could see him up close, he really was a good-looking boy. But he wore a resentful pout, and she could see that he wasn’t really happy about being dragged inside. His mother handed him a present wrapped with a green bow, and Dinesh seemed reluctant to take it. As he approached Weezy, Yuki began to close in from the other side of the room. Oblivious, Weezy kept dancing as she spun and punched the air.

“Yuki Yamazaki, moving in for the jugular,” Schreck whispered into her fruit roll-up.

“Gimme that,” Ethel said, taking away the sticky blue wand. Somebody had to warn Weezy, yet she dared not tip off the adults, who were all crowded around the living room with paper plates in their hands. Ethel deftly lobbed the fruit roll-up at Weezy, smacking her in the back of the head. Weezy stopped dancing, disoriented, her eyes a little googly behind her glasses.

“Happy birthday, Louise. Dinesh would like to give you something,” said his mother, smiling down at Weezy. She sashayed backward in her yellow sari, her *neriyathu* tucked inside her blouse, leaving Dinesh alone to face Weezy. Yuki stood at her side.

“Here,” Dinesh said. His eyes barely met Weezy’s before they slid away. Weezy warily took the present from him. His mother and father sat with Weezy’s parents in the corner of the living room next to the fire. Everyone watched Weezy, who opened it.

It was a book. *Emily Post’s Guide to Manners*.

“Thanks?” Weezy said, blinking at Dinesh. Now finished with his obligation, Dinesh began to walk out of the living room, but his mother intercepted him. Standing up from her chair, she produced a piece of paper from within the folds of her fringy sari.

“Dinesh, show her your bio data.”

Bio data? Ethel thought. Dinesh rolled his eyes and handed the sheet of paper to Weezy, who adjusted her glasses on her nose to peer at it. Yuki craned over Weezy’s shoulder with great interest.

“Mmm hmm, mmhmm,” Yuki said, pointing to a line on the page. “I like what you’ve done here.” This so intrigued Ethel that she began to move closer to see what this was all about. Schreck followed.

“Says here you plan to be an information technology specialist at Google when you graduate,” Yuki said, staring down Dinesh, who was two inches shorter. “That is, after you plan to go to New York University.”

For the first time, Dinesh seemed to give Yuki his full attention, as if Weezy were simply a tree he was standing next to. “Yeah, that’s right,” he said, his brow furrowed.

Yuki’s eyebrows rose as she scrutinized his bio data. Ethel tried to get in closer to see it. *What was that, a resume?*

“Mmm hmm,” Yuki said, her tongue making a sharp click. “Looks to me like this isn’t so much your biodata as a *wish list*.”

Dinesh pointed to the piece of paper. “I get all As in advanced math and science. I’ve already got references for NYU.”

Yuki didn’t seem convinced and looked away. “I don’t know. This is a prized daughter here. You might have to do a little better.”

Now Dinesh was irritated. “I make two grand every summer at my uncle’s farm.”

“So? Me and Weez have a business together. And we both get As in advanced math and science. Whoop-di-do. *And* we’re investing in our 401(k) . . .”

Perhaps Weezy was just beginning to pick up on the fact that all the parents were noticing tension, or maybe it was because she didn’t want Dinesh to learn that she and Yuki already had a shared future together, but she grabbed the sheet of paper from Yuki’s hands. “I’m sure it’s just fine,” she said quickly to Dinesh. “Thanks for the book.”

Ethel moved fast. She tapped the button on the CD player to advance to the next Ella McBella song, which thankfully, was uptempo. Immediately the room filled with drums, guitar, and Ella’s high, bouncy voice. Schreck flanked Yuki on the other side.

“Dance,” Ethel hissed, pushing Yuki away from Weezy.

Yuki flared her braces. “I don’t feel like it.”

“I am saving your marriage,” Ethel whispered.

Schreck flapped her arms, unsure of how to dance. Even years after that hip-hop class, Schreck had the coordination of Bambi on ice. Yuki did not dance so much as allow Ethel to move her limbs stiffly like a giant-sized doll. “He’s not good enough for her,” she whispered back. “He only got a B-minus in French.”

Schreck grabbed Weezy’s arm and yanked her into their uncomfortable circle. Soon, all four girls were dancing with tight smiles, pretending to have fun until the adults lost interest in what the kids were doing and got up to retire to the kitchen. Dinesh shook his head, picking up his soccer ball to go back outside.

“Don’t worry, Yuki,” Weezy said, watching him go. “I don’t like him; he doesn’t like me. We just have to do this for our parents.”

“Yeah,” Schreck said, trying to do a split in her dress. Everyone could hear her pink tights rip at the crotch. She grunted and hefted herself back up one knee at a time. “He’s gonna marry that soccer ball, anyway.”

Ethel took Weezy and twirled her around. “Yeah, and they’ll have second-gen little soccer balls.” Weezy snorted with laughter. “While he goes to work at Google and makes \$100,000 a year.”

A smile appeared, finally, on Yuki’s face. “Yeah, right. Like he’s gonna make \$100,000 a year.”

Chapter 11

“Mizz T, what do you think of my future self?”

Mizz T squatted down next to the computer screen to check out Ethel’s Photoshopped rendition. “You might want to center the text under that image. Looking good,” Mizz T said, giving her a reassuring pat on the back.

“Ya, but what do you *think* of my future self?” Ethel tapped the image on her computer. Ethel tried to read what Mizz T was thinking as she cocked her head.

“Um,” said Mizz T carefully. “Despite the fact that your avatar is eight feet tall and for some inexplicable reason is wearing a heat shield and carrying a light saber, I’d say it’s great.”

“That’s for the evil robots who will attack us on Mars.” Ethel smiled, satisfied. In just four weeks, she knew her website was looking pretty slick, better than everybody else’s, even Stephönë’s (that her mom didn’t help her with . . . *ya, right*). At first, Carrie wanted to copy Ethel’s future self avatar idea, but to Ethel’s relief, Mizz T told Carrie she needed to come up with her own original idea in making a website for her future career. Ethel was glad, for she’d spent a lot of time conjuring up material for her bio and credentials and had even made up a list of speaking engagements. “*No Television for a Year and a Half: a Mars Mission Reality*” by *Ethel F. Effelby, seminar, National Convention of Clinical NASA Psychologists, Cape Canaveral*. She’d even learned how to incorporate music. Each time a page on her site opened, the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey* played.

Beside her, Schreck was busy working on a website featuring the future museum she was going to work for as a paleontologist. The museum was going to exhibit the world’s most dangerous meat-eating dinosaurs. She’d managed to incorporate in her website a video of a T. rex lumbering in slow motion to the musical strains of Röyksopp.

“God!” Weezy yelped. She pounded the keyboard. “Why. Doesn’t. This. Stupid. Thing. Work?”

“Easy, easy,” said Mizz T, crossing the room to figure out the problem. “Never beat the keyboard, Louise, you only make it madder. Here—it’s simple—you can figure it out, see?”

Weezy had been working on the text and Yuki on the images for their website. After three weeks of arguing about it, they’d finally come up with a name for their new business: Knittin’ 4 Kittens.

Ethel began resizing her giant avatar just as Carrie breezed in with a tray of pink-frosted cupcakes. “I’m here,” she sang out. “Finally.” Ethel’s eyes automatically lifted to the clock above the door. Five minutes past the class start time. Carrie had on high-heeled Mary Janes, a plaid mini, and a new pink T-shirt that matched the color of the cupcake frosting.

“You’re late again.” Mizz T frowned, looking at Carrie’s pink T-shirt.

“I know. I’m sorry. But it’s because I wanted to bring you snacks, Mizz T.”

“Uh huh,” Mizz T said, reaching for a cupcake. “Nice shirt.”

Ethel strained to look over her computer. “Lemme see.”

Carrie turned to display the shirt. It was a slice of pie on a plate with the numbers 3.14 underneath.

“Oh,” Ethel said. “Ha ha. Pi, I get it.”

Yuki nodded briefly, but said nothing.

“Yeah,” Carrie said, sitting down next to Ethel at the computer station. “Guess what Stephönë said about it?” Carrie licked the frosting on a cupcake. “She looked at it and said all snotty, ‘Why does a *piece of pie* cost three dollars and fourteen cents?’” Carrie broke up laughing.

“Yeah, I saw that T-shirt in the store,” Schreck said, staring at her screen. “I just thought twenty-eight bucks was, you know, a little much for a T-shirt, that’s all.”

Carrie looked down at her shirt. “I know, but,” she said. “I just had to have it.”

Sometimes there were moments around friends when cupcake could stick in your throat. Ethel glanced at Schreck, who was sort of known for her T-shirts; they were her shtick. It was a little awkward, but Carrie really was trying to fit in. For several weeks now, she’d been sitting with them at lunch. Yuki tolerated her; Weezy and Schreck were slowly growing more accommodating, but Ethel was the only one who had truly warmed

up to her. It was hard, especially when Carrie had gone from being a mean girl to super sweet over night. Often, she'd bring in special snacks or little knickknacks, like matching key chains she bought for everyone. It was almost as if she were trying to catch up quickly to the kind of friendship that Ethel, Yuki, Weezy, and Schreck had built up for years.

At least they were having a good influence on Carrie. She seemed more sure of herself than at the start of the school year. She was starting to bring real lunches to school. She had even learned how to do a website on her own without asking for Mizz T's help every five seconds. Ethel leaned over to peek at what Carrie was working on now.

"Heyyyy," Ethel said suspiciously. "Is that a picture of your future self?" Carrie immediately covered the computer screen with her hands.

"Don't freak, Ethel, it's just a placeholder," Carrie said. "I just needed to practice dropping in pictures so when I find my dream restaurant, I can load it in."

Ethel could see through Carrie's splayed fingers that the entire website had become a social profile, similar to Stephöñë's. "You're going to have to change all of that, you know," Ethel said.

"I know, shh, I'm just playing around with colors and text."

The next moment, Carrie's cell phone went off, vibrating with a *whirr whirr*. She slipped it out of her pocket and held it under the desk. No one was allowed to use cell phones during the school day at Seaside and Carrie knew it, but regardless, she pretended to type on her keyboard with one hand while using her thumb to send a text message. Mizz T was not easy to fool, however, and shot her a sharp look.

"Carrie, you know the rules. Turn it off or I'll take it," she said, palm out.

"Yeah, uh." Carrie looked up from her phone. "I'm really sorry, Mizz T, it's just that my mom is supposed to pick me up after school and she just texted me she can't."

"I don't want to hear excuses."

"It's off!" Carrie stowed it in her backpack and tried to smile. "Promise!"

Ethel blushed, embarrassed for Carrie. She would've died if Mizz T had spoken to her like that.

“You can always take the public bus,” Ethel whispered as Carrie slipped her phone back into her pocket.

“I don’t know which one to take,” Carrie whispered. “I’ve always gotten a ride.”

Ethel went back to resizing her images and plugging in code. “My uncle is picking me up after school today,” she said. “You can come home with me, and your mom can pick you up later.”

“Yeah?” Carrie brightened.

“Yeah, it’s no problem.”

“Awesome.”

**

At 2:35 p.m., Uncle Fritz’s blue Toyota sat running at the curb, just outside the front doors. He got out to greet Ethel, wearing his Portland Pirates cap and a blue paint-stained vest with the name LINDA on the front breast pocket.

“Hiya Ethel!” he said, loping up to her and Carrie. “Tell me something.” He pulled several blue paint chips out of his vest pocket. “Which color do you like best for a ball gown?”

Carrie said nothing, staring at him.

“Uh, this is my uncle Fritz,” Ethel said, standing between them. “Fritzzy, this is Carrie, my friend.”

“Hiya Carrie,” Fritz said with his stubbly smile, hand outstretched.

“Hi,” Carrie said quietly, holding her books to her chest.

“So, which one, Ethel?” Fritz said. He tapped a dark ocean blue paint chip. “That’s my favorite.”

“Yeah, that’s nice,” Ethel said.

Satisfied, Fritz slipped the chips back into his vest. “We just have to stop at the fabric store on the way home so I can get some rickrack.”

Fritz’s car was a beater with a backseat filled with random items like cigar boxes, metal street signs, empty cartons, and crumpled fast food bags. His car always looked

like some kind of neat garage sale, but now Ethel could see it through Carrie's eyes as she moved debris off the seat with a distasteful flick of her hand.

Uncle Fritz talked the entire time as he drove, about his job at the tannery and especially about the new one-armed guy who was really nice. Occasionally he stopped in the middle of a sentence to say, "Oh, would you look at that one!" as his focus was momentarily distracted by a fine specimen of a squirrel.

"So Carrie," Fritz said over his shoulder. "Do you have any pets?"

"Yes," Carrie said reluctantly. Ethel felt a tiny twang of irritation in the way Carrie had answered him. She wouldn't volunteer any more information until Ethel elbowed her. "We have a dog. His name is Kahlua."

"Oh, I love dogs," Fritz said. "I'm not allowed to have dogs in my apartment, but if I did, boy, I'd get twenty of them." Ethel wondered what a landlord would have to say about live squirrels, but let the matter rest.

Only when Fritz left the car running in the parking lot of the fabric store to pick up some items did Carrie lose her inhibition.

"Oh my God," she said, amazed. "He is so weird! Why is he making a ball gown?"

For some reason, Ethel didn't want to say, "It's for a squirrel." So, she lied. "He makes clothes for a side job." It wasn't totally a lie.

"And why does his vest say Linda?" Carrie asked, her face animated.

"I think he got it at Goodwill," Ethel answered.

"Who's Linda?"

Ethel shrugged, that strange feeling of irritation returning. "I don't *know*. The name of the person who gave away that vest, I guess."

Carrie seemed to pick up on her tone and sat back in the seat. "He shops at Goodwill," she said in wonder, looking out the window.

Now Ethel became really irritated. "*I* shop at the Goodwill."

Carrie turned her head slowly to face Ethel. "Why?"

"'Cause I get all my best outfits there." Her brows cramped. "Don't make fun of my uncle."

"I'm not," Carrie said. "I just . . . I never saw someone like him before."

“He’s . . .” Ethel was going to say a word the whole family used to describe Fritz, but instead she said, “a good person.”

At that moment Carrie’s phone chirped, and she pulled it out. She read the message and dumped the phone back into her purse. Now it was her turn to be irritated. “All she has to do is get her hair done and she waits till four o’clock to do it. Now she said she won’t be finished till six tonight,” she said. “I hate when she does this to me.”

“Well, it’s my turn to make dinner, so you can help me and stay if you want,” Ethel said, glad to be on another topic.

This got Carrie excited. “Oh yeah, okay. I love to cook!”

Fritz drove them all the way home to the Eastern Prom, dropping them off at the apartment. Ethel gave him a quick squeeze through the window. “See you this weekend,” she said. Fritz gave her his sunny smile. “Okay, ’bye Ethel!”

**

“Where’s your room?” Carrie asked, moments after Ethel let them both into the apartment. After the scene with Fritz, Ethel had anticipated this question and more. With Yuki, Weezy, and Schreck, who’d known her for years, these were not questions they asked. It was always an uncomfortable area with new people.

Ethel dropped the key on the counter. “You’re standing in it,” she said, nodding at the pullout couch. “That’s my bed.”

“What?” Carrie said, shocked, as if Ethel were kidding. Then, in a small voice, “Oh.”

Ethel narrowed her eyes. Carrie had told her all about her own palatial house, her parents’ European getaways, the shopping mall outings. She really had no idea how other people lived. Gram worked hard to keep them in this expensive apartment, and Ethel resented all of the judgment that rested on one little word: *Oh*.

Ethel slid her iPad out of its neoprene case on the kitchen counter. “Do you have any homework?”

“Yeah,” Carrie said, her finger brushing the black fringe on the showgirl-leg lampshade. “But I’ll do it later.”

“Well, I gotta do some before Gram gets home, but maybe we can check out the Paperdollz Mall real quick.”

“Ooh ya.” Carrie clapped her hands. “Do you think Yuki and those guys would mind if I made myself into a Paperdoll for the LOL Patrol?”

“I guess not,” Ethel said, although she hadn’t asked her friends about it. She wondered if they really would mind. Carrie took over the keyboard, her face radiant. “Do you think I should go with the leopard mini or the hot pink one?” she asked, clicking on different outfits to dress her doll.

Ethel opened her mouth to protest. She didn’t want anyone in the LOL Patrol looking like a tramp; after all, this wasn’t the Cherrybomb Girlz! But then she thought of Yuki, who insisted they each maintain their own avatar personality.

“I don’t know,” Ethel said, pulling out a bag of microwave popcorn from the cabinet. “You decide.”

“You know what I heard today?”

“What?” Ethel opened the microwave door and pushed the keypad.

“Bayley told me that Stephönë likes Nessa’s boyfriend now and has been secretly IMing him under a different screen name. Then Stephönë pretended to IM him as Nessa and started a fight with him.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” Carrie’s eyes blazed. “And Nessa found out today and now they’re in the hugest fight!” She jumped up and down, giggling. “Oh God, I wonder if they kicked Stephönë out of the Cherrybomb Girlz. I’m gonna go check their club page.”

“Geez Louise,” Ethel said, shaking her head. “It’s all . . . so stupid.” When the popcorn was done, she emptied the bag into a bowl they could share. “Aren’t you glad you’re not part of that anymore?”

After Carrie hadn’t said anything for a moment, Ethel looked over her shoulder. A small sidebar on the Cherrybomb Girlz club page revealed that more than 2,376 people had checked out their club page. Carrie clicked on Stephönë’s avatar, opening her profile. Another sidebar showed that Supafly Cherry had spent more than \$150 US on her virtual outfits. Carrie made a sound of disgust and clicked on Stephönë’s journal as Ethel shoved popcorn in her mouth, both of them reading through the entries.

Monday-10/13 hah! Sassy Cherry is no more yall—done, done, done! She freaking FLIPPED OUT at lunch 2day and called me a “bee” in front of every1, and now her sorry a\$\$ is threw!

Thursday 10/20

Oo wats this? Now General Genius of the “LOL Patrol” (such a *cool* name) thinks she can talkback to ma Cherrybomb Girlz in class and stick up for Sassy! Well gess wat yall, you aint seen nothing yet, let me tell u abt those loser twins Sassy and General Genius, we got sum surprises for them. Stay tooned and keep it all on the down low yall . . . hee hee

Saturday 10/24

Well I decided this all needs to be recorded 4 real yall cuz if were gonna be big stars sum day, ya gotsta do it indy style—it’s the only way execs take notice anymore so from now on this journal is done! U be seeing me on the KidVid from now on so go to my private guestbook and click on the link that will take u to the drama that unfolds every day! Wink wink.

Ethel frowned. She didn’t know Stephönë had been talking more crap about her on Paperdollz. “What does she mean she’s going to start more drama on KidVid?” Ethel asked. “What the heck is that?”

“It’s a new video site everybody is posting these funny videos to,” Carrie said. “Stephönë forgot that I’m the one who set it up, so I know all the passwords to their channel.”

“I don’t think I really want to be on Paperdollz anymore,” Ethel grumbled, walking away. It was no longer fun to be the LOL Patrol if they were going to be constantly made fun of. After Ethel had switched the LOL Patrol guestbook to “private,” she thought that would be the end of these nasty comments. This whole thing was getting out of hand, and it bothered Ethel to be called Carrie’s “loser twin.”

A click of the mouse opened to a snippet of video on KidVid.

Against the background of a pink bedroom wall stood Stephönë with Taylor and Nessa behind her. The tight camera shot revealed only their heads and necks, but the makeup they wore was unbelievable! Dark eye shadow, blush, and, of course, shocking bright red lipstick. Each of them wore a pageboy cap with silk scarves wrapped like bandanas underneath. The video was ten seconds long. Only Stephönë spoke.

“Welcome to the first episode of the Cherrybomb Girlz. I’m Supafly, and these are my girls, Diva and QTpie. Each week we will tell you about the drama in our school. It’s an *all-girls*’ school. When people get in our face, we will get right back in theirs and you will see it all happen here. Keep it in mind, y’all, because we intend to make *this* our pilot episode. Remember, you saw it here first.”

Stephönë finished the video with an aggressive snap of her fingers. When it ended, Ethel and Carrie looked at each other. “We’re gonna have to put a stop to this,” Ethel said.

Carrie went back to the Paperdollz site. “I know. I’ll pretend to be somebody else and write on her guestbook that she’s ugly and . . .”

“No!” Ethel said, covering Carrie’s hands on the keyboard. “You’ll only give her what she wants! More drama so she can do this . . . this stupid show about it for everybody to see! No, Carrie, we’ve got to tell Mizz T or something.”

“No way,” Carrie said, shaking her head. “You can’t bring a teacher into it or else Stephönë will use it against us. You don’t know her like I do.”

Troubled, Ethel stared at the still image of Stephönë in the video. “Maybe if we told her mom . . .”

“Yeah right,” Carrie said. “I’ve met her mom. She’d probably think this was cool.”

“She shouldn’t be able to get away with this,” Ethel said, agitated. She paced the kitchen, trying to think.

“I’ll just post like fifty comments to her KidVid video that she sucks and that . . .”

“No!” Ethel yelled. “Don’t do anything more!”

Carrie frowned. “Don’t tell me what to do. I’ll do what I want to do.”

Ethel could see how Carrie would make it even worse. Oh! Why had she ever gotten involved! “You’re the one who started all this drama,” Ethel muttered. “I wish I had never been dragged into it.”

When Ethel turned again, she found Carrie angrily pulling her phone out of her bag.

“What are you doing?”

Carrie didn’t answer her. “Mom?” she said. “I need you to pick me up *right* now.”

Ethel watched Carrie for a few moments, then decided that if Carrie was going to act like that, there was nothing more to say. Besides, dinner had to get started. She pulled out a package of hamburger from the refrigerator.

“I don’t care. I need you to pick me up right now!” There was a moment where it was clear Carrie wasn’t going to get her way. Ethel pretended not to listen, but it was hard not to when Carrie stomped her foot. “I hate you,” Carrie seethed, and snapped her phone shut.

Ethel sighed and pulled out some chili beans, onion, and garlic from the pantry. Right now she had more important things to worry about. This KidVid video troubled her. All the girls at Seaside who had a Paperdollz account would find it and it would really get around. Ethel realized she couldn’t afford to alienate Carrie, not if they were going to be a united front.

“It would be a lot more fun cooking this if you stayed,” Ethel said over her shoulder.

Carrie curled away from her on the farthest part of the couch. *What a baby*, Ethel thought. She weighed what to do for a second, then went over to the coffee table. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV, tossing the remote next to Carrie.

“Ella McBella’s on at five o’clock,” Ethel said bluntly, and headed back to the kitchen.

While Ethel chopped the garlic, browned the beef, and got the water on the stove boiling, Carrie bundled herself on the couch and watched the after-school shows. In perhaps twenty minutes, she seemed to forget she was mad and laughed out loud.

“Who do you like more?” Carrie called to Ethel in the kitchen. “The blond twin or the brown-haired one?”

“Um, usually I watch *NOVA*,” Ethel said, stirring tomato sauce into a cast iron pot. “But the blond one, I guess.”

“Me too, he is so cute,” Carrie said, and got off the couch. “Someday I wanna be a private chef for somebody like him.” Ethel said nothing, glad for the change of topic. She wanted to be friendly with Carrie again. A strategy was forming in her mind. It would do no good for Carrie to go off on her own and post revenge comments to everything Stephönë wrote; it would only fuel this fire. Ethel needed time to think and to keep Carrie from doing something rash. They needed to stick together.

Carrie stood at the counter, watching what Ethel was doing. “You need some spices in that, you know.”

Ethel glanced at her over her shoulder. “You’re the chef. Get me some.”

Carrie picked a few out of the spice rack and began shaking one of the small containers into the pot of chili.

“Whoa,” Ethel said, stopping her. “What are you putting in here?” She looked at the label on the spice jar. “Uh, coriander might make it taste funny.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Carrie said, distracted. “I thought whatever you put in might make it taste good.”

“Here, hand me the chili powder,” Ethel said.

Carrie peered at the rack. “Which one is that?”

“The red stuff—right in front of you.” Ethel considered the next question carefully, given Carrie’s hair-trigger mood this afternoon. “Do you, um . . . cook with spices a lot?”

“I don’t really get to cook a lot at home ’cause we go out to dinner so much,” Carrie said. She reached up to the cabinet to pull two plates out of the cupboard. “I’ll garnish the plates. I know how to do that.”

“Kay,” Ethel said, pulling carrots and a cucumber out of the refrigerator. “Do one for my Gram too; she should be home soon.”

“What do you think of this?” Carrie said after she’d made little rosettes out of carrots and julienned the cucumber so that it fanned around the rosettes.

“Wow,” Ethel said, impressed. “Cool.”

“I’ll make a couple more,” Carrie said happily. “Ooh, I forgot to tell you, I was on the chat room last night after dinner and no one was on, so I got bored and began to talk to myself. And I learned how to do this really cool thing.” She put down the carrot and the knife, and switched on her iPad. “Here, I’ll show you.”

She watched Carrie sign on to the Seaside’s pink-and-green chat room and log in under her screen name: **Celebritychef**. Several girls were already on at this hour in the Deer Isle lounge. Carrie chose the Ragged Island lounge, which was empty.

“Check this out,” Carrie said, typing: hi GG **General Genius**: hello PP
On the chat room it appeared as

5:47 PM **Celebritychef**: hi GG

General Genius: hello PP

“Wow!” Ethel said. “It looks like I’m on the chat with you!”

“Yeah,” said Carrie, excited. “Even though it’s just me, I can make it look like we’re talking back and forth.”

“You can tell it’s not me, though, because the time stamp isn’t by my screen name,” Ethel said.

“Yeah, but nobody really notices that.” Carrie’s eyes twinkled. “We could use this trick if we needed to.” She let the implication hang for a moment. Ethel smiled. *Now* they were working together.

“All right, let me try.” Ethel logged in under General Genius and used the bold HTML codes to do the same thing. Pretty soon, they were giggling, writing to each other on the chat room and putting words in each other’s electronic mouths.

5:47 PM **Celebritychef**: u have stinky feets

General Genius: o I know! I totally agree

5:48 PM **General Genius**: tell me whos the best in the world?

Celebritychef: of course u are *bows and kisses stinky feets*

“Hee hee,” Ethel said. “That’s so funny.”

“I know,” Carrie squealed. “We should just keep this between us so we can use it if we have to.”

“Yeah,” Ethel said, nodding. “That’s a really good idea.”

**

The smell of hearty chili filled the room when Gram finally made it through the door at 6:15 p.m. “Hello dears,” Gram said, shuffling in, tired.

“Gram, this is my friend Carrie,” Ethel said, laying out the garnished plates on the butcher-block kitchen counter. “Her mom is gonna pick her up after dinner.”

“Splendid.” Gram pulled out one of the bar stools. “Thanks for making dinner, sweets. I’ve had a long, hard day.” Gram picked one of the carrot rosettes up from her plate. “How festive.”

“Carrie did that,” Ethel said. “She’s going to be a world-class chef someday.”

“We go out to a lot of restaurants,” Carrie said shyly, and wiggled onto a bar stool next to Gram as Ethel scooped some sour cream onto the side of everyone’s plates.

“You’re quite the talent,” Gram said as Ethel placed a glass of red wine in front of her. “Thanks, doll. So, Carrie,” Gram said, “what kind of food do you want to specialize in someday?” *Oh, here we go*, Ethel thought as she finally sat down to dinner. Gram was always asking the big, deep questions, so that dinnertime always felt like a perpetual job interview.

“Um, I really like Mexican food. And I also like Japanese. We order a lot of sushi at home, so maybe a combination of both,” Carrie said. “That’s called *fusion*.”

Gram smiled, reaching into a bag of tortilla chips. “You know the best way to dream big is to start small.” Gram held the tortilla chip like a pointer. “You ought to think about doing some experimenting with fusion food, then maybe do a little appetizer stand in the summer—you know, kind of like a lemonade stand, but with your own creations.”

“Ooh,” Carrie said, clapping. She loved that idea. Just then, a chirping tone came from Carrie’s purse. She reached in and pulled out her smartphone. “Oh, hang on,” she said, reading the screen. This happened so frequently during the day that Ethel never

noticed it anymore. Most of the girls at school had a cell phone, and everybody texted in between classes or at lunch, but Gram didn't let it pass.

"You sound like an ATM," Gram observed drily. She thought it was incredibly rude in restaurants when people let their cell phones disturb others during dinner.

"Yeah," Carrie agreed. "I know. People are constantly trying to call me or text me. But look," she said, showing Gram her smartphone. "It does everything—this one takes really good pictures." She held up the phone to take a picture of Ethel and clicked a button. The phone made a sound like the shutter of an old-fashioned camera.

"See, Gram?" Ethel complained. "That's why I need one." This wasn't the first time this topic had been brought up. "My cell is so craptastic—it's like something out of the eighties!"

"You're lucky you've got the one you've got," Gram said, letting her raised eyebrow serve as her final answer.

The telephone in the kitchen rang at that moment, and Gram dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. She made no effort to rise, as that was another dinnertime rule: no answering the phone during meals. For some reason, Ethel began to feel dread as the answering machine picked up.

"Hi honey . . . ," began a voice on the machine. Ethel cringed and tried to pick up everybody's plates, allowing them to clatter. Still, her mother's draggy, overtired voice continued. Ethel turned on the faucet, but the sound of water was not enough to drown out the echoey background coming through as Charlene talked. "We have special privileges to see family on Thanksgiving . . . and I was wondering . . ." Ethel couldn't stand it anymore and crossed the room to turn the volume down on the answering machine.

"Who was *that*?" Carrie asked. Gram met Ethel's eyes as she came back to sit down.

"Just one of my friends, dear," Gram said coolly. "We don't answer the phone during dinner."

"Oh."

The kitchen was quiet. "That was good chili," Gram said.

Ethel couldn't tell if Carrie had understood what that call was about, but a fluttery feeling inside made her face feel hot. "Gram, do you want any more corn bread?"

"No thanks, kiddo." Gram rested her elbows upon the butcher-block counter. "I thought we might have a new family for Chico today," she said, closing her eyes. "But then they came back two hours later and said they changed their minds. And we're so full, I don't know if we can keep him now."

Ethel gasped. "Oh no!" This happened at least every couple of months. In the past, Gram tried to sneak shelter dogs into their tiny apartment and keep them until she could find a new owner. But then the landlord got wind of it and told Gram she'd be evicted if she did it again. That always seemed to unleash a chain reaction, whereupon Gram cursed her second ex-husband, cursed the fact that they didn't have a real house, cursed her job, and cursed the landlord so loudly that it generated more complaints from the neighbors.

"Don't worry." Gram looked at Ethel wearily and squeezed her shoulder. "Georgina's daughter can take him temporarily. We'll figure it out. But now, I'm going to go take a bath." She shuffled out of the kitchen into her bedroom.

"Okay, Gram." Ethel watched her go, then turned to Carrie, hoping to lighten the mood. "Want to do something fun before your mom comes to pick you up?" She rubbed her hands.

Carrie glanced toward Gram's room. "Yeah. What?"

Ethel snapped on long yellow dish gloves. "Dishes!" She began to dance around the kitchen.

Carrie surveyed the messy countertop and sink full of dirty pots and pans. Her nose wrinkled. "That's not what I thought you were gonna say."

Ethel grabbed her sleeve and pulled her toward the entry hall closet. "Come here."

Carrie followed her as Ethel opened the closet. "This is where the magic happens." Carrie peered inside.

"Is this your clothes closet? Oh my God—it's so small!"

Ethel wasn't going to get snappy about that comment. Instead, she pulled out a stepstool and reached for a plastic box on the top shelf, pulling it down. Inside were her

weirdest accessories: old-man hats, wigs, costume jewelry, long evening gloves, even a pair of opera glasses.

“Here.” Ethel gave Carrie a cherry Kool-Aid-colored bobbed wig and a pair of purple hippie glasses. “Wear these.” She chose a winter army hat with earflaps for herself. She put on the hat with the visor flap up and donned yellow ski goggles. “Okay, I’m going to do dishes now.”

Carrie put on the wig, laughing. “Do you always do this?”

“Yeah, when I’ve got chores to do, I put this stuff on, then I put on music, and it makes it fun.”

“All right, I’ll help,” Carrie said, now motivated. They looked at themselves in the mirror attached to the inside of the door. “You look so freaky!” Carrie giggled.

“So do you!”

“Could you imagine going to school like this?”

“Uh.” Ethel held out her hand, as if to display her closet. “Have you *seen* my clothes?”

“Nobody I know would ever do this,” Carrie said. “You are like the weirdest person I know.”

“Aww,” Ethel said. She put her hand to her chest. That was really the highest compliment she could be paid. “I’m really touched.”

That just made Carrie laugh even more. She pulled out her phone and snapped a picture of Ethel in the army flap hat and then held out the phone so she could take a selfie of the two of them together. They spent the next few minutes doing this, laughing over each new image. Ethel looked at the pictures she’d taken. They were so clear and sharp. “God, I want a phone like this so bad,” she said.

“I wish you had one so you and I could talk all day,” Carrie said, looking at hers. “I don’t know what I’d do without mine.”

Ethel sighed and imitated Gram’s voice perfectly. “You kids spend all your time talking on these things, and you don’t even know the first thing about communicating.”

“God,” Carrie said. “I hear that all the time.”

“I know, grrr,” Ethel said quietly. She looked to make sure Gram was still in her bedroom before whispering, “She’s a little out of touch.”

“Poor you,” Carrie said, looking into her phone.
Ethel tugged on her earflaps. “Yeah, poor me.”

Chapter 12

Everywhere there was black, black, black, and just when the eye couldn't take any more of that suffocating vacuum, there it was to the right, visible behind faint streamers of pink twinkle dust—a teeny speck of light. Ethel cocked her head, staring at the photo of the universe with the Earth as a tiny speck titled *The Pale Blue Dot*. The Earth looked like a baby, just born.

Last week Mr. Place had played a video on climate change for them and she had been struck by this image. Everybody thought they were so important in this world, but in the bigger picture of the universe, the Earth was just a tiny dot in this vast cosmos.

Ethel lay on her stomach upon Clyde, her legs casually kicking the air, looking at the photo on her iPad. The idea of floating in space in the darkness with just a view of the tiny pinpoint of the Earth might make some people feel lonely. But, she'd grown up as an only child, alone for much of her life, and this image made her feel right at home. Already, space travel was starting to become available to everyday people. By the time she was twenty-five, it was possible that civilians, not just astronauts, would be landing on Mars.

Some people believed in ghosts. A lot of people believed in miracles. That only meant worlds existed even when people couldn't see, hear, taste, or touch them. And that's what Ethel knew deep down about the cosmos. Perhaps there were planets not yet discovered that people on Earth would eventually travel to and live on. There were oceans of darkness in that journey, yet science and technology were getting more sophisticated every day. Just yesterday, she'd read how scientists had to move beyond the limits of their imaginations to understand how other planets' ecosystems worked. They had to imagine that on some planets, the ocean water molecules had the same density of atmosphere molecules. It was possible that the ocean was hovering up in the clouds! Talk about freaky! It would be wonderful to live on a planet where the sky was ever purple and fish flew miles above the ground.

As she waited for Gram to give her a ride to school, Ethel played on her iPad, tapping the keyboard. She opened a new design program she'd found on the 'Net that let you make your own virtual bedroom. She happily typed away, working on this image. Pop! She inserted an aluminum bunk bed with a built-in desk underneath. A few more keystrokes and she completed the room with a walk-in closet, a big white, fluffy rug, an orange beanbag chair, and a flat screen TV. She completed the décor with a poster of Ella McBella, and one of Einstein sticking out his tongue. She saved *The Pale Blue Dot* for last, inserting the image over her virtual bed.

"Gram?" Ethel called, carefully holding the laptop and getting up off the couch. "Gram! You want to see something?"

Gram shuffled out of the bedroom with one white sneaker on. "Ugh, I hate early meetings," she groaned. Her work outfit was always the same: track pants with a long-sleeve shirt under her blue jersey, and white tennis shoes. She stopped to peer down at the iPad. "What is it?"

Ethel held it up. "I made my own room. See?" She pointed. "There's my bed and my desk and my *real* closet." She tapped a key. Instantly the perspective of the 3-D room changed, moving the walk-in closet to the forefront. There, Ethel had designed the biggest mess possible. Clothes were draped all over the floor. Cubbies overflowed with books, old soda cans, banana peels, and discarded homework.

"Yechh," Gram said. "Glad that's your room and I don't have to see it."

"Ha! I did that on purpose," Ethel said, following her to the kitchen. Gram opened the refrigerator, taking out a plate with half a grapefruit.

"Did you see the poster over my bed?" Ethel pressed a key and the room revolved once again, zooming in on the *The Pale Blue Dot*.

"Mmm," Gram said, stirring her coffee. "Nice."

"No, look—look," Ethel said. "That's how tiny it is from *Voyager 1*."

"Stupendous," Gram said, which is what she always said when she was tired of being enthusiastic.

Ethel sighed and tried again. "You know how you always tell me I'm not the center of the universe?" She thrust the laptop screen in front of Gram. "Well, look at this!"

Gram looked at the screen more intently. She refused to wear glasses, so any time she tried to read something, she frowned at it so hard, it looked as though she might smack it. “Yep,” she said. “That’s right. No one is the center of the universe.”

Ethel looked at it. “Yeah, because if you look at this picture, we’re all kind of off to the right somewhere.”

Gram snorted. “Or to the left, depending on your ideology.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Gram said, and gulped her coffee down. “Two minutes and we’re outta here.”

**

Ms. Halpern-Jones’s English literature class had a really great, weird requirement. For every book they studied as a class, the girls had to dress up in a costume of that period. This semester, they were reading Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Ms. Halpern-Jones provided a trunk by her desk filled with scraps of tulle, silk, and satin. Not only did most of the girls take immediately to the items in that trunk, but they came to school in fairy costumes and slip-on wings. Some girls even wore the costumes throughout the day, even in gym. Val and Georgia, of course, were the driving force behind this. Val’s cute blond bob and freckles complemented her peach-colored shift with fluttering scraps of silk, an outfit she’d sewn herself. Whenever she moved, she rustled like dried leaves scuttling down a sidewalk. Next to her, Georgia looked like the Black Angel of Death in a black leotard and black wings. (Ms. Halpern-Jones looked a little uneasy about this, but technically, Georgia was still in full costume.) Some of the Soccer Chicas had embraced the look as well. As long as Jess could still wear her jersey underneath a tulle tutu, she was all into it.

It was easy to get sucked into the fantasy of the classroom’s surroundings; everything in the English room jolted the eyes. Each of the plastic desk chairs was lime green, as was the construction paper lining the corkboards. Besides the costume trunk, the other fantastic item in the room was an oversized bookshelf. It had been stuffed with all kinds of picture books, graphic novels, and classic fiction. Tucked into each shelf were

all sorts of toys and curios as well, little dolls and figurines from world-renowned stories, like the *Wizard of Oz*, Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, and epic Greek poetry.

Ethel sat in the front row in a donkey costume that Weezy and Yuki had made out of a burlap bag. Leave it to everyone else to be Titania's fairies; she wanted to be Nick Bottom, the dude with the donkey head. It was a great costume, roomy, warm, if a bit scratchy. She had to sit on the edge of her seat, however, because Yuki had sewn the tail right on the butt of the costume, making it impossible to sit in one position for too long.

Class had not yet started. Ethel had seen Ms. Halpern-Jones out in the hallway, chatting with Mizz T, both holding on to their coffee cups.

"Did you read past act two, scene two?" Georgia said, hanging out on the edge of Ethel's desk playing with her fingerless black gloves.

"Yup," Ethel said, pushing her donkey head back.

"Well, don't ruin it like last time," Val said, patting Ethel.

"I won't. Jeez." Earlier in the semester, she'd read all the way through *Huckleberry Finn* instead of just the assigned chapters and inadvertently given away the ending, causing the entire class to groan and some to even chuck their paperbacks at her.

Amanda and Taylor strode into class then, allowing smiles for those they favored and blotting out those who were unworthy. From the beginning, they had made it known to Ms. Halpern-Jones how unenthusiastic they were about wearing fairy costumes. They wore only wristbands of silk, which they snapped off and threw back at the costume trunk the second class was over as if to say, "There—I played your stupid game."

Whenever Ms. Halpern-Jones called on either of them to answer a question, they always looked at each other first and uttered something like, "I don't know" or shrugged and said, "I guess." Ethel knew they weren't that dumb, especially Nessa, who got straight As. Nessa had changed so much in a matter of weeks, it was hard to believe she was once nice. Now she wore the cool Cherrybomb Girlz persona as her permanent costume.

Ethel chewed on her donkey ear, so very glad Stephönë wasn't in this particular class. Even though Taylor and Amanda were Stephönë's followers, they were still her eyes and ears at Seaside. After Stephönë's targeted Paperdollz assaults on "General Genius" and her promise on the KidVid video to conjure more drama for future episodes,

Ethel kept mindful of what she said in class, careful not to raise her hand too much or say anything dumb that would get back to Stephönë. Ethel had even changed her routes to all her classes in the last week, hoping that if she avoided Stephönë, there would be nothing to broadcast on KidVid. Still, this oversized donkey costume didn't help. She was beginning to wonder if it had been a good idea to ask Yuki and Weezy to make it.

Just then Carrie walked into class, late as usual, and everyone stopped murmuring. Her long, auburn hair had been cut into a short boy's style. Not only that, but she was wearing an odd denim vest over a country shirt with rhinestone flourishes at the collar. In place of her usual skinny jeans or mini, she was wearing dusty orange corduroy flares *and* saddle shoes.

Ethel gaped. What was *this*?

"Oh my God," said Amanda from the back of the room. Then she and Taylor broke into helpless giggles. Carrie ignored them as she dug through the costume trunk and put on a pair of fairy wings and an ostrich feather tiara.

"Hey, what's up," Carrie said, sitting down at her desk across from Georgia, Val, and Ethel.

"Wow," Val said, looking her up and down. "This is . . . uh . . . new."

It wasn't exactly new. Or original. Ethel stared at Carrie, not sure what to say. A swirl of feelings tugged at her. Why was she wearing this? This was Ethel's shtick.

Carrie laughed self-consciously. "Yeah, it's my new thingy thang." That too, was Ethel's expression. Val threw a knowing squint at Ethel, who just couldn't get over the rhinestone collar and burnt orange flares. What was Carrie thinking?

"Where did you get that stuff?" Ethel whispered. She didn't have much time to talk, for Ms. Halpern-Jones breezed in with her coffee cup and shut the classroom door.

"Where do you think?" Carrie said with a wink.

Goodwill, Ethel thought and sat back in her chair, her oversized snout covering her face.

**

“So what?” Yuki said, sticking a fork into a Tupperware container of cold edamame. “It’s just clothes. It’s like the way they all get upset if two of them wear the same baby-doll top on the same day. Oh, boo hoo.” She knuckled away imitation tears. “You wore the pink one on Tuesday, and everyone knows Tuesday is *my* day to wear the pink one.”

It was Friday at lunchtime, and Weezy and Schreck had not yet gotten out of class to join them. After English, Ethel had changed out of her donkey costume into her standard Tuesday outfit: a purple sweater vest and elastic waistband dungarees. The way Yuki made fun of the Cherrybomb Girlz’ strict adherence to outfit protocol made Ethel somewhat uncomfortable (since she herself employed quite an elaborate outfit matrix on Excel), but she pressed on. “It’s just that last week, Carrie was going on and on about how she’d never shop at Goodwill if someone held her at gunpoint, that’s all.”

“What do you care?” Yuki asked, sipping her chocolate milk. “Why do you care what she thinks at all?”

By now, Ethel was used to Yuki’s dispassionate responses to everything, but right now, it just irked her. “Be-*cause*. You don’t go around saying certain things and then do the opposite.”

“Some of the Soccer Chicas have asked me why Carrie sits with us. And I still don’t know what to tell them,” Yuki said, her gaze on Ethel. “Why does she sit with us?”

Ethel blinked, searching for something to say. “Because we’re not the Cherrybomb Girlz. We don’t just ban people. I know Carrie can be kind of annoying, but she can be really nice and fun too. I think it’s good that we hang out so we can show her what it’s like to not be the center of the universe.”

“Oh,” Yuki said, her eyes far away. “So, that’s what I should tell them.”

“Ooh,” Ethel said, squinting. “You’re being mean today.”

Yuki shrugged and Ethel found herself confused. The best thing about Yuki was that she never wavered; she stood by every opinion that came out of her mouth. But right now, that was something Ethel both respected and despised about her. She had no more time to think about it, because Schreck and Weezy walked into the cafeteria, followed by Carrie. The funny thing, as Ethel watched the three of them make their way across the cafeteria, was how Carrie held herself as she walked with them. Schreck had on a sweatshirt with a bull’s-eye on the back. Weezy wore her Girl Scout uniform. Carrie, in

her Goodwill outfit, seemed more comfortable in her own skin than she ever had before. She didn't duck her head around to see who was looking at her as she crossed the cafeteria. She was even holding a tray of food. Real food. Not an apple and a bottle of water this time.

"Hey, guess what?" Schreck said, sitting down with her brown bag lunch. "I got an A-plus on my math test."

Ethel high-fived her. Yuki threw her hand up, as did Weezy. They all did that whenever someone got an A. If it was a B, all you got was a one-finger high-five. No one got Cs, so there wasn't a gesture for that.

"I was thinking, like, today, after tech class, maybe we could stay after school and do our own website for the LOL Patrol," Carrie said. She opened up a carton of low-fat chocolate milk. Ethel stared at her. She was actually eating a salad with chicken strips on the top.

"Mmm," Ethel said, piercing a tomato into her taco salad. "The thing is, I've decided to shut down our Paperdollz profile. I don't think we should be the LOL Patrol anymore."

"Yeah," Yuki agreed. "After those nasty things they wrote, we don't need to be part of it anymore."

"Well, that's stupid," Carrie sputtered. "We can't just cut ourselves completely off. Then, we'll *never* know what they're saying about us!"

"*We*?" Yuki said, putting down her fork. "What if we don't care about what people say?"

No one said anything. Ethel raised her fist to pound a snack bag of tortilla chips. Then she opened the bag, sprinkling the broken pieces across her salad. "Well, whatever. The site is stupid and we're getting out of it."

"You guys!" Carrie shook her head. "If we shut down Paperdollz, Stephönë and those guys will think they won!"

Ethel eyed her. "Umm, *no*, I don't think so. They will move on to something else because they'll get bored."

"You don't know them like I do," Carrie warned. Schreck watched all of this intently while Weezy seemed to shrink lower in her seat.

“We never wanted to be part of this in the first place,” Ethel said, exasperated. “All we ever wanted to do is start a fun profile on Paperdollz, and now it’s turned into this . . . stupid war!”

“Ethel,” Carrie said, her voice rising. “They’ll make it worse for us. We need to fight them back on their profiles and give it right back to them!”

“No, Carrie. Once we’re gone, they’ll go away, because they’ve got no more drama to make fun of.” Ethel stared straight ahead, determined she was right. If they were going to defeat Stephöñë, they needed to eliminate all traces of themselves online. Carrie didn’t get this. She was never supposed to be in the LOL Patrol anyway, so where did she get off acting as though she were the group leader? “Now let’s stop talking about it. I’m making the decision to shut down our profile today after school.”

Schreck’s eyes rose to Ethel’s and flicked downward.

“*Okay*,” Carrie said, pushing her salad away. “You just wait to see what happens when you find out you’re dead wrong.” She stood up. “You really are a *Genius*,” she fumed, turning to leave. She clomped out of the cafeteria, her arms straight at her sides. Weezy’s green beret slipped down over one eye and she pushed it back up. “Wowzers.”

Schreck swiped her nose and put down her apple. “It used to be a lot more fun when it was just us,” she said quietly. Yuki elected to remain silent as she popped another edamame out of its shell.

**

Before her next class, Ethel jumped quickly into the Ragged Island lounge to see if anyone was on. No one was there, so she jumped into Little Hen lounge. Several girls were already in midconversation upon the screen. Ethel could see that Carrie was on as Celebritychef, but she wasn’t sure who *ducky* and *i like pie* were. She hoped Carrie would be in a more reasonable mood. Maybe she could coax her out of her snit with some light chat.

01:27 PM **ducky**: im hyper

01:27 PM **i like pie**: lalalalalalalalalala

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: hi**

01:28 PM **i like pie**: hola everybody

01:28 PM **Celebritychef**: :-(

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: u ok?

01:28 PM **i like pie**: y the sad face?

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: Are you still mad?

01:28 PM **Celebritychef**: I not sure

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: she is mad at me

01:28 PM **Celebritychef**: what ever i dont really care lol

01:28 PM **i like pie**: ? that was rude

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: don't bite the hand that feeds u

01:28 PM **ducky**: omg what r u talking about Eth?

01:28 PM **Ethanol**: nuthin

01:29 PM **Celebritychef**: that is so annoying E!!!

01:29 PM **i like pie**: whoa

01:29 PM **Ethanol**: u got mad at me 4 no reason

01:29 PM **Celebritychef**: u know wut this teaches u

01:29 PM **ducky**: guys—stop

01:29 PM **Celebritychef**: not 2b so high and mitey

01:29 PM **Ethanol**: WRONG**

01:29 PM **ducky**: wow outta control

01:29 PM **Ethanol**: lets just stop. This is getting silly

01:29 PM **Celebritychef**: ya well see abt that

**

It was 2:05 p.m., the last period before the end of the day. Ethel stood at her locker, trying to dig her math textbook out. She was glad this was a B-day, because she had math instead of tech class. She was still angry from the chat and formulated in her head what she'd say to Carrie if she saw her when school ended. *Talk about high and mighty!* Ethel had gone out of her way to invite Carrie to her group, be friends with her, put up with her

copying Ethel's style, even defend her to Yuki, and this was how she got treated! Someone sidled up to her in the hallway. Ethel turned to see a short, freckled, strawberry blond girl beside her locker, a fifth grader she vaguely knew.

"I'm Julie," she said. "I was ducky on the chat and saw what you guys said."

Great. Now she had a kid from a grade below trying to get involved. Ethel exchanged some books out of her backpack. Julie leaned against the lockers. She looked around to see if anyone was coming. "You should've heard what Carrie said about you after you left the chat."

Ethel was going to be late for her next class. "I really don't care," she said. "It's not any of your business."

Julie ignored this and continued. "She said you were immature and a bragger and that you think you're so smart, but it's only in your mind." Julie twiddled her fingers, a small, trying-to-be-helpful smile on her face.

"She said this on the *chat*?" Ethel scowled.

"Yeah, she did."

Ethel slammed her locker. "Yeah, well, the mods will see her and ban her, so that was smart."

**

In algebra, Ethel had a hard time concentrating. Math didn't come easy, because she'd missed so much of it growing up. By second grade she'd already transferred out of three schools. All she remembered back in New York were cold, gray winters, snow up to her neck. Each public school was the same: a too-big place with lots of kids, faceless people she couldn't even remember anymore. Back then, no one seemed to be very interested in learning anything. Even at that young age, girls always seemed to be embroiled in one big dramatic fight with other girls. Notes and rumors passed all day, yet the teachers never seemed to care. Nothing ever got done, and school seemed like a drain, a waste of time. Each day she'd come home with a headache and a weariness that didn't seem to go away even with a full night's sleep. Weird, gray, hazy time that was, bringing home Cs, then Ds, her mom barely glancing at the report card. Whenever she came home to that

apartment, Charlene was always over at their next-door neighbor's: the man with two names, Joe George.

Mr. Honig was at the board jotting down equations. Ethel felt a knot inside, trying to concentrate. She didn't know what was making her more angry: Carrie, for taking the friendship she'd offered, then turning around and saying mean things about Ethel on the chat room or that little gossip Julie for stirring it up for her own obvious entertainment. She hoped Carrie would get banned from the chat room for a month. This would be her second offense. Ethel thought about it all during class. To be called a bragger and immature by Carrie was a good laugh! When Carrie didn't get her way, she acted like a total brat. Talk about immature!

After algebra, she had ten minutes before she had to catch the bus. Ethel pulled out her iPad and emailed the school administrators.

Dear Seaside Chat Monitors,

You might want to check the chat today—somebody broke the rules and called someone else a bunch of names.

Signed,

Just Playing by the Rules

She brought it on herself, Ethel thought and clicked Send.

Chapter 13

Ah, the smell of pee-soaked newspapers. Other girls might wrinkle their noses, but to Ethel, this was as sweet and fragrant a smell as manure in fields might be to farm kids. Every Saturday, she accompanied Gram to work at the animal shelter. As shelter manager, Gram ran the office, the phone always to her ear as she checked the animals' meds, treated any sores or mites, and filled out the kennel cards with detailed notes. Ethel worked alongside, cleaning out the cages, feeding the animals.

She was ecstatic to find Chico still there. The shelter had somehow found room for him. Chico, a roddy mix, was her favorite, along with Bowzer, a Lab mutt, and Esmerelda, a three-legged poodle. Gram called them the "lifers," dogs who'd been there so long, no one wanted to adopt them. There were always too many animals and not enough space, so Gram usually buried herself in paperwork on Saturdays, trying to shuffle the lifers around to different county shelters. Chico had a blood disease and wasn't that great around kids—except he was great around Ethel. When she opened his kennel door, he jumped up on her chest, whining and licking his snout. What was left of his stumpy little tail cranked furiously side to side.

"Okay, you dork," Ethel said and slipped a muzzle around his nose and mouth. "Let's go." She took Chico up the loop in the field behind the shelter. It was a precarious loop, as there was a stiff pile of poop every foot and a half on the side of the path. That's how Ethel had gotten the idea for her summer business, by volunteering for poop patrol, ridding this path of its unsightly decoration. Afterward, she took Bowzer, who tugged her the entire way. Ethel had to go a little slower for Little Miss Melda, who hopped the trail deftly on three legs.

The veterinarian and the vet tech worked only on weekdays, so on Saturdays, it was just Gram, Ethel, and the adoption counselor, Georgina, keeping the office going. Georgina staffed the phones and worked with incoming animals and outgoing adoptions. She was in her fifties, and had four children whose pictures she kept on her cluttered desk alongside pictures of her many dogs and cats, ferrets and horses. Each week, after Ethel

cleaned the kennels, Georgina allowed her to play with the kittens, if the shelter had any. In the Wee Kitty Room, six or seven kittens would come out of their hidey-holes, jump off the play towers, and flock to Ethel. She'd kneel down, spin their little plastic tops, or fling some string at them. She loved seeing their teeny paws come out and bat at the toys. She called it the Wee Kitty Room because when they were excited, their meows sounded like "Weee, weee."

Every once in a while, Weezy would come with Ethel to the shelter on Saturdays, especially if they had kittens. She was stark raving mad for kitties. Ethel thought of calling her to come over now, but remembered Weezy was at a Girl Scout retreat that weekend. Yuki wasn't a big kitty fan, and besides, Ethel remembered her grumbling something about a piccolo recital.

Ethel took out her cell, trying to remember which house Schreck was staying at this weekend.

Schreck answered. "Hi," she said, sounding glum.

"What's wrong?"

Schreck sighed. "Nothing. The nanny is here."

"Oh." Schreck rarely called her by her real name, Joyce; it was always "the nanny." "Yeah, now she's acting like she's my mother, telling me what to do in front of him. She just told me if I didn't make my bed, I couldn't get on IM. Can you believe that? He didn't even say anything!"

"Aww," Ethel said. "That stinks. Virtual hugs."

"Thanks," Schreck said. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. Yesterday, as I was waiting outside for the bus, I saw Carrie talking really loud to this girl, Julie, who I think is like a grade below us . . ."

"Yeah," Ethel said, remembering the unpleasant encounter. "I know who she is."

"Well, Carrie looked really upset. I mean, she was like *shouting*. Everybody could hear her. I guess when she tried to get on the chat at the end of the day, she got a message that she was banned for a month."

Ethel turned to face the wall, so Georgina couldn't hear her. "That girl Julie came up to me yesterday and told me that Carrie was saying all this mean stuff about me after I left the chat. So I emailed the monitors," she whispered.

“Really?” Schreck said. “Well, good. I’m glad you told them.”

“I mean, she’s already gotten in trouble once for badmouthing on there. Duh! If the monitors see that you’re calling someone names, you’re gonna get banned!”

“You know, I didn’t want to say anything, but I never liked Carrie much. Neither did Yuki or Weezy, and we really didn’t know what to say to you.”

Ethel clucked. “I know. I tried.”

“I mean, sometimes she can be really nice, but you can tell she’s got a lot of problems.” Ethel could hear Schreck’s dad saying something on the other end. Schreck sighed. “Gotta go. I have to make my bed and then vacuum, and then I’ll have to use a magnifying glass to make sure that every piece of fluff is off the carpet for when the nanny checks my work. Ugh.”

“Ha,” Ethel said. “Well, IM me tonight.”

“I will.”

“Kay, ’bye.”

Ethel hung up and chewed her thumbnail, thinking about what Schreck had said. The thought of Carrie being friendless once again made Ethel feel guilty, but there was nothing to be done. Instead of being smart and sticking together, what had Carrie gone and done? She’d backstabbed Ethel on the chat room. Way to alienate the only friends she had left! Ethel had tried to overlook the things that drove everyone else crazy about Carrie, because deep down, she believed Carrie had a good heart. Even so, in a matter of weeks, her downsides had become dangerous. Carrie’s compulsion to shoot off her mouth would make them an even bigger target to the Cherrybomb Girlz. As long as they avoided Stephönë, this whole thing would die down. Why couldn’t Carrie see that?

Ethel could hear a rumbling down the animal shelter driveway. Once every couple of weeks a donation truck from the Animal Rescue League delivered twenty-pound bags of dog food, cat food, and medicine. Both Gram and Georgina had “old bones,” they said, so Ethel always had to lug the bags off the truck and heave them onto a wagon to take them to the storeroom. Whenever Chico heard the rumbling down the driveway, he wagged his stump furiously and began to climb his kennel.

As they stood outside, Georgina lit up a cigarette, watching Ethel pull the bags off the truck. “I’ll tell ya something,” she called back to Gram, pointing her cigarette at

Ethel. “You don’t get kids like that anymore. They either want to be rock stars or they want to be retired millionaires by thirty-five, but they don’t wanna work. This one”—she jabbed her cigarette again—“never complains either, no sir.”

“Straight-A student,” Gram called, opening the side door for Ethel to come through with the wagon.

“Hmmp,” Georgina said, shaking her head. “Picking up dog crap ain’t the glamorous life. And still, every week, she shows up like clockwork.”

Ethel pretended not to hear. Georgina said a variation of something like this every Saturday. Still, it wasn’t the praise that motivated her to haul bag after bag off the truck, flop them down into a little red wagon, and pull them to the storeroom. It was Chico, who practically did backflips when she came in. He shook with excitement and jumped up on the kennel, arching his back. All the dogs followed suit, yipping and yapping, for they knew what they were going to get next. For Chico, dried pig’s ears with a savory beef coating was enough to make him go cross-eyed. And that was her reward, handing out the doggie treats.

Her other reward came after Gram and Georgina locked up the shelter at noon. Gram switched out of her blue shirt into a nice blouse and slacks. Ethel changed out of her work jeans and sweatshirt into a crocheted pink-and-green vest with a nice pair of pink, stretchy hip huggers.

They had lunch every Saturday at Gram’s favorite spot, the Oak Room, a floor-to-ceiling wood-paneled waterfront restaurant at the edge of the pier with an aquarium centerpiece that held two thousand gallons and featured the most incredible fish Ethel had ever seen. Her favorite were the transparent jellyfish with their fleshy mushroom-shaped bodies and tentacles like trailing wedding veils.

Gram had been going to the Oak Room since 1965, when Ethel’s grandfather had proposed to her over the steak tartare. Even though they divorced and Grandpa later died, he still remained the love of Gram’s life. Every week, Gram ordered the steak tartare, even though she said the chefs these days didn’t know what they were doing. Back in the old days, she said, they used to be prepare it much better.

Still, the waiters treated Gram like she owned the place. She hefted a palm to her blond beehive. “Give it, oh, three, four minutes under the broiler. Oh, and Robert . . .”

She tapped the rim of her empty martini glass with a frosted pink fingernail. “When you catch a minute, doll.”

“Of course, I’ll bring another right away,” said Robert, one of Gram’s favorite waiters at the Oak Room, a young man with black hair and a wonderful smile. “And you, miss?”

Ethel had to crack up. *Miss*. If her friends were there, they’d crack up too. “Um, I’ll have the halibut, please.”

Robert’s smile stayed in place, but his head tilted ever so slightly. Gram brought her fingers to her mouth and tried not to laugh. “I’m sure she means the halibut,” she told Robert, who bowed and left the table.

Ethel looked down at the menu. She could’ve sworn it said halibut.

“Where are your little pals this weekend?” Gram said, pushing the bread plate away.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ethel sighed. “Everybody’s got something to do. Yuki can’t leave the house whenever she has a recital. She has to practice like fifteen hours a day. And I think Weezy is in the woods, doing some merit badge retreat thingy for Girl Scouts. And Schreck’s at her dad’s, which is kind of far away.”

“What about Carrie?”

“Who knows?” She shrugged, swirling the cherry in her Shirley Temple.

“What happened, you two have an argument?” Gram asked.

Ethel realized she should’ve masked her tone better. “Well . . . okay . . . Here’s what happened.” She began to tell Gram in between sips of her Shirley Temple about the chat incident, keeping the parts about the Paperdollz site and the KidVid video to herself. Just as Ethel finished, Robert set down their salads and another martini in front of Gram. She took a long sip and smacked her lips.

“Well, sounds to me like you were both wrong,” Gram said, poking a fork into the apple of her Waldorf salad.

“Huh? How am I wrong?” Ethel huffed.

“You kind of snitched on her, didn’t you? With the chat administrators?”

“Well, I had to! She said mean things about me.”

“One day, you’ll get to be an old crone like me and the best thing about it is you

just won't give a rip what people say about you," Gram said, staring at the aquarium. "What people say can't touch you—it'll never change the fact that you're a good person. Your true friends and family will know the difference between lies and the truth. The rest of the people who try to deliberately misunderstand you? Ehh—" Gram waved them away. "Still, it would've been better if you'd just calmed down and talked to her instead of telling on her. The best thing you can do, Ethel, is own up to your part in it and say sorry."

"But she—"

Gram tipped her head back and looked down her nose at Ethel. It was the don't-argue-with-me look Ethel was well familiar with.

"Listen, it's simple," Gram said, dabbing her mouth with a white linen napkin. "It takes two people to have a fight, and each person is always a little bit wrong. She's wrong too, but she doesn't have the maturity to see that, so you need to step up and be the bigger person."

Ethel's toes curled in her shoes. It stank when Gram was right. "Okay."

Chapter 14

Having already changed into her donkey costume, Ethel sat at her desk in Ms. Halpern-Jones's room, playing a restless drumbeat upon the desktop with two chewed pencils. She kept glancing at the door. Ethel had it all planned out. Carrie would have to walk by Ethel to take her seat, at which point, Ethel would slip her a note: I'm sorry! ☹ Can we talk after class? Things would be better once that happened. Her costume felt hot and itchy as she waited.

Ms. Halpern-Jones hadn't come in yet. Anxious for class to start, Ethel's eyes roamed the classroom. Papering nearly every inch of the classroom walls were big, bold posters featuring books like *Catcher in the Rye* and *Homecoming*. A banner spattered in yellow stars topped the blackboard, with the familiar mantra: PREWRITE-DRAFT-REVISE-EDIT. To the side of the board outlined in pink chalk were this week's vocab words:

Delectable (pg 18)

Melancholy (pg 20)

Vigor (pg 20)

Ethel knew them all. She made a note of the assignment—Quiz Friday—3 chapters summary due Monday—as more girls began to drift into the classroom and sift through the costume box to suit up.

Val and Georgia came into the room together already in full costume as the White Angel and Black Angel of Death.

"Hey girls," Ethel said, feeling better once she saw them.

"What's yup?" Val said, sitting down on the edge of Ethel's desk. She flicked a white feathery boa at Ethel's nose. "Hey, I tried to find your LOL Patrol on Paperdollz last night. Where is it?"

"Oh," Ethel said, tugging on her donkey ear. "We decided to shut it down."

"How come?"

Ethel shrugged. "We found better sites to go on. Have you checked out Fairy Glen yet?"

“Ooh yah,” Georgia said with wide eyes rimmed in black. “We found it this weekend when I slept over at Val’s.”

“Me too,” Ethel agreed. “I also like the Puddytat site where you can make your own kitten. We can’t have a real one in our apartment, so I made one that I pet and feed every day. I call her Ralph.”

Georgia snickered. “Ralph.”

“Uh oh,” Val said as Ms. Halpern-Jones came in. She edged off Ethel’s desk, stray feathers from her boa flitting through the air. “I have to pee and there’s no time. Oh shoot, now I have to hold it.”

Ethel craned her head to see Carrie walk in behind Ms. Halpern-Jones. Ethel noticed the change immediately; Carrie wore a tiny button-down shirt and a skinny mini with leggings underneath. Her short hair was gelled and held back with bejeweled clips. Evidently her Goodwill phase hadn’t lasted long. She didn’t cross the room to take her usual seat behind Ethel, but instead, headed straight for the back of the classroom to sit with Amanda and Taylor. Ethel’s fingers rubbed the note in the pocket of her donkey costume. Carrie and the other two wore the smallest of smiles; their world closed out everyone around them.

“Well, guess who’s back to being a Cherrybomb Girl?” Val leaned over and drawled as class began to start.

**

“Hey guys.” Ethel found her friends at midmorning break at their usual table under the giant mural of a hamburger. There were only a half dozen girls in the cafeteria all sitting quietly together. Ethel slumped down in her seat with a mug of hot chocolate. “Happy Monday,” she said.

“Yup,” Yuki said, and yawned. That made Weezy yawn too.

“Monday. Happy. Yay,” said Schreck.

Ethel took a sip. “You know, in general, I really like Mondays. But today is one of those days that really deserves its sucky Monday reputation.”

Everyone nodded, propping up their heads on their elbows. “Tell me about it,”

Schreck said.

“I’ve never liked Mondays,” Yuki said. “I don’t care much for Thursdays either.”

Weezy stabbed a spoon at her yogurt. “I didn’t get my camping badge this weekend.”

“Why not?” Ethel asked.

“I woke up at three in the morning because a cricket was jumping around in my tent and I freaked out. So, I made them take me home.”

“Aww, Weez,” Ethel said, patting her head the way Fritzzy always did. “I’m sorry.”

Weezy sighed, her hands under her chin.

Schreck lay her head on a stack of books and closed her eyes. Ethel nudged her.

“What’s up with you?”

“Grunt.”

“Grunt?”

“Ya, the *nanny* stayed at our house all weekend long. I never even got to hang out with my dad.”

“Ugh,” Weezy said. Yuki made a *tsk* sound. Ethel wasn’t about to bring up her troubles—everybody else’s seemed worse.

“Definitely a suck-fest Monday,” Ethel affirmed just as a figure strode through the glass doors of the cafeteria. It was that fifth grader Julie. *Oh perfect*, Ethel thought. Julie breezed past the tables in a cropped yellow sweater that clashed with her pale yellow hair and freckles. Here was a girl on a growing list of people Ethel didn’t really care to see. Why was this girl everywhere all of a sudden? And what was with her way-too-trendy holely jeans and wedge sandals?

As Julie walked straight toward them, Ethel realized something was up. The way she sashayed in as if she carried the most important news in the world meant something *not good*.

Julie acknowledged no one at the table; she simply handed a small card to Ethel.

“You probably will want to take a look at this.” Ethel looked down at it. It read <http://EthellsHotLOL.voodoo.com>.

“It’s very, um . . . informational,” Julie added, and sauntered off with her hands clasped behind her back.

Yuki took the card. “What is *this*?”

Ethel frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Let me see it,” Schreck said, taking the card. “Let’s find it.”

“I don’t know if I even want to look at it,” Ethel said, watching Julie leave the cafeteria.

But Yuki, Weezy, and Schreck all had their iPads out. Just as Ethel suspected, in trying to access it, they got the familiar warning page: “This site is blocked by administrators.” Ethel bit her lip.

**

Ironically, while Mme Volon flipped transparent sheets on the projector, droning on about conjugating the French verb *aller*, “to go,” there was nothing Ethel would rather do more. She kept looking at the clock, over which a sign read *QUELLE HEURE EST-IL?* She wanted badly to leave class and find out what this website was all about. Twice now in a week, she hadn’t been able to concentrate in class because of this stupid drama, and she should’ve been concentrating, for they were prepping for a French test tomorrow. Yet she could not keep French in her head. It didn’t help that Stephönë was in this class, the third row over, behind her. No doubt she was behind all of this, but despite the strain she felt, Ethel tried to remain composed. She didn’t want Stephönë to think she’d “gotten” to her with this latest website.

It was as if Mme Volon were deliberately holding back the minutes—that’s how slow this class period was going. Ethel heard Stephönë whisper something to a friend. She couldn’t help herself and glanced back. When she did, she regretted it. It was as if Stephönë had been waiting the whole period for Ethel to turn around. Her eyes were keen, and she gave Ethel a little smile that made it very clear who was in control. Stephönë wasn’t a big girl (in fact, she was painfully thin), but that composed smirk and the way her eyes widened with that little smile turned Ethel cold. *We’ve got you now.* Staring at the last minutes on the clock, Ethel realized she was afraid.

The second that French class ended, Ethel was out of her seat and out the door. It took nearly two minutes to get to the library as she walked hurriedly through the

hallways. Her curiosity *burned* to know what they were saying. She hustled over to an available computer station in the back of the library and opened a browser, working fast. The school's wireless network blocked a ton of social networking websites like Instagram and Facebook, but Schreck had taught them all how to connect to an outside proxy server and access any websites they wanted. Still, it was risky to do it on her own iPad, for the monitors tracked certain keywords.

She might get in trouble, but this was too important. Her heart felt like it was trying to climb out of her chest.

Ethel Googled “proxy servers” and quickly found the URL address of one that was not blocked by school administrators. She opened a new browser and entered the new server address. The proxy worked. She accessed the Voodoo site and typed in the URL. This is what she found:

VOODOO.COM

stick up for your friends—or *stick* your enemies!

Welcome to Ethel Is Hot (LOL)!



blogs+websites+comments+chat+polls

website

Take a poll: hot or not?



Click here to meet me! Hi im ethel f. effleby—im a genius! I like to wear rilly kewl clothes from goodwill because they makemy butt look rilly good! I would most like to meet sumbody who is: 1)as smart if not smarter than meand 2) who has stoped wetting his bed!

**Grunt Work, Inc.
Don't Have Time?
I do!**

- Rake leaves/mow lawns
- Pick dog waste off your lawn.
- Shovel snow/sand driveway
- Wash windows & cars!
- Anything else you can think of.

**I have 12 years of experience
(well that's how old I am).
Reasonable rates: \$5/hour
AT YOUR SERVICE**

Call Ethel F. Effleby 555-9898



tips on casting more cyber voodoo. . .

GET 2 KNOW GENERAL GENIUS! PERSONALITY PROFILE

Name: ethel F. effleby
Birthday: who cares
Current location: Seaside Skewl 4 Girlz
Eye Color: poo brown **Hair color:** poo brown
Heritage: Freakorican
The Shoes You Wore Today: My ugly poo brown ones.
"Every1 thinks there kewl."
Weakness: Fried chicken. My middle initial stands for:
FAT!
Your perfect pizza: the whole pie-make it 2~!
Future Goal: to live in outer space!
Bedtime: early (being on time 4 school is my life!)
Have You Ever Smoked? Yah-im hooked!
Have You Ever Drank? Every day in school!
Have You Ever Done Drugs? Ya-Dexatrim! Didnt work tho!
Your dreams: 2 be the worlds gratest genius!

BONUS

Meet my uncle fritz—he likes to wear womens clothes and sew blue ballgowns. His secret chat name is LINDA so if you meet him on the street, don't let him touch u!!!

Ethel clicked off the site and erased the history on the computer's browser. She couldn't read anymore, even though there were fifty more comments. She felt sick, her face turning hot.

The words from the site burned in her memory. Some of it was just plain stupid like:

Click here to meet me! Hi I'm ethel f. effelby—I'm a genius! I like to wear rilly kewl clothes from goodwill because they make my butt look rilly good! I would most like to meet sumbody who is 1) as smart if not smarter than me and 20 who has stoped wetting his bed.

But some of it was downright nasty mean like:

Eye Color: poo brown. ***Hair Color:*** poo brown

Weakness: Fried chicken. My middle initial stands for FAT!

And then there was something so ugly that she couldn't believe someone would actually say this:

BONUS: Meet my uncle fritz—he likes to wear womens clothes and sew blue ballgowns. His secret chat name is LINDA so if you meet him on the street, don't let him touch u!!!

A lot of the comments she scrolled through looked as though they were written with boys' screen names; where the heck did they come from? Besides Seaside girls, who else was contributing to this? It was beyond anything she'd ever expected. The worst part was that Carrie had betrayed her. Someone must have gotten ahold of one of her old business flyers. But that picture of herself in the army flap hat—and those nasty things about her uncle Fritz—that had undeniably come from Carrie.

**

"Check to see if there's an abuse button," Yuki said over Ethel's shoulder. The four of them had skipped lunch and hunkered down in the empty computer room where Schreck had a monitor on. Ethel surveyed every link on the Voodoo site.

"There isn't one," Ethel said. "And there's no phone number to call. Just a webmaster email."

“This Voodoo site sucks,” Schreck said, clicking through various pages. “I’ll bet nobody goes to it. Look, even the home page has all these spelling errors.”

“Well, we need to write to it and tell them to shut it down,” Yuki said. “Schreck, can you do that?”

Schreck nodded, typing. Yuki paced the room, tugging at the gaps in her oxford shirt. “I can’t believe it’s up to a hundred comments already.”

Ethel fretted, looking at the website. “I don’t understand who all these people are. Look at this comment from some kid named bmxdave. That isn’t anybody from our school! These people don’t know me!”

“I know,” Yuki said, biting her thumbnail. She patted Ethel’s shoulder. “We’ll get it shut down, don’t worry.”

“And look at this comment from Dat Chef. That’s got to be Carrie.” Ethel’s face crumpled. “Is everybody at school talking about me behind my back?”

Weezy hugged Ethel. “No. Nobody is saying anything about you.”

“Stop looking at it,” Yuki said. “It’s just going to make you feel worse.”

“Okay,” Schreck said, and finished typing. “I just emailed the webmaster.”

“Okay, see?” Yuki said. “It’ll be down in a couple of hours.”

A hot spike ran through Ethel. Stephönë was just a nasty person, and that alone was hard enough to contend with—but the way Carrie used confidential pictures and info against Ethel was unbelievable! All this meanness over what? Getting banned on the chat room? It was so overblown; she just wanted to find Carrie and scream at her until her voice went hoarse.

“I’m going to go find Carrie,” Ethel said through clenched teeth.

“Uh,” Yuki said, crossing her arms. “Don’t. You’ll make it worse.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Ethel cried. “Just let her totally get away with this?”

Weezy spoke up. “Don’t get yourself in trouble over this. She’s probably expecting you to find her, and then, how bad will it look if you get in more trouble? They’ll just use it against you.”

“Yeah,” Yuki said. “You have to be calm. You have to out-think her, not fight her.”

Ethel’s chest heaved. She felt dizzy and sat down. “Okay.”

Schreck offered Ethel a half of her liverwurst sandwich, but Ethel made a face.

"I'm not hungry."

The lunch period was nearly over. They could hear girls starting to fill the hallways on the way to their next class. Schreck stood up from the computer desk and turned off the monitor. She leaned over and hugged Ethel. "We love you, don't worry." Yuki and Weezy did the same, and for a few moments, Ethel felt better. It was as if she'd just run for fifteen straight miles until her heart sighed heavily and calmed down.

**

"Hmm, interesting," Gram said about the dinner menu of mac and cheese, hot dogs, and salad.

"Sorry," Ethel said, looking down at her full plate. She still wasn't hungry and hadn't put any creative thought into what they were having for dinner that night.

"You're really quiet," Gram commented. "Everything okay?"

Don't bring it up, don't bring it up, don't bring it up, Ethel thought. "I have a test tomorrow," she said.

"Okay, well, eat something and get cracking."

Ethel stirred her fork into the mac and cheese. She knew how miserable she looked, and still, she had no energy to pretend otherwise.

"What's going on?" Gram said, looking at her. "You don't look right."

"Nothing." Ethel kept her eyes on her plate.

"How did the apology go with Carrie?"

This time, Ethel looked up. Without meaning to, it spilled out. "She doesn't deserve one. I found out she made this website about me and said all these mean things on it and now everybody is joining in and making comments."

"Oh for heaven's sake," Gram said, exasperated. "Why can't you kids just talk to each other face-to-face? I told you to talk to her . . ."

"Gram," Ethel raised her voice. "You don't know what's going on. So forget it!" Now, if it were possible, she was more miserable than ever. She picked up her plate and scraped her dinner into the trash.

"What are you doing? You need to eat," Gram said, her brow furrowed. "Look, do

you want me to talk to the principal? Maybe we can . . .”

“No!” Ethel interrupted. “You don’t know how it works, Gram. Don’t do *anything*.” She paced the living room, suddenly angrier than ever. There was no place to go. Why couldn’t she have her own room to go to? She needed to be alone.

“Listen,” Gram said, getting up from the kitchen counter. “If it’s getting this bad, then maybe you need to take a break from that iPad and all of that technology for a while.”

“No,” Ethel said again. God, that’s the last thing she needed—to be cut off from what they were saying about her.

Gram bristled. “I can tell you’re upset, but that doesn’t mean you can take it out on me.”

“Arrghh.” Ethel gritted her teeth. “I’m going outside!”

“Oh no, you’re not,” Gram said. “It’s too late to be out on the street.”

“I’m just going to sit out on the outside stoop,” Ethel said. “There’s no place for me here. I can’t shut my door. I can’t go into your room, so I’m going to sit on the stoop!”

“Yup,” Gram muttered, looking at her watch. “She must be twelve; here comes the back talk.” Ethel put on her coat, glaring at Gram, who was still muttering as she walked into her bedroom.

Je vais, tu vas, il va. Outside on the dark stoop, Ethel could see her breath in the November night, her flashlight on her French book. She wanted to hurl the French book at a tree across the sidewalk. There was a man coming up the sidewalk under the streetlights with his black Lab on a leash. As he passed, he sang up to her, “Hello! Nice night!” and despite herself, she managed a reluctant hello back. The French verbs swarmed, and she could not keep any of it in her head. She had to out-think Carrie and Stephöñë, but now they weren’t the only problem. Now there were dozens of kids behind this website, all under anonymous screen names. Maybe there were now dozens of dozens. She could not fight them all, especially when she didn’t know who they were. Ethel put her French book down and came back inside. Gram’s door to her room was closed and she could hear the evening news on. In the living room, she plucked up her iPad and slipped back out with it on the front stoop.

Ethel found a proxy server and opened a browser, her heart ramping up to its

familiar jog. If she looked at it and didn't type anything, the school monitors wouldn't pick up any keywords, but she had to be careful. The Voodoo site had not been shut down. It had been five hours! Surely the webmaster would've gotten Schreck's email by now. She scrolled through the Ethel Is Hot LOL site, now up to 150 comments, each one nastier than the last. *God, why are they saying this about me? They don't know me!* She couldn't help herself and read every single one.

These weren't stupid comments like "Nice high waters" or "Where'd you get that shirt, Goodwill?" She'd handled those with years of practice and a saucy smile. Those comments were easy to handle because they had always been predictable and face-to-face. But these—"She should be tied to a tree overnight and get her entire face rubbed in dogshit"; "She betta have a job cuz no 1 ever gonna marry that ugly skank"; "Her gay uncle should get tied to a tree and beat"—these were the most ugly, awful things anybody could say. They were written as if every single poster had sworn to be her worst enemy.

She pictured her body lying lifeless in the dirt, like that *NOVA* program she'd seen, where jackals had torn apart an antelope. Every comment ripped at her, tearing shreds of her away. The jackals sat back in the dirt, howling and snickering, and dove back in, looking for a new piece to chew on.

**

By 3:30 a.m., it was useless. Ethel pounded the arm of the pullout couch, frustrated. "Sorry, Clyde," she whispered. She was never going to get to sleep. The moon came through the living room window, nearly full, its light turning everything ghost-colored. The leaves on the ficus tree in the corner of the room were pale; the skin on her arms looked like she'd been dead for days. Carrie once told her she was positive that the moon glowed on its own, until Ethel explained that it was the reflection of the sun that made it light up. *No, seriously, the moon glows on its own!* Carrie had tried to argue. Ethel wondered how Carrie had ever made it through the admissions process to get into Seaside. Could somebody really be that dumb? The fact was, Carrie was smart in other ways, dangerous ways.

Ethel picked up her iPad again and pressed the On button, making sure the volume was low. She logged back on to the Voodoo site. She was not going to keep lying here letting them rip apart her reputation with their ugly words. She thought carefully before posting her own comment. It would appear as the first one they saw in the morning.

Screenname: Ethel 3:30am

Carrie, StePHONY, Taylor, and Amanda and whoever else thinks I'm so GREAT.

All of u joining in making comments who don't even KNOW me—you don't have the guts to face me in person. You have to hide behind your screen names instead.

I could tell you some things on here that Carrie told me in private about all of you, but I wont.

Leave Me Alone . . . if you know whats good for u

Chapter 15

“See me after class, mademoiselle,” Mme Volon told Ethel as she passed back everyone’s tests. She walked back to the front of the room. “*Bonjour, mes amies*, let’s go over the most common mistakes on this last test.”

Ethel looked at the big red D on hers. Oh looky there, a big fat D. It was like a foreign letter: D for dumb. D for distracted. D for duh. She knew she had bombed it when she took it days ago. This was just icing on the cake of her life lately. There’d be no high-five over this in the cafeteria. What did they give each other for Ds? Probably a slap on the forehead.

Inside her book bag, her cell phone vibrated. Like everyone, she snuck her phone into the bathroom to check her texts during the day, but never during class. Stephönë was busy whispering to Taylor while Mme Volon’s back was turned. This time, she had to risk it. Ethel slipped the phone out of her backpack and tucked it into the French book.

Nice job on the test! Check out the site lately ☺??

Ethel slipped the phone back into her backpack. She stared at the whiteboard, pretending to concentrate. Stephönë must have thought the Ethel Is Hot LOL website was still up. In fact, it had been removed at seven thirty this morning, but only *after* Schreck had sent fifteen consecutive emails to the webmaster. Ethel’s stomach hurt. She’d tried so hard to stay under the radar. How did a small, snippy exchange with Carrie turn into this giant fireball in her life? It was exactly the kind of drama Stephönë and the other Cherrybomb Girlz thrived on for their KidVid broadcasts. Before Ethel Is Hot LOL had been removed, it had generated more than 500 comments in a matter of three days. And even though it was gone, Ethel didn’t feel safe. Some of the meanest, nastiest things she’d ever read about herself were emblazoned on her memory—everything from her weight to her looks to things they had made up that weren’t even true. Someone had stirred things up even higher in the comments section by making up a rumor that she’d

once wet her pants in gym until Val and Georgia had gotten on to protest, but that had just generated more infighting and more comments. Ethel hadn't been able to look at anyone in the hallways all day as she changed classes, afraid that everyone at the Seaside School for Girls was in on it. Despite what Weezy said, she felt as though everyone was talking about her behind her back. She didn't even want to go back on the Seaside chat room, afraid she might be attacked, until Yuki convinced her that all she had to do was switch her screen name from Ethanol to the most anonymous screen name she could think of, like Girl625, so nobody would know who she was.

In Ms. Halpern-Jones's English class, Ethel walked in wearing her everyday clothes. In her closet, she'd hunted for the least unadorned sweater she could find. A beige cable sweater. Khakis, sneakers. Clothes that blended with the walls and seamlessly melded with the floors.

Val and Georgia in their fairy costumes were the first to notice. "Where's your donkey costume?" Val said, her pixie hair adorned with silk flowers.

Ethel slumped into her lime green chair. "Dry cleaners."

"Oh," Val said. Georgia reached into the costume trunk. "You want to wear these wings?"

Ethel shook her head. She didn't feel like talking and opened *A Midsummer Night's Dream* instead. She'd already read the entire story twice, and it had been a welcome respite to immerse herself into the world of Hippolyta, Lysander, and Demetrius for a while. In the last few days she'd spent most of her time off the computer reading a stack of books on Fifi under the bay window in the living room. Thank God she had never told Carrie that she called the settee Fifi—or her pullout bed Clyde. It sounded babyish now, even to her. Ethel felt desperately grateful for the things she hadn't told Carrie, the parts of herself that remained hidden. Right now, she trusted no one. *A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. These were places she wanted to go. All she wanted to do was take the bus home and curl up into Fifi and read until Gram got home.

As Carrie walked in with Taylor and Amanda, Ethel kept her gaze fixed to the blackboard. Now that the Ethel Is Hot LOL site was down, the only thing Ethel wanted to do was get through school so she could be away from everyone.

Ms. Halpern-Jones began class by asking if anyone wanted to start reading the first part of the next scene. Ethel didn't raise her hand and hoped Ms. Halpern-Jones would just leave her alone. But things weren't going her way, so naturally Ms. Halpern-Jones had to make a comment about the absence of Ethel's costume. And, just like Georgia, Ms. Halpern-Jones tried to be helpful and ask if she wanted to put on a prop from the costume trunk, interrupting the entire focus of the class to shine that spotlight once again back on Ethel. She didn't know how much more she could take.

"I don't want to," she said, staring fiercely at her book. Ms. Halpern-Jones blinked and continued on, asking if anyone else was interested in reading.

"Um," Carrie said, raising her hand with the gauzy wristband around it. "How come *she* doesn't have to wear any costume for the class, but the rest of us do? I mean, you said it was a requirement and all."

Before now, Ethel had never known what it felt like to hate someone. Pure hate. Carrie wasn't satisfied to see her dragged through the dirt; now she wanted to kick her while she was down? She glared at Carrie. *Backstabber!* The feeling was a hot gallop in her chest; her fingers itched to tear at something.

Ms. Halpern-Jones began reading from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and reached down into the costume trunk, picking out a purply gauze wristband with flowers. Without even once glancing up from the page, Ms. Halpern-Jones simply dropped it onto Ethel's desk as if to say, *Follow the rules and I'll leave you alone.* Ethel put it on, grateful for the gesture.

**

Yuki and Schreck said they'd be in the Ragged Island lobby during science; Ethel logged on under her new screen name, Girl625, to check.

01:44 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: MR. P. LOVES STAR WARS I MEAN
LOOK AROUND THE ROOM! :-)

01:45 PM **Schreckno**: no kidding?!?!?!?

01:45 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: YES YES YES

01:45 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: ABOVE A DOOR IT SAYS MOON OF

ENDOR EWOK VILLAGE

01:45 PM **Girl625**: hey Lt. LAN

01:45 PM **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: hey Girl625 *wink wink*

01:45 PM **Girl625**: *wink wink* back

01:45 PM **Schreckno**: ello govna!

01:45 PM: **Weezy**: what does that mean?

01:45 PM: **Schreckno**: hello govenor but with a british accent

01:45 PM: **Girl625**: LOL

01:45 PM **Schreckno**: yes . . . now who wants to hear it with a german accent?

01:45 PM: **Girl625**: i do

01:45 PM **Schreckno**: dunolloooooollooooillo fraaaauline!

01:45 PM: **Girl625**: hahaa

01:45 PM: **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: thats great

01:45 PM: **Weezy**: lol

[jujubee joined the room]

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: Whatchoo talking bout?

01:45 PM: **Weezy**: German accents

01:45 PM: **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: who is jujubee?

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: O, hey did u guys see the new site?

01:45 PM: **Weezy**: Um

01:45 PM: **Schreckno**: Wat site

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: U know!

01:45 PM: **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: No

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: On General Genius.

01:45 PM: **Yuki_lurvs_bass**: that's notfunny

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: whatev

01:45 PM: **Weezy**: where is it jujubee?

01:45 PM: **jujubee**: cant say on here ask around at lunch.

[Girl625 left the room.]

Chapter 16

It wasn't too hard to find out that Julie had changed from *ducky* to *jujubee* on the chat room. That's what Ayanna told Ethel as they huddled in the hallway.

"She's now one of those cherry girls," Ayanna said, in faltering English. "They let her be in their group." Ayanna pushed back the patterned headscarf framing her face, her dark eyes somber. "She's at lunch right now giving these out." Ethel took the homemade card from Ayanna's hand.

Meet General Genius
www.freewebs/generalgenius

So that was what Stephönë's note was about in French. A new site they started.

"I did not see it yet," Ayanna assured Ethel.

"Will you promise me you won't?" Ethel pleaded. "Tell everybody to not look at it."

"I will try," Ayanna said.

Ethel tried her best not to run to the library. Instead she walked-ran, her arms stiffly to her sides. Once again she was going to have to break the rule and find a proxy to get the URL of this latest website. She didn't want to do this, but she had to know. As she sat down to a vacant study carrel and switched on the computer, her body began to tremble.



Free Webs *-make your own website!*

[getting started](#) [terms & conditions](#) [design palette](#) [html shortcuts](#)

Welcome to the official website of

General Genius



Here is a picture of the GIANTwalk-in closet she has for all of her many STYLISH and EXPENSIVEclothes



Let us tell you a little story about the General Genius. At the Seaside Skewl 4 Girls she is the BEST, the SMARTEST at everything. Principal Frederick agrees: "if it wasn't for General Genius, we would never have started this school. Her parents bring in so much money that we will have to name our new wing after her. Oh wait, I'm sorry, I forgot-she is a scholarship student—all of the rest of the parents pay for her to be here."

She is going to be a worldfamous NASA psycolojist someday and this is her future self



And now a message from the General herself:

Carrie, StePHONY, Amanda and Fiona and whoever else thinks I'm so GREAT,
All of u joining in making comments who don't even KNOW me—you don't have the guts to face me in person. You have tohide behind your screen names instead. I could tell you some things on here that Carrie told me in private about all of you, but I wont.

Comments(75 Comments)

mylittlepony: Lol she is so stooped. EFE—go on and tell —I dare u—uwill just make it worse for u
veeble said: God I hope she tells. I want to see her face when I make my website on her.
bmxdave: oh sad, sad General Genius-don't u know u can never stop us?

She read:

Let us tell you a little story about The General Genius. At the Seaside skewl 4 Girls she is the BEST, the SMARTEST at everything. Principal Frederick agrees: “if it wasn’t for General Genius, we would never have started this school. Her parents bring in so much money that we will have to name our new wing after her. Oh wait, I’m sorry I forgot—she is a scholarship student—all of the rest of the parents pay for her to be here.”

Just like the last website, the comments were like little knives:

mylittlepony: *Lol she is so stooped. EFE—go on and tell—I dare you—uwill make it worse for u*

veeble: *God I hope she tells. I want to see her face when I make my website on her.*

For the first time ever on Fried Chicken Day, Ethel had no desire to go to the cafeteria. Even though the delicious fried smells carried throughout the hallway, she left the library and drifted down the corridor, unsure of where to go next.

This was beyond the little Paperdollz world of the Cherrybomb Girlz. Whoever had put this new site up had gotten smarter and gone underground so no one could track Ethel by her real name. If caught, they could claim it wasn’t about her; but of course, everyone knew it was. She burned inside. There were so many scary parts to this newest website, she couldn’t get her mind around it. It wasn’t bad enough that they were making fun of her picture, where she lived, or her dreams.

She is going to be a worldfamous NASA psycologist someday and this is her Future Self.

Below that comment was a photo of that lady from Star Trek. Now they were getting very sophisticated in their attacks. They’d copied and pasted that late-night message she’d sent to the last site telling them they didn’t have the guts to face her in person. Instead of her message making an impact on people the way she’d intended, they were just using it against her. Anything she said or wrote from now on would be twisted into new material to make fun of her. That’s what was so scary. No one was being fair or logical. And the comments . . . Ethel couldn’t bring herself to read any more than the first three on this new site. One particular comment from someone named bmxdave chilled her and stuck in her memory:

Oh sad, sad, General Genius, don't u know u can never stop us?

How could you stop people you didn't even know? Ethel walked the hallway in a daze, stopping at an enormous window. She looked out at the crackly leaves swirling outside across the dead, brown school lawn. She wished Gram was there, and felt like calling her to come pick her up. Ethel slumped, looking out the window, realizing her options were limited. Gram couldn't afford to leave work, and besides, she thought computer fights were a waste of time. She'd never come pick her up at school for something like this. Ethel just wanted someone to hug her and say it was going to all go away.

Just then, Jess and Kate, the Soccer Chicas, approached her. "There you are!" They came up to Ethel in their red-and-white numbered jerseys as the lunch crowd began to pour down the hallways heading for the afternoon classes. Ethel looked up at them warily.

"We just saw the site on Elise's laptop. Everybody is talking about it in the cafeteria," Jess said. "Are you okay?"

Ethel cringed. She shook her head.

"Yeah, it really sucks," Kate echoed, her freckled face in a squint. "Why are they doing this to you?"

"I don't know," Ethel said, still looking out the window. "Because I got in a fight with Carrie."

"Well, it's ridiculous," Jess said. "Carrie's in my science class, and I saw her pulling up the site when Mr. Place wasn't looking and writing more comments to it. Bayley's her lab partner, and she added one too! Now everybody thinks it's like this big reality show."

This sent a spike of rage through Ethel. *Now Bayley was in on it?* "Do you know who else is writing comments?" she asked with a squeak.

Jess looked around before putting a sympathetic hand on Ethel's shoulder. "Heather and Ashley and Meghan. I know for a fact they wrote a couple of things."

"But," Ethel said, "I don't have anything against those girls. Why would they do that to me?"

"I don't even think people really get that it's about you—I think they're just adding

comments like it's a game. It's just this *thing* that everybody wants to be a part of," Kate said.

"Does everybody hate me?" Ethel asked, the lump in her throat growing larger.

"*Noo*," Jess said. "Me and Kate, Val and Georgia, and the Robot Chicks have been getting on the site and defending you. Georgia even got into a major IM war with these Portland public school boys because of it."

Hearing this news ramped Ethel's anxiety up even higher. "That's where all the comments from boys were coming from?"

"Yeah, that's where Nessa's boyfriend goes to school," Jess said. "Oops, hang on, here comes Mizz T," she whispered.

Mizz T caught her name as she was striding toward them; she had preternatural radar for whispering.

"*Here comes Mizz T*," she repeated, stopping to regard them. "Hey ladies, lunch period is almost over. Do we all have a place to go?"

When no one said anything, Mizz T held her clipboard to her chest. "All right, what's going on?" Her joking tone evaporated.

Jess took a deep breath and snuck a glance at Ethel. No one wanted to say anything.

"We're fine," Ethel answered. As always, her voice betrayed her feelings. Her answer had come out like a broken squeak. *Ooh, dangerous territory, dangerous*. To tell a teacher would flame this thing all over again, like a bonfire with gasoline poured on it. She could just picture the explosion of comments on the new website. *Snitch, snitch! The little baby had to go and snitch!*

Mizz T continued to scrutinize the girls. "Ethel. I just got a transfer slip from Carrie to be in my other tech class. She's on a B-day schedule now. Know anything about it?"

Ethel looked up at her. "No."

"I thought it was kind of odd she wanted to be in the same class as Stephönë. But then again, you guys change friends every week, right?" Ethel could tell Mizz T was fishing.

Ethel shrugged. "I don't know."

Mizz T couldn't get any of them to look her in the eye. Ethel made a small circle with her shoe. "Um, I need to go to math."

“Yeah, we have gym,” Jess said, and looked at Kate.

“Okay, my door is always open if you ever need to talk.”

“Yup,” Ethel said. This time she tried to smile. There was an awkward moment before Mizz T finally headed off to her classroom.

Ethel looked at her watch; lunchtime was over. “You guys,” she pleaded to Jess and Kate. “Just do me a favor and don’t go on that site anymore, ’cause all it does is make more comments, and then everybody wants to read the new ones. I got the last site taken down. I’m gonna try to get this one down too.”

“All right,” Kate said, squeezing Ethel’s shoulder.

“What are you going to do?” Jess asked.

“I’m gonna find Carrie,” Ethel said. “To start.”

Ethel stood at the corner of the hallway that intersected the corridor leading to the cafeteria. From her vantage point she could see clearly through the glass doors and watched Stephönë carrying her tray over to the trash as the other Cherrybomb Girlz followed. Ethel looked at her watch. She only had a minute before afternoon classes began, and stayed in the shadows of the long hallway. She would be late for math, but she had prepared to take the detention.

As the Cherrybomb Girlz all left the cafeteria, Carrie waved goodbye. Stephönë, Amanda, and Taylor went down the opposite corridor as Ethel ducked into the girls’ bathroom. Only a couple of weeks ago, she and Carrie used to walk down this corridor after lunch. As Ethel knew she would, Carrie turned the corner to the hallway and headed toward the math and science wing. Ethel counted up to ten slowly and slipped out of the bathroom.

“Hi,” Ethel said, startling Carrie, who visibly recoiled. Ethel continued to walk with her as if nothing had changed between them. “I just wanted to thank you for all of the mean stuff you’ve been posting about me.” Ethel came around Carrie and stopped her. “I think it’s really *awesome*. And you’re really *cool* for doing it.”

“Well, you got me banned for a month,” Carrie retorted.

Ethel’s face reddened. “You deserved to get banned for saying mean things about me.” *Don’t touch her*, Yuki had said. *Do everything you can not to touch her. Out-think*

her. “And if you don’t take down this new site, you’re gonna be sorry.” Though Ethel’s heart was beating madly, her voice came through clear and cold, like the bottom of an icy lake.

Carrie stopped. “Or what, you’re gonna tell?” The bratty look on her face was infuriating. She began to walk away.

“No, I’m not going to *tell*.” *Don’t touch her*. God, it was so hard not to grab her sleeve and yank her backward, but Ethel didn’t stop following her. “I just can’t believe that a stupid little fight on the chat would make you go and do something like this. It’s not a game, Carrie.” She wanted to add, *You are ruining my life*. But she knew all that would do is give her and the others more ammunition.

Carrie didn’t answer, her stride faster than before. They were almost at the end of the hallway near her next class. “Stop following me,” Carrie hissed.

“Then take down the site.”

“I didn’t put this one up, so leave me alone.”

This was beyond what Ethel could stand. As Carrie opened the door to the classroom, Ethel fought to keep her voice level, but her words were choked.

“I stuck up for you when they were doing this to *you*.”

Not a hint of expression touched Carrie’s eyes—they were dead as a still quarry. She opened the door to her class.

**

“Welcome to the second episode of the Cherrybomb Girlz,” Stephönë said, her head coyly bent. Behind her stood Carrie and Taylor. Once again, they wore outfits they’d never get away with at Seaside. Stephönë’s striped halter top and bandana-wrapped hair made her look like she was part of one of those skanky girl groups who wore lingerie on stage. Carrie’s short hair had been slicked back; her makeup was so smoky, she was almost unrecognizable. And Taylor had on long black gloves, a low-cut black top, and enormous hoop earrings. All three of them pursed their lips at the camera.

“So here’s what’s happened since we saw you last,” Stephönë said, putting her arm around Carrie and pulling her up toward the camera. “My girl Sassy here got into a little fight with us, but we’re all good now.”

“It was just a little misunderstanding,” Carrie said, winking.

“Yeah and so, to earn her way back into the Cherrybomb Girlz, she had to make some sacrifices.” All three smiled. Stephönë continued. “See, what happened was, this other girl, we’ll call her The Genius, has been making up stuff about us and getting us banned on the school chat room.”

“She’s not even a girl,” Taylor said. “She looks like a boy.”

“A fugly boy,” Stephönë emphasized as her outlined eyes found the camera. She moved in closer, a sneer forming. “First, she got my girl Sassy here in trouble on the chat room. And then she started some rumors about me. And you know how we feel about *drama*,” Stephönë said, pausing. “We *love* it.” At that moment, the video cut to a new scene. Stephönë reappeared, this time in a short, black wig, fake Coke-bottle glasses, and ugly plastic teeth. She held up a piece of paper with the General Genius website address written in crayon. “So check out this website and add your comments,” she said as giggling was heard off camera. “Until next time, keep the drama coming.”

**

Ethel folded her arms. “Oh right. Like that is supposed to be me?”

They were all in Weezy’s bedroom on a rainy afternoon. Yuki and Weezy sat squeezed together on a wooden chair by the computer. “It’s not very good postproduction,” Weezy said, biting her fingernail.

“And I never started any rumors!” Ethel barked.

Schreck took a lollipop out of her mouth with a pop. “Of course, they’re just making that up so it looks like you’re the bad guy.”

“So, they can make up anything they want and people will believe them?” Ethel screeched.

Yuki scrolled through the comments posted under the video. “She’s getting a lot of people to watch it. It’s been viewed more than a thousand times since yesterday.”

“God!” Ethel spat, pacing. “It’s not like I did anything to them.”

Schreck continued viewing. “The thing is, the video isn’t just about the dramz. Look, Stephönë, Taylor, and Carrie are all doing this dance number now.”

Yuki watched. “Pfff. They suck.”

The lollipop popped out again from Schreck’s mouth. “Yeah, but see, it’s now an actual show. They’re trying to make the Cherrybomb Girlz into some kind of song-and-dance, talk show thingy.”

Ethel went to lie down on Weezy’s bed, feeling completely exhausted. The rain battered against the window on a dark afternoon. The brightest light in the room came from the bluish computer screen. Ethel picked up a red stuffed horse on Weezy’s pillow. Staring at the ceiling, she began tossing it in the air.

Schreck went back to sit by the window on the shag carpet, picking at the strands of shag. “I think it’s time to tell.”

“No,” Weezy said, shaking her head. “Ethel’s right, it’ll make it worse.”

“At least they’re not using your real name,” Schreck said.

Yuki pulled up the General Genius website and began searching through the latest comments. “Of course they won’t use her real name. No one is using a real name. They’re not stupid. Only anybody who is in on it knows it’s about Ethel.”

Ethel frowned, playing with the horse’s red satin ears.

“The school knows you were General Genius on the chat logs. You could email Mr. Frederick anonymously and link to this website,” Yuki suggested.

Weezy pushed at her glasses. “Wait. If the school made Stephönë take everything down, she would just find a way to put up another site and another KidVid video under completely new names and we’d never find them. At least this way you know everything Stephönë is doing.”

Ethel threw the stuffed horse in the air and caught it, saying nothing.

Yuki stared into the screen of the General Genius website. “I’m going to look up who owns this site.” She clicked the keyboard furiously.

“God, I wish this would go away,” Schreck mumbled, picking at the carpet. “I’m sick of dealing with this every day.”

Ethel sat up on the bed like one of those old-fashioned vampires rising from its coffin. She turned her gaze upon Schreck. “I’m really *sorry* you have to deal with this every day,” she snapped.

Yuki stopped typing. Schreck blanched, her mouth slightly open. “No, Ethel, don’t take it that way. I just meant . . .”

“Everyone is sick of it,” Yuki interrupted. “But we have to deal with it.”

“I’m just saying this is taking over your life,” Schreck said. “You’re not sleeping, you’ve failed two tests this week. TWO!” She held up two fingers as if nobody could count. “You can’t fight this. You should just tell at this point.”

“Do you *not* get it?” Ethel barked. “I can’t! God, Schreck!”

Schreck’s shoulders lowered as she picked at the shag carpet.

“That’s it,” Yuki said. “I’m writing another comment.” She hunched over the keyboard.

Ethel sighed. “Don’t, Yuki. It doesn’t help.” She shook her head and lay back down on the bed.

A small *ping* sounded on Weezy’s cell phone. “Is that the text I sent you like fifteen minutes ago?” Yuki asked, picking up Weezy’s phone. She read

Dinesh: Hey Louise—gess wat! We won the championship!

Yuki swiveled in the wooden chair to face her. “Why is Dinesh texting you?”

Weezy’s hands fumbled together; she put them behind her back. “Oh, you know, our parents make us talk from time to time.”

Yuki’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know, Weez. It sounds like you’re friends.” She thumbed out a quick reply.

Hey whoo hoo, u must be soooo proud

“Don’t write that!” Weezy said, slapping Yuki’s hand away.

“Why do you care?” Yuki said coolly, sitting back in the creaky chair. “I thought you hated him.”

Schreck looked at Ethel. This wasn’t just a normal session of Weezy and Yuki bickering. Weezy quickly typed out another reply to Dinesh. “For your information, I don’t hate him.”

“Oh *really*,” Yuki said. “So, what are you gonna do when you get older, marry him?”

When Weezy turned to the window and said nothing, Yuki slapped the wooden arms of the chair. “Wow. Little Miss ‘I Hate My Arranged Marriage,’ isn’t that you?” Yuki said, her arms crossed. As imposing as Yuki was, she had underestimated Weezy, for in the next moment, Weezy replied, “Dinesh is really kind of nice when you get to know him.”

Yuki snorted. “When did this happen? We’ve been making fun of him since second grade, and all of a sudden, you’re in love?”

“Well,” Weezy conceded, looking at the floor. “I’m not in *love*.”

“What about college?” Yuki demanded. “What about all of our plans. Is he going to be our roommate? What about grad school . . . and Paris in the springtime? Are you going to throw that all away just to . . . get married to that jerk and have a million babies?”

Weezy seemed to shrink. Quietly, she answered. “If you were Indian, you would understand. I have to do what my parents want.”

“Uh oh, you guys,” Schreck said, her voice panicked. She was staring at her iPad screen again. “You better see this.”

“What?” Ethel said, getting up from the bed. Yuki and Weezy reluctantly came forward; they all crowded around the iPad to see the latest comments on the General Genius site.

Hey Yucky Yamazaki, and Lezzie Sunanda—get a room.

Hello house of Mongolia? One extra large with dog please.

How many dogs has that girl eaten. Have u seen her lately?

Shes phat, no wait, whoops typo—meant FAT.

**Wait I just herd that Yucky and Lezzie are married??? OMG
is that the gayest thing u ever herd?**

LOL, LOL,LOL!!! I cant waigttt to tell peeps at our school.

All i can say: ewwwwwwww.

Yuki turned from the computer. “That’s it.” They watched her work at the ring on her finger, yanking it. “I don’t need this.” The ring loosened, and she slammed it down on Weezy’s desk. “Here. Take it back. I’m sorry we ever got ‘married’ in the first place. It was a stupid joke when we were kids.” She picked up her blue rain jacket and yanked open the bedroom door, the zipper of her jacket scraping against the door frame as she stomped out. “Have a great life with your awesome husband!” she called down the hallway.

Weezy’s eyes began to fill behind her glasses; she took them off. Schreck stood, looking lost. Ethel swallowed over the ever-present lump that had returned. She put an arm around Weezy and then said very quietly to Schreck, “Turn that thing off.”

Chapter 17

The moon was gone. Its waning crescent phase left the living room dark; just the barest glow from the streetlights outlined the fishnet-stockings lamp and the bust of Elvis and good old Fifi in the corner under the bay window. It was 3:45 a.m. There was no use trying to sleep. Ethel pulled off the covers and went to sit on Fifi for a while. Under the glow of the streetlights, she stroked the red velvet, pushing patterns into the fabric with her finger. Every time she began to drift off, her pulse raced and one of those website comments came floating back. Whoever said sticks and stones could break your bones but names could never hurt you was talking *crap*. The things that they had said about Yuki and Weezy made her sick to her stomach. She couldn't read any more things about herself. She felt like hundreds of kids were out to get her. The more she tried to defend herself, the more it became their entertainment.

Ethel squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to silence her anxious thoughts with the word *NO*. She tried to train her mind to stop letting all the bad stuff in. Instead, she tried to fill her mind with good stuff. There was the Museum of Science trip coming up, something she'd been madly excited about for weeks. Even though it was difficult to feel madly excited about anything right now, it was at least a good sign that she was still looking forward to it. Then there was Thanksgiving break coming up after that. With Gram, T-Day was always festive. Uncle Fritz would come, along with Gram's girlfriends, some work people, and the occasional guest Ethel had never met before (like Fritz's roommate one year, Weird Jim, who didn't eat meat and had brought his own soy turkey sandwich dinner in a little lunch pail). They always had to rent a large table and turn Ethel's bedroom area into the dining area. And since Gram didn't like anything traditional for the Thanksgiving menu, forgoing the classic cranberry sauce and squash and potato side dishes, Ethel never knew what they were going to eat. One year Gram did a deep-fried turducken, which was chicken stuffed into a duck stuffed into a turkey. It looked like a mutant football on the dinner table, but it had been one of the most delicious

things she'd ever tasted. And, of course, the side dishes had been just as wacky: mashed plantains and Hawaiian chicken skewers with poi. Gram couldn't stand holiday music, so she'd put on big-band music instead. Every time they were finished with a course, people had to clink glasses and get up and do a little dance. The only thing traditional that Gram liked were homemade pies, so at the end of the meal there were always at least four different kinds to choose from like pumpkin, chocolate, pecan, and mincemeat.

Ethel wrapped herself up in a blanket, staring out at the parked cars on the street. The thought of Thanksgiving brought up other uneasy feelings. Her mother always wanted Ethel to come visit her at the prison on the holidays, which was hard, for Ethel never wanted to go there again. In four years Charlene would be released and they could have Thanksgiving Day together again. Yet Ethel couldn't help but conjure up memories of the last time they had all gotten together; she wasn't sure she ever wanted to spend Thanksgiving with her mother ever again.

A panic fluttered in her chest—bad thoughts sneaking in again. Thank God no one knew where her mother was! Ethel's eyes shut tight, her blanket wrapped taut around her. Carrie had been to her house, had heard her mom calling, but how much had she really heard and understood? Ethel was pretty sure she hadn't pieced anything together or else it would've been posted online already. As reason returned, Ethel calmed down a little, grateful for the things in her life still hidden from the online world. *I'm going to disappear*, she thought. It was the only way to be safe.

The digital clock continued to remind her how late it was, but Ethel was no closer to sleep than if it had been two in the afternoon. She remembered a girl named Heather with whom she'd taken an acting class two summers ago. One day, Heather went into a complete tailspin over not getting the part she'd wanted and announced she was quitting the class. Yet the following week, Heather had walked back into the class as if nothing happened. Even the acting instructor seemed to be taken aback. "I thought you quit," he said.

"Quit?" Heather laughed. "What are you talking about? I love this class!" Heather's nose crinkled up as if the instructor were crazy. She proceeded to join the others in their stretching and warming-up exercises. That weird little moment had always stayed with Ethel. She wondered why she was thinking about it now. Heather had erased

reality, changing the events of the previous week as if they'd never happened. By doing so, she'd actually changed the way others perceived her. Heather might've been a little nuts, but at least she wasn't seen as a quitter.

This can't go on forever, Ethel thought, stroking Fifi's velvet. *Keep walking in there like nothing happened*. Perhaps this could work. *Smile if anyone says anything mean to you—pretend that they are saying nice things instead*. Ethel yawned, finally feeling tired, and climbed back into Clyde. Maybe the trick to getting through this was to be completely crazy.

Chapter 18

Getting through morning classes had been difficult, but two hours of sleep was better than no hours of sleep. Schreck swung her *Planet of the Apes* lunch box as she and Ethel headed for the cafeteria.

“And oh my God, they’ve got an IMAX film about dinosaurs,” Schreck piped, hopping alongside Ethel. “Which I will completely *freak* if I don’t see. Two more days and we’ll be on the bus. I can’t wait.” She turned to Ethel. “Did you get your permission slip in?”

Ethel covered her mouth, yawning. “Yeah.” As they approached the cafeteria, Ethel looked through the glass doors, scanning the dozens of girls milling around.

“Have you seen Yuki and Weezy?” Ethel asked, worried.

Schreck held her lunch box with both hands. “I think Weezy is out sick today. And Yuki . . . I haven’t seen her today.”

Since their spat over Dinesh, Yuki and Weezy had stopped talking to each other. But Ethel knew those nasty website comments had driven an even bigger wedge between them. She bit her lower lip, desperately wanting to find them both. Divide and conquer, that was the Cherrybomb Girlz strategy—and it was working.

“Listen.” Ethel cornered Schreck, leaning so close, she could feel Schreck’s hair tickling her cheek. “You haven’t told anyone at school about my mom, right?”

Schreck drew back. “*No*. Of course not.”

Ethel made sure no one was near them before continuing. “Okay. Just checking. I just didn’t sleep last night, thinking about it.”

“Don’t worry,” Schreck said. “I’m sticking by you.”

“Thanks.” She felt so grateful to have Schreck by her side. Ethel knuckled one of her eyes. Her entire face felt baggy. “I didn’t bring a lunch today.”

Schreck opened the snap on her lunch box, lifting the lid. “Ham loaf and Gouda cheese,” she said. “Halfsies?” The smell was overwhelming.

“Thanks, but I think I’m gonna buy something instead. Meet ya inside?”

“Kay, see ya in a minute,” Schreck said, opening the cafeteria door.

In the lunch line, Jess and Kate were hopping up and down with their trays. “Can’t wait—we’re going to my aunt’s for Turkey Day,” Jess said, her ponytail bouncing.

“Sweet! We have all the family over. First we all watch the parade and then football,” Kate said. She turned to Ethel behind her. “What do you guys do?”

“Oh, the usual,” Ethel said, yawning again.

In front of them, Bayley caught wind of the conversation. “My mom always makes the best sweet potato pie, but I never have room. This year, I’m gonna have like one bite of everything and that’s it.”

Ethel looked away, uninterested in contributing any more to this conversation. Bayley was one of the girls who had written a comment on the General Genius site, and that alone made her an enemy. Standing in line began to frazzle her nerves. Every time a girl joined the lunch line, Ethel darted a glance to see who it was.

“Hey Ethel.”

Ethel turned slowly, glad to see Elise appear at her side. “I’m not cutting,” Elise told Jess and Kate. “I just had to ask Ethel something.”

The conversations in line ceased as girls homed in to listen more intently. No wonder she felt paranoid. “What?” said Ethel.

Elise hesitated, twisting her foot. “So, I just have to know. Did you start an Internet rumor about Stephōnē?”

“No!” The fluttery feeling returned.

Elise searched Ethel’s face. “Oh, ’cause she’s saying you did on KidVid, and before I believe it, I just wanted to ask you.”

“I haven’t done anything to her. She’s the one attacking me, Elise.”

Elise wrung her hands. “Okay. I just had to ask. You know, ’cause all kinds of things are being said, and, well, I’m kind of friends with everybody and needed to know.”

“What things?” Ethel’s voice cracked.

“You guys, just treat it like a joke,” Bayley turned to add, trying to be helpful. “The videos are just supposed to make people laugh. Ethel, just laugh it off. The more you take it seriously, the more they will keep making them.”

“People wouldn’t think it was so funny if it was happening to them,” Ethel protested, taking a big gulp of air.

“You guys,” Kate said, holding her empty tray flat across her stomach. “Stop talking about that stupid website. Nobody I know is looking at it anymore.”

Bayley crooked an eyebrow, pushing her long brown hair behind an ear. Just that gesture alone told Ethel that Kate’s comment was untrue. At that moment, Nessa strode up to the lunch line. Her hair was plaited in two long braids and she was wearing scrubby jeans and a Spanish cola T-shirt, not quite up to Stephönë’s fashion standards. More shocking still, Bayley smiled and grabbed Nessa’s hand. “*Hola*. Cut in front of me.”

If everything were normal, someone would have automatically uttered, “No backsies,” but to see Bayley and Nessa friends again was unusual. One of Stephönë’s rules dictated that you couldn’t be friends with your old friends if you were a Cherrybomb Girl.

“People!” Jess barked. “Nobody go to that site anymore.” Ethel cringed. Jess was just trying to stick up for her, but it caused other girls in the line to stare and do that *thing* where they leaned into each other and talked under their breath as if they weren’t *really* talking about her. Hungry or not, Ethel couldn’t stay here any longer. She broke out of line and made her way past the long line of fifth and sixth graders waiting to get lunch. *Oh shoot!* Schreck was still waiting for her. Schreck would just have to understand; she had to get out of there. At end of the line stood Julie, the Cherrybomb Girlz’ latest pet, along with a few of her friends. Ethel hurried by, but just as she’d gotten a few steps past, she felt Julie grab her arm.

“Ethel, wait!”

Ethel swiveled, wanting to shake this little needle-nosed rat. “What do you want?”

Julie looked to her friends and said, “I just wanted to warn you about something. Did you know that Stephönë’s dad works in L.A.?”

“Yeah, so?”

“I just thought you should know he’s working on getting the Cherrybomb Girlz their own YouTube show. A lot of Hollywood people are already looking at Stephöñë’s KidVid episodes.”

This new information made Ethel’s throat close. Complicating it further, she didn’t know if Julie was actually looking out for her or if this was a trap. She didn’t trust anyone anymore. She looked to the floor, unable to come up with a retort. If she didn’t get away this second, she’d fall apart. Ethel started walking with no idea where she was going. Inside, a little voice kept saying, “Go—go—go!”

**

Lying on Gram’s bed, with Gram next to her, watching the evening news, Ethel felt the world recede. She scootched back against the oversized floral pillows, letting her body relax. It felt as though the more she kept sinking farther into the pillows and under the covers, the calmer she became.

Every once in a while, they had a tray of snacks for dinner, and it was the only place Ethel wanted to be right now. Before them on wooden trays Gram had arranged an array of cheeses, crackers, apples, pears, summer sausage, pickles, and olives.

“I told Georgina to hold off on giving Chico a bath today because I knew you’d want to do it on Saturday,” Gram said, climbing onto the bed. She still had her work clothes on and smelled like dog, a sweet, comforting smell.

Ethel lay back on the pillow and popped an olive into her mouth. “Okay.” She wished she never had to go back to school again. What heaven it would be just to go to work and give dogs baths all day.

“Six o’clock, here comes ole helmet head,” Gram said, staring at the TV as the national evening news came on. That’s what Gram called the news anchor. Her real name was Doris, and she always faced the camera with a stiff helmet of brown hair that looked like a bad Halloween wig. As Doris rattled on about car accidents on I-95 and local protests to stop cell phone towers from being built in rural areas, Gram balanced pieces of sausage, cheese, apple, pear, and olives upon a single cracker. “Doris, don’t forget to

spray more Aqua Net on during the break,” Gram cracked. She said a version of this every night. Ethel smiled.

Staring at the camera, Doris began to read an item on the national news. On the green screen beside her head, a video of a teenage boy began to roll. In the frame a slight, blond boy with a gentle face began singing into a carrot, his eyes closed. “They’re calling him the Dream Girls Boy, a fourteen-year-old who videotaped himself practicing a song from the movie *Dream Girls*. The video, stolen and then broadcast by a classmate upon the popular user-generated video site KidVid, has been downloaded more than a million times . . .”

Ethel stopped chewing as the brief snippet of video played. As the blond boy gave the song his full emotion, his mouth contorted and his voice cracked slightly.

“He attempted to take his own life yesterday. According to his parents, the boy had been cyberbullied for months and harassed in school repeatedly. He remains in stable condition at a hospital in Minnesota,” Doris read, shuffling the papers in front of her before moving to the next news item.

“Oh, that’s just awful,” Gram said, disgusted. “What is wrong with kids today?”

Ethel had forgotten to swallow, and now when she did, the cracker went down dry. Instantly, she was filled with outrage.

“Why did they put this on the national news? Now more people will try to find that video and make it worse for him!” She blinked, suddenly very upset. The boy had only wanted to sing to himself in the privacy of his own bedroom, trying out his vocal range. Who was that hurting? Ethel had probably used up hours of videotape doing stupid, silly skits and impressions like that with her friends. She got up off the bed, her face drained, and entered Gram’s bathroom.

“You okay?” Gram said, lowering the volume on the remote.

“Yeah,” she muttered, and closed the bathroom door behind her. Hours of videotape somewhere, Halloween costumes, birthday parties where they all took turns lip-synching to songs holding wooden spoons: Ethel couldn’t recall every wacky or spontaneous thing she’d done at sleepovers or birthday parties over the years, but she knew somewhere in every Seaside girl’s home there were digital images, videotape, and audio of girls being silly and having fun. All it took was some kid singing into a carrot to

be a national sensation? Ethel began to tremble. It started in her knees, spreading up, her whole body feeling as though she were standing outside in the November chill. She braced herself against the bathroom sink counter.

Her own face in the mirror was unrecognizable, sickly white. Ethel closed her eyes, picturing what it must have been like to go to school every day and hear kids in the hallway taunt him. Even in second grade in New York, she remembered boys throwing around the word *fag* to anyone who was even slightly different. And now the news stations had made up a clever name for him: the Dream Girls Boy. As if that wouldn't add to his misery. What had it been like for the Dream Girls Boy to walk the hallways, unable to take the constant elbowing, the evil comments under his video? What about the kids who *used* to like him, but now couldn't look him in the eye or offer a kind smile? Day by day, another click on KidVid downloaded his humiliation. At some point, a looming realization had to occur. It wasn't just immature high school kids making fun of him, now it was the whole world. Adults, teachers, parents, the media—people who were supposed to protect him were clicking on the video, sharing it with friends and coworkers, laughing. *Did you see this kid?* Posting it on the national news, so now the late-night talk shows could take a crack at him. There was no escape beyond high school, or a life beyond college where he could ever be anonymous again.

Ethel began to feel a rushing sensation, big black dots clustering at the top of her vision. They were cartoon dots growing bigger like raindrops. She saw the Dream Girls Boy singing, his eyes closing at a high note, a small smile on his lips. *I'm drowning*, she thought but that didn't make sense. The rain fell in big black drops across the bathroom mirror, her fingertips stinging with pins and needles. Ethel fell, slumping to the floor, her chin whacking hard against the sink counter.

**

In moments Gram had her by the armpits, pulling her up. "Oh sweet Lord," Gram said, setting her down upon the closed lid of the toilet. Gram pressed a washcloth to Ethel's chin; it came away with a moon of blood. Ethel stumbled to stand, blinking rapidly, not understanding what was happening. Her feet and hands still felt unbelievably cold. Her

vision was a weird little oval, everything else dark around it, no matter where her head turned. Gradually, the oval opened up like a camera lens to its widest aperture. As Ethel stood, warmth began to flood back to her fingertips.

“Look at me. Are you okay?” Gram said, staring into her eyes. Ethel took the washcloth from her chin and peered at herself in the mirror to see how bad it was. Her jaw felt like it had been punched. In a few moments, the cut on her chin had finally stopped bleeding, but Gram made her keep the washcloth pressed to it anyway as she searched through the first aid kit.

“Look at my face,” Ethel said in a whisper. All she could think of was going to school with a huge Band-Aid on her chin: something new to point and laugh at.

**

In the morning, Ethel lay under the covers on Clyde, watching Gram suck down the last of her coffee. “All right,” Gram said, crossing the hardwood floor to gather her keys and her tan trench coat. The sound of her white sneakers peeped across the floor like baby chicks with each step. “Time to get up. You only have a half hour till you catch the bus.”

“I still don’t feel good,” Ethel muttered.

Gram hovered over her. “Do you feel like you’re going to faint again?”

“No,” Ethel said, trying to sound miserable. “It’s my stomach.” They’d already been over this. Gram didn’t believe in missing school unless Ethel had a raging fever or was throwing up. Already, Ethel had submitted to the thermometer twice that morning, frustrated to discover that her temperature was perfectly normal.

“Well, you probably just need to eat something. Do you want a little more Pepto?”

Ethel shrugged, tracing her fingers along the satin edge of her blanket.

Gram eyed her. “You’re about to have ten days off for Thanksgiving break. I would like you to get up, get dressed, and make an effort to go to school. If you still aren’t feeling good later, I’ll come and get you.”

“Gram,” Ethel protested in an angry whine. “I don’t want to.”

Gram pulled a few bobby pins out of her hair and stuck one in the corner of her mouth to adjust her hair. Between her taut lips, she mumbled, “Let’s go. Up, up.”

Oh, why couldn’t she be left alone! Ethel angrily threw the covers back.

Chapter 19

A dark scab had already started to form in the cleft in her chin. It looked like it had been drawn in with a brown marker. *Great!* Ethel sat directly behind the bus driver. In her hand she held a little makeup mirror, staring at her chin as the bus bounced and groaned comfortably through the wharf district. There was no way to hide this deformity. Her mind conjured up little scenarios of the Cherrybomb Girlz coming up to her in the hallway. *What happened to your chin? Did you cut yourself shaving? Ha ha.* Perhaps Carrie would snap off a picture on her cell phone. Of course she would! Then it would immediately appear on the General Genius website.

Ethel closed her eyes, upset with Gram for making her go to school. Her nerves were taut and her stomach truly did hurt! It felt like a knitting needle stabbing around in there. Ethel clutched her heavy backpack, scrunching down into her seat. When she tried looking out the window at the same old route, she stared at the back of the bus driver's short gray hair, fascinated by his florid neck folds under his stiff green cap. Except for the occasional cough, none of the other passengers made a sound. Riding the public bus every day, Ethel felt anonymous among the nurses in their uniforms, the men and women in their business suits, and the old people who took forever to get up the bus stairs with their roll carts of groceries. The closer the bus rolled past the city streets toward the south end of the harbor toward Seaside, the more her stomach clenched. Staring at a large fish truck double-parked outside the Oak Room, she knew her stop was a few minutes away. She fantasized for a moment about riding the bus till three o'clock, then getting off and going back to the apartment and curling up on Fifi. But if she didn't show up at school, they would call Gram. Then she'd have to sit at home, nervous and anxious, waiting for Gram to punish her.

When Ethel's stop came up, she had to will herself to stand up. With her backpack slung around one shoulder, she grasped the pole, waiting for the compressed sound of the doors opening.

It took little tricks to get through the day, like waiting until each class started before scurrying down the empty hallways. Even if she was late, it kept her invisible. Another trick: not raising her hand to answer teachers' questions. This way, she managed to keep her chin artfully hidden by maintaining the bored pose of resting her elbow on the desk and propping up the side of her face with her hand. In between classes, when the other girls logged on to the Seaside chat room for a few moments, Ethel doodled in her spiral notebook. She hadn't logged on to the school chat room in two days and didn't know if she could bring herself to go on there again. The chat room scared her. She was afraid of what she might see. Never before had getting on a computer or a chat room made her feel like this, like something was going to jump through the screen and snatch her with its teeth.

Unfortunately, this made her feel cut off from Yuki and Weezy, who still weren't talking to each other. Neither had IM'd Ethel in days either. She pictured her friends as the paper dolls they had created, all four of them rained upon, shredded apart.

At lunch, Ethel headed for the library rather than face that lunch line again. The cafeteria was Stephöñë's domain now, her offline territory. Creeping through the science corridor toward the library, she felt like she might fall apart, as though her body were made of gauze; every dirty look or barbed comment might punch a hole clean through her. When she opened the doors to the library, she spied Yuki sitting with Nessa at one of the study tables by the reference section. *Nessa! What was she doing with Yuki?* Ethel faltered, wondering if she should try to find someplace else to go. But before she could leave, Nessa got up from the study table and said goodbye to Yuki. Ethel's heart hammered. She quickly sidestepped over to the bookshelf by the window, pretending to look through a *World Book Encyclopedia* as Nessa left the library. Ethel scratched the back of her neck as she tried to make a decision. She needed to talk to Yuki.

"Hi," Ethel said, sliding into the study table chair.

Yuki looked up, flipping a page of her magazine. "Hi."

"I haven't seen you in like two days."

Yuki seemed to take a long time before answering. "I know."

Ethel swallowed, not wanting to ask, but she had to. "I didn't know you and Nessa were friends. So, does that mean you're a Cherrybomb Girl now?"

"No," Yuki said, snorting. "Nessa's not either. They kicked her out so Carrie could come back in." She looked at Ethel. "Nessa said they let her know through a text message."

Ethel blinked, taking this in. "Oh."

Yuki flipped her magazine page with a slap. "I went up to Stephönë and Carrie yesterday after homeroom and told them I was gonna find out who wrote that stuff about me and Weezy. Of course they both acted like they didn't know. So I told them it was a good thing that I was Buddhist, or else I was gonna kick their sorry asses."

Ethel's eyes widened, thrilled that Yuki had sworn at them. "What did they say?"

"Stephönë had nothing to say. And Carrie couldn't even look at me." Yuki stared at Ethel. "That's why you're gonna have to get right in their faces too."

Ethel licked her lips. "But they're not scared of me. They want more drama from me so they can add to their show."

"Stop being afraid of them." Yuki spoke under her breath. "They've got you right where they want you. You have to make them stop."

"I can't," Ethel said miserably. She tried to picture the day the Cherrybomb Girlz got their YouTube show green lighted, followed by years of online torture, more websites with her real name. *Hey, it's the Ethel Is Hot girl*. She could never hide, not with people pointing and staring at her everywhere she went. She couldn't explain how terrifying it was. Yuki said nothing, just kept flipping the magazine pages without reading. Ethel knew how weak she looked in Yuki's eyes. She felt hopeless, as if pieces of her were breaking off inside.

"I can't, Yuki . . . You don't understand. Everything I do will just make it worse," she whispered.

Yuki hesitated to answer. "You've said that over and over, but it's already worse. You let Carrie drag you into it, and when I tried to defend you, they started saying crap about me." Yuki stood up suddenly. "I'm really sorry, Ethel, but if you don't want to stand up for yourself, there's really nothing I can do anymore."

As Yuki started to walk out of the library, Ethel felt a painful lump in her throat. She jumped out of her seat and tried to catch Yuki's sleeve. "Wait, stop. Can't we just hang out?"

Yuki crossed her arms, looking at her feet. She thought for a moment before she answered. "Right now, it's probably not a good idea."

**

Toward the end of the day, a jubilant vibe permeated the school. The promise of the Boston field trip, followed by Thanksgiving break, put the girls in a giddy mood as they threw their books back into their lockers for the last class of the day. Elise and the Robot Chicks flew running down the hallway, chanting "Bos-ton! Bos-ton!" until Ms. Halpern-Jones told them to cut it out.

Dazed, Ethel walked toward the math and science wing. She passed by Mizz T's computer lab, grateful that it was a B-day and that Carrie was in Mizz T's other tech class. She could see the top of Carrie's auburn head next to Stephönë's sleek highlighted one in the door window. She plodded through the corridor that bypassed the cafeteria, taking the least-used route to get to the math and science wing. She had to drag herself through another hour of fractions and then finally, go home. The hallways were eerily silent. It would be a relief to have ten days off from school. In only a few weeks, she felt as if she'd aged an entire year.

Passing by the cafeteria, she automatically inspected it to see who was inside and caught a glimpse of a girl sitting by herself. She recognized the big bangs curled like wings. Ethel was grateful to see Schreck and yanked open one of the glass doors.

"Hey," Ethel said, entering the cafeteria. "You wanna walk with me to math?"

Schreck didn't answer. She stood up in her LAN RULES T-shirt, her arms limply by her sides.

Ethel came closer until she was standing right next to Schreck. Something was wrong; she could tell by the way Schreck wouldn't look up.

"What's going on?" Ethel asked. She could see Schreck's iPad open to the pink-and-green Seaside chat room.

Up close, Schreck looked like she'd just been touched in freeze tag. Ethel tried to search her eyes. "What is it?"

"I thought you and Yuki were on the chat just now."

"No," Ethel said, alarmed. "I haven't been on in two days."

Schreck's mouth bent into a weird, twisted position. "Oh God."

Ethel peered closer, reading back through the chat conversation. "Hey," she said, put out. "Who is using my screen name?"

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: hey girly

1:45 PM **Schreckno**: oo ur back!

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: hahaa—yup

1:45 PM **Schreckno**: im glad, don't let them get to u

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: I wont.

Yuki_lurvs_bass: hey galz

1:45 PM **Schreckno**: hey that waz weird

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: wat is?

Yuki_lurvs_bass: wat?

1:45 PM **Schreckno**: Why doesn't Yuki have a time stamp?

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: strange ☺

Yuki_lurvs_bass: ya

1:45 PM: **Girl625**: enywaze, I wont let them get 2 me

1:46 PM **Schreckno**: good I thought abt wut we can say abt ur mom

1:46 PM: **Girl625**: like wat?

1:46 PM **Schreckno**: if they ever ask just say she works out of the country

1:46 PM: **Girl625**: 2 late, they found out abt my mom

1:46 PM **Schreckno**: ?????? when? wat did they say!

1:46 PM **Girl625**: u know

Yuki_lurvs_bass: ya, it's the secret

1:46 PM **Schreckno**: omg!

1:46 PM **Girl625**: its ok, u can talk—its just us on the chat

Yuki_lurvs_bass: they already know why her mom calls every week

1:46 PM **Schreckno**: ohh nooooo! Omg so sorry

1:46 PM **Girl625**: shes coming home.
1:46 PM **Schreckno**: ? how? Is she out now?
1:46 PM **Girl625**: out? Wut do u mean?
1:46 PM **Schreckno**: from jail?
1:46 PM **Schreckno**: whoops dint mean to say on chat
1:46 PM **Girl625**: ill bet u didnt ☺
1:46 PM **Schreckno**: wait, wat?

Schreck began to shake. “I didn’t mean to say it . . . I wrote it and then I couldn’t take it back.”

Ethel’s fingertips felt icy again. She recalled the trick Carrie taught her to impersonate someone else on the chat. Somebody had just done it to Schreck, who had no idea what had just happened. Ethel wanted to scream, but tried to keep her voice level. “Why would you say anything at all?”

“Cause Yuki was on the chat too . . . or it looked like she was . . . Now I don’t know what happened, but they were talking like us, and I wasn’t thinking, and it just came out . . .”

Oh no, no, no. Ethel quickly typed the URL to the General Genius site.



Free Webs *-make your own website!*

[getting started](#) [terms & conditions](#) [design palette](#) [html shortcuts](#)

Welcome to the official
website of
**General
Genius**



General Geniuses FUTURE SELF!!!!!!

Comments(900 Comments)

So now the mystery is solved. Why
General Genius wants so bad to fly
to the stars and be a NASA
psychologist.

To escape her jailbait mama!

You must be so proud!

lizzebell: so that explains how messed up
she is!

Da princess: i cant stand how funny this
is!

bmxdave: its all over the internet now,
beeyoch-u got nowhere to hide!

[more comments...](#)

Ethel read each word on the updated General Genius site, feeling stone cold.

So now the mystery is solved. Why General Genius wants so bad to fly to the stars and be a NASA psychologist.

To eascape her jailbait mama!

You must be so proud!

Where had they gotten this cartoon image of a woman in prison so fast? Ethel checked the time stamp on the chat room against the iPad clock. In only five minutes, someone had found this cartoon and uploaded it to the site. Yet, even as she refreshed the page, she could see people were adding comments to the website at this very moment, which meant either someone at Seaside was using a proxy or someone outside of school was doing it.

***lizzebell:** so that explains how messed up she is.*

***da princess:** I cant stand how funny this is!*

***bmxdave:** its all over the internet now beeyoch-u got nowhere to hide!*

Ethel wanted to throw Schreck's iPad to the floor. How could Schreck have been so stupid! She should've known not to reveal anything. Ethel's body seemed to alternate between feeling cold and blazing hot. Schreck stood next to her, visibly shaking. The cafeteria was quiet except for Schreck's nose running; she kept sniffing it back.

"Ethel," Schreck whispered, tears beginning to come down her face. "I'm sorry."

Ethel stumbled past a plastic chair. She didn't know where she was going. With the clunk of the second hand, the giant clock over the cafeteria doors announced that the last class of the day had already begun seven minutes ago.

**

On the north side of the building, the math and science corridor had few windows, and this particular hallway was always dim. Ethel stopped walking and leaned against a locker. She was already so late getting to her math class, she'd probably get a detention. When the door opened, Mr. Honig would stop writing on the board . . . All eyes would

slide to see who interrupted class . . . Her breath was coming short and fast, and she slid down the orange locker, holding her knees. She couldn't even move, trying to think of what to do. The General Genius website would flame up all over again in the coming days. All the girls at school now had a ten-day vacation to devote all of their time to it. Ethel closed her eyes, her fingers clutching her bangs.

Her body ached terribly; she felt cold and weak, her joints stiff as if she'd been kicked over and over in the stomach, in the muscles of her back. *That's it*, she thought. *That's all of it*. They'd all gotten to her, Stephönë, Carrie, the Cherrybomb Girlz with their wide following, even people from a public school she'd never met, and they had done it. They had gotten to her. *That's it*.

Ethel stood up unsteadily. As she walked back the opposite way, her left brown orthopedic shoe made an odd creaking sound. *Snitch, snitch, snitch*. The sound echoed off the long walls and the lockers, chugging along in a rhythm.

The corridor became a darkening tunnel. Somewhere beyond a row of lockers, Stephönë's sunny face in her Supafly Cherry outfit played out in a grainy image superimposed by Carrie in a cherry Kool-Aid-colored bobbed wig and a pair of purple hippie glasses. *You're like the weirdest person I know!*

As she walked, it didn't even feel like her feet taking the steps. Seaside was supposed to be the place where her whole life had changed. In goes a D student, out comes an A student. Just chug along on the straight and narrow to a bright, shiny future bursting wide open.

As she walked by a large window, she could see the courtyard was hazy with fog. Ethel saw her reflection, but those weren't her eyes. They were Charlene's eyes. For now they shared the same draggy, worn-out expression.

Goodbye, NASA, Ethel thought. There was no point in dreaming about working with astronauts, or a room of her own someday; the plan had derailed. All that hard work, gone. *Goodbye, goodbye*. Stephönë would come out the other end with a wide open future. Her golden star would rise, as would Carrie's, with the show they would put on for Hollywood. They would get all the way to the top on the tracks of her broken bones.

Only . . . there was a tiny piece of her that hadn't broken off just yet, a part they hadn't bargained for.

Before Ethel left school today, they would get something else for their broadcast, something to show the world. *They sent me to Seaside through the straight and narrow tunnel; ooh, but wait till you see what comes out the other side.*

At the library, she stopped walking. And pushed open the doors.

**

“Ethel, shouldn’t you be in class?”

The buses were coming in a half hour. The fog was coming. All doors would be locked down. Ethel clutched a stack of pages against her chest; she held them close, as if they were a beloved book. *But these pages will be free.*

“*Hell-o*, Ethel, I’m talking to you.” Ms. Halpern-Jones followed behind, her high heels clacking on the polished floor as she picked up the pace. Ethel let a few of the pages drop. She liked the whooshing sound they made before they fluttered to the floor. She could hear Ms. Halpern-Jones’s heels slow to a halt as she picked up one of the papers.

“Ethel, please stop . . . ,” Ms. Halpern-Jones called out.

But she had no intention of stopping as she rounded the corner of the computer wing, her brown shoes squeaking. She began to run. Some more pages loosened from her grasp, dropping to the floor. Within moments, she arrived at Mizz T’s class and backed up against an orange locker to stare through the window. She caught a brief glimpse of Mizz T just as Ms. Halpern-Jones turned the corner.

“All right, Ethel, I’m not kidding. You’d better just stay . . .”

Ethel’s fists clenched, mangling the smooth papers.

And then she felt strangely calm, her entire body buzzing as she opened the door to the classroom. Mizz T stopped talking, a flash of alarm in her eyes, as Ethel approached her. Ethel pushed a few pages across her desk. *Here, you get to see them first.*

Up to this moment, Ethel hadn’t thought of what to say. She drifted across the front row of computer stations past Bayley, Taylor, and Elise, blotting them out. A ream of humiliating words floated to the floor: printouts of the General Genius site and all 500

comments settled faceup. In the front row, Taylor moved her foot, leaving a dirty Mary Jane shoe print upon the image of a woman in prison.

“Ethel.” Mizz T cleared her throat.

Only two or three sheets of paper remained in her fists, and she crumpled them, letting them drop onto the computer desk Stephönë shared with Carrie.

In her blue polka-dot hair scarf and matching turquoise glasses, Stephönë watched Ethel. Gone was the perpetual amused smile. Stephönë stared back with no expression.

Ethel leaned in. “If you ever write another thing about me or post another video about me ever again . . .” She stared at Stephönë. “I will spend the rest of my life coming after you.”

Mizz T began to advance. “*Okay*, let’s go outside, Ethel.” Up until this moment, she’d felt fuzzy, as if on cold medicine, but now Mizz T’s proprietary tone and Stephönë’s maddening blank expression drove Ethel to snap. A flood came through her.

“Don’t come near me!” Ethel growled at Mizz T. “You either!” Ms. Halpern-Jones stood blinking at the door. She turned back to Stephönë, whose eyes widened slightly. “When you wonder why your life sucks so bad, why you don’t have a career or any friends, all you ever have to do is just look at your computer—’cause that’s where it will all be coming from.”

Ethel stared at Carrie next. “You’re next.”

Not a sound could be heard in the classroom until Mizz T came up behind Ethel, gently taking hold of her arm. With her free arm, Ethel picked up the crumpled piece of paper on Carrie’s desk and threw it in her face. Carrie’s face instantly turned red, her hands flying up to her cheeks. Girls in the classroom gasped as Mizz T tightened her firm grip on Ethel’s upper arm.

“All right, let’s go,” Mizz T said with more force as she yanked Ethel out of the room.

“I’m getting help!” Ms. Halpern-Jones called, and she began to trot the opposite way down the hallway, her heels clacking once more. The door to Mizz T’s computer room slammed. In the empty hallway, Mizz T gripped Ethel by both arms, her face so close, Ethel could see her freckles.

“What is going on?” Mizz T demanded in a whisper.

“Let go,” Ethel said, surprised at how low and calm her words came out. When Mizz T didn’t, Ethel felt a furious surge, wrenching out of her grasp. “I said let go!” she yelled. Mizz T obeyed, holding her arms up protectively.

“I don’t need you! I don’t need your school. You think you’re a leadership school? Ha! You teachers are the stupidest people here. You don’t know what’s going on.” Ethel licked her lips rapidly, backing away. “You’re fake and your school is fake. I am never coming back to this place, so I don’t care what you do to me.” She turned, slipping on the worn-out soles of her brown orthopedic shoes, banging into a locker. Around the farthest end of the hallway, Ms. Halpern-Jones reappeared, jogging toward them with Principal Frederick close behind. Ethel narrowed her eyes and pushed herself off the baby blue locker. The front doors were just down one more hall and around the corner. She began to sprint as fast as she could.

**

Outside it was cold, made even more so by the pervasive damp of the fog. Ethel had no coat, only a vest made of wool. She sprinted through the wet grass along the grounds of the school, her shoes slipping, until she reached a thicket of trees. Inside the thicket, she finally relaxed, bending over to catch her breath. In a moment, she stood back up. She could hear them all calling her name. If she couldn’t see them, they wouldn’t see her. Her breath mingled with the fog as she rubbed her bare arms, trying to think of what to do next. Of course they were going to look for her at the public bus stop first. For a second, she thought her wallet might be with her backpack in her locker along with the rest of the stuff she planned to leave behind. But then, Ethel patted the inner lining of her vest and felt the hard outline of her plaid wallet. She took it out, finding her folded twenty-dollar bill. *Always have your mad money.*

She stood hidden by the trees, thinking. Not enough to run away, but enough to get home and pack some stuff quickly. She had a hundred dollars in a lockbox with her diary in her closet. *Mad money.* She’d never gotten around to depositing it. *Money you need when you are mad.*

Even out in the woods, Ethel felt constantly watched, as if a camera had been placed in every corner of world, monitoring her every move. She began to make her way through the thin copse of trees. On each side of the Seaside Leadership School for Girls were residential areas. All she'd have to do is run through some backyards, pass the water treatment plant, and angle over two or three blocks to catch the bus at a stop farther down the route, where they wouldn't expect to see her. She looked at her watch, her breath billowing out in short bursts. Time to go now.

A little after four, Ethel clattered down the bus steps into her neighborhood on the Prom. It was already dark; the swelling hill and view of the Promenade was indistinct, washed out. She wrapped her arms around herself as she walked past every brownstone and Victorian she knew so well. The sugar maple trees were all bare. Porch lights from the row of houses illuminated the branches; they seemed to stab every which way in the fog.

The closer she got to home, the more her heart thudded. In a few months, no one would remember Ethel F. Effelby. They could do whatever they wanted; she no longer existed. She knew Gram would fight her on this, yet Gram didn't have to walk the hallways alone or sit by herself at lunch. Or hear vicious laughter as she walked by a group of kids. What kind of life was that? To suffer a thousand cuts from the morning bell to the last bus, every day with no end in sight—that was no life at all. The public school would be no better. They were all in on the General Genius site too and behind some of the meanest comments ever posted. She imagined walking into a new school with hundreds of strangers knowing who she was, yet having no idea whom to trust or which kids were out to harm her. No thanks, they were never going to sell her on that option. There was only one choice. It was better for Gram, too, in the long run, for she could have her entire apartment back and not have to work so hard to take care of two people.

Ethel pressed her palms against her wet eyes as she walked. In the fog, she saw her mom's face, her light brown hair tied back, singing to her, on some concrete steps in the summer. A memory of some old apartment in New York where they used to live.

People around, some sort of block party—everybody cheering and clapping as Charlene sang. She had a great voice. At least Ethel remembered one good thing.

At the brown concrete steps of the apartment, Ethel looked up to their leaded-glass door. The bay windows were dark, half obscured by curtains. She took a breath. Gram would be home soon, and she needed to move fast.

Chapter 20

“Is this what they’ve been doing to you?”

Still wrapped in her tan trench coat, Gram stood in the dark kitchen before Ethel’s open iPad on the counter. Her face was bathed in bluish light. “This is a damn *fine* use of technology these schools all give you kids.”

Ethel stood at the door, absolutely wooden. Gram was not supposed to be here.

“You need to tell me everything that’s going on,” Gram said, turning on the light over the stove. “I just got back from your school. I’ve been running around like a madwoman trying to find you, since they told me you took off. My next call was going to be to the police. Now, what is this website you told me about?” Gram’s eyes flicked to the iPad screen. “I thought it was some silly thing all you girls did online, a little sniping here and there. But this!” She stood up to her full height, made even more imperious by her giant blond beehive. “Ethel, I need you to start talking.”

She began to advance, and Ethel reacted in a way she never had before. It was as if she were a marionette, with all her strings severed. She squatted down to the floor, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees, and began to cry. All the vicious typed words that had burned into her memory became a torrent. She sobbed, her face buried, thinking of how many people hated her. It was as if they could all see her now and it was everything they had hoped for, and they were cackling and joyous to see her break.

“I’m not going back to school,” she said, her words muffled against her knees. “Don’t try to make me. There’s nothing you can do. I’ll leave here too . . .” Her head twisted side to side. “I don’t care, I don’t care anymore.”

In a few moments, there was a hand on her shoulder. “Okay,” Gram said low and soothing, the way she did to shivering animals at the shelter. “Oh boy.”

Something about the way Gram said that made Ethel look up through her blurry eyes. Gram stared at a far point in the room. She made a sound as if she were holding her breath. Ethel could tell she was furious. There were tears forming in her eyes. “Oh boy.”

She picked Ethel up off the floor and put her arms around her. Ethel felt the buckle of Gram's trench coat dig into her side, but it was okay. They stood in the dim living room together like that for a while. When Gram spoke, her words came out in a low croak.

"You think I'm going to let you walk away from me?" Gram pushed Ethel's damp bangs back from her forehead. "All this time I've spent putting you back together, you think you're going to take off now?" Gram laughed bitterly. The back of her hand swiped Ethel's cheeks. "I'll tell you one thing. You didn't do anything to deserve this."

Ethel said nothing and allowed herself to be taken back into a hug again. She just wanted to stay there, smelling Gram's vanilla perfume, feeling that scratchy trench coat against her cheek.

"There's nothing you can do about it," Ethel murmured into Gram's collar. "Once something's on the Internet, it's on there forever."

Gram sniffled, her fingers dabbing at her nose. She let go. "You need to tell me start to finish when this started and every single thing that has been posted."

"No . . .," Ethel said miserably. "I don't want to go through this anymore."

"Listen to me," Gram said, gripping Ethel's shoulders. "This is much bigger than you. Right now I need information and I need to know what we've got to fight with."

It felt like the broken-off pieces inside Ethel inflamed all over again. "Ohhh, God," she said. "I don't want to show you more of this stuff."

"Please. I have to see this."

Reluctantly, Ethel logged back into Paperdollz and searched for the Cherrybomb Girlz profile. She rubbed her nose, toggling back and forth to the home page and to the search fields. "I can't find it," Ethel said. She looked up at Gram. It was the truth.

"What are we looking at?" Gram said behind her, trying to see what she was doing. She rummaged through her purse to get her reading glasses and put them on. "Look at the ways these dolls are dressed. Good God! What is this?"

"Gram, please," Ethel said gloomily. "If you want me to tell you how this works, then you can't yell."

"Okay," Gram said, rubbing Ethel's shoulder briskly. "All right. What are we looking for anyway?"

"I'm looking for these paper dolls that Carrie and some other girls at school made online. They're called the Cherrybomb Girlz . . . but I think they got rid of them." She tried to find the Cherrybomb Girlz profile on the Paperdollz site, but nothing produced a listing. Their profile had vanished. Quickly, Ethel opened a new browser window and pulled up the KidVid site, keying in Cherrybomb Girlz. Her eyes scanned the results down the page. That, too, had been taken down.

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?" Gram asked, her mouth puckered.

"Yeah, Gram, but now it looks like all the sites have been pulled down," Ethel said. "This girl Stephönë was the leader, and she brought Carrie and these other girls into her special club. Then she posted these video clips about me on KidVid and . . ." Ethel slumped. How could she possibly explain? Without seeing the videos for herself, Gram wouldn't understand. Trying to explain this to an adult was more difficult than she realized. Ethel sighed and toggled back to the General Genius site. She frowned, refreshing the site again, but found an error page: This site is no longer active.

"Gram, they just took this one down too," Ethel muttered. Stephönë and Carrie weren't stupid; they were leaving no traces. Everything was coming down fast.

"Besides what you printed out at school, did you save any of this stuff they put up about you?" Gram asked, squinting at the screen.

"No," Ethel said. "After a while, I couldn't even look at it anymore."

"Well, that leaves us with bupkis," Gram said, trying to conceal her irritation. "Now it's going to be hard to prove."

At once Ethel's IM box popped open with a *ding*. It was Schreck and Yuki on group chat trying to reach her. "Oh," Ethel said, feeling overwhelmed. She turned away from the laptop. "I don't want to do this anymore."

Gram's mouth was a small line. "Sweets," she said. "Why don't you go lie down. I'm going to call up Bellagio's and order us a large Hawaiian pizza. After that, I need to make some calls. I'll check in with you in about an hour."

Ethel looked at her wearily. Gram softened, smoothing Ethel's hair back. "We'll take this step by step. The only way I'll understand it is if I write it all down."

Ethel shook her head. "Everything is taken down now. It doesn't matter."

“Please trust me.” Gram’s eyes sought hers. “It matters.”

Ethel slunk into Gram’s bedroom, grateful to just crawl onto the flowery bedspread and be alone. She clicked the remote to see if there was a movie already in the DVD player, watching impassively as an old favorite animated film began to play. *Charlotte’s Web*. She was a little too old for it; that’s how long it had been since they’d watched a DVD movie. But right now, it was soothing in an odd way. As she watched it, her eyes grew tired, feeling pleasantly lost in Charlotte’s world and Wilbur’s problems, which were so far removed from her own.

Chapter 21

In the morning, Ethel stretched out of a dream. The light was funny, at a different angle across the couch. It was the first time in a week she'd really slept, and she'd dreamed so hard, it felt as if she'd run for miles. Gram was frying up eggs and bacon in the kitchen.

Groggily, Ethel realized what day it was. By now, the Seaside buses would be on their way to Boston. In a matter of hours, girls would be screeching with excitement, running through the Museum of Science. She pictured Stephöñë, Carrie, Taylor, and Amanda, all looking their best in full makeup and curled hair because they knew boys would be there. Just envisioning Schreck, Yuki, and Weezy along with Val and Georgia, the Soccer Chicas, the Robot Chicks, and the others running like mad toward the Omni theater, everybody happy, going on with their lives, made tears come to her swollen eyes. She no longer existed at Seaside; it was like a large hand pushing down on her chest.

Ethel sat up, rubbing her eyes, dreading the minutes until they had to leave. Last night, they'd both stayed up late, cramming for what felt like a final exam. Ethel showed Gram how websites were made, how IM, blogs, and KidVid worked, how to make personal profiles and use guestbook comments. Finally, she showed Gram what an Internet service provider was and how to message them through a contact page.

Gram came around the kitchen counter. She was wearing her favorite dark blue suit, a 1940s cut that she said made her legs look fabulous. She wore black patent leather pumps to go with it.

Ethel took the blankets off and sat up. Her arms and legs felt weighted down. "Why are you wearing that?" she murmured.

"It's my power suit," Gram said, sipping from her stainless travel coffee mug. "Our meeting with Principal Frederick is in an hour, so go take a shower." She leaned on the kitchen counter, flipping through the curled yellow papers of her legal pad.

"I don't want to do this, Gram."

Gram brought her coffee over to where Ethel sat on Clyde. With her hand, she cupped Ethel's face. "I told you I'm not going to make you go back to Seaside, and I promise you I will not do anything that makes your life worse. But we are going to deal with what happened. This is one of those times you're going to have to fully trust me, Ethel."

Ethel willed herself to get out of bed and shuffle to the bathroom as Gram went back to her legal pad and clicked her pen to jot down more notes.

Oh, this was going to be awful, just awful.

**

When they walked in, the double doors slammed behind them. The sound echoed all the way down the hall. It was 10:00 a.m., technically third period. If school were in session, Ethel would be in science, but the hallways were empty. It felt strange walking into the school with Gram by her side. Once again, she had the sensation that a video camera was following her every move. Only a few janitors occupied the hallway, polishing the floors with a large buffing machine. Ethel didn't meet their eyes as Gram opened the door to the main office.

A dim light emanated from the principal's side office. Usually, Mrs. Reidy sat at the front desk handling the attendance sheets and taking calls, but today she wasn't here, the normal rhythms of school life brought to a standstill.

"Mrs. Effelby, Ethel, please come in," Principal Frederick said. He was older than Gram, with gray sideburns and a genial nature. He mostly appeared at assemblies or as a disembodied voice over the PA system. Ethel couldn't face him directly. The last time she'd seen him, he was running after her.

As they entered his dark-paneled office, Ethel felt her chest constrict. Principal Frederick gestured to another man standing next to him, a man Ethel didn't recognize.

"Mrs. Effelby, this is Principal Gordon of the Portland Middle School," he said, and Principal Gordon held his hand out for Gram to shake. Ethel looked at Gram. *Why was he here?*

“Have a seat,” Principal Frederick said, tugging at the knees of his trousers before sitting down at his desk. Gram and Ethel took their seats in the two leather chairs across from him. He leaned forward, his palms folded across the blotter. “First, I just want to say we’re sorry for what you’ve been through, Ethel. We do everything we can to prevent any kind of mistreatment at this school. Miss Tucker wanted to be here for this meeting, but she is chaperoning the class trip to Boston. However, she gave us these screen shots you must’ve printed out yesterday.” His face was serious and lined as he smoothed out a stack of dirty, crumpled pieces of paper across his desk. “When we looked for this website last night, we saw that it had been removed.”

Gram’s strong, sarcastic voice filled the room. “Pretty impressive, huh? They covered their tracks pretty well.” Ethel began to tremble. She felt Gram’s hand rubbing her back. Despite what Gram had said, all of these adults knowing about the site still made her feel like a snitch.

Principal Frederick gave a brief nod. “We’re doing a thorough check of the school’s computers today; I already had my IT people go through chat logs and records.” He looked down at the stack of papers before him. “None of the screen names on here match any of the screen names we have listed at Seaside. So far, we don’t have any evidence that this website was created on school property, nor do we have any indication the instigators were any of our students.”

“Well, take my word for it. It was Carrie Swan and that other girl”—Gram looked at her legal pad of notes—“Stephönë Gallagher. And a couple of other girls who were followers.”

He let out a short sigh. “Did you happen to print out anything else? Anything we can use?”

“No,” Gram said, lifting her hand from Ethel’s back. “Until yesterday, I didn’t know about any of this. By then all of these websites I told you about were taken down, including those videos. I mean, for God’s sake, Stephönë’s father is condoning this crap by making some Internet show out of it.”

Principal Frederick made a futile gesture. “If I could see what you were talking about, maybe we could do something. But I looked and couldn’t find anything on the Cherry Girls.”

“Cherrybomb Girlz with a z,” Ethel said quietly, looking at her shoes.

Gram’s nostrils flared. “Look, regardless of whether it happened on school property or off, it *still* happened. These bullies are still students from your school—and *yours*—” She directed this to Principal Gordon, who allowed an uncomfortable smile as he straightened in his chair. “And I think there should be consequences.”

“I agree, Mrs. Effelby. The problem is, we don’t know which kids are responsible,” Principal Gordon said. Ethel looked up to peek at him. He was probably twenty years younger than Principal Frederick, but with a black, slicked-back hairstyle that looked more appropriate in a tough inner city. “They all used multiple screen names, making them impossible to identify.” He rubbed his knee uneasily. “We even contacted the Internet service provider of this General Genius site, but there has been no response as of today. You see,” he said as he leaned forward, “if this site was set up in someone’s private home, legally we have no power. The parents of the students are the ones held responsible for what their children do using the Internet at home, not the schools.”

“And how does this help us?” Gram asked. “How are we going to find the students who did this?”

Principal Gordon’s uncomfortable smile remained fixed as he shared a look with Principal Frederick, who spoke next. “We called the parents of the girls you named—Stephönë Gallagher, Carrie Swan, Taylor Greenfield, and Amanda Canton—to let them know we have reason to believe they were all involved in this General Genius site, but they denied knowing anything about it.”

“Of course they did,” Gram snorted. “Isn’t Ethel’s word that it happened enough evidence?”

“We’re taking it seriously, believe me,” Principal Frederick said. “This happened so late in the day yesterday, normally I’d bring in the alleged perpetrators and their parents, along with any witnesses. But all of the girls are in Boston today on the school trip.”

“All except for Ethel,” Gram reminded him. “You didn’t think maybe to cancel the whole trip so we could get to the bottom of this?”

“Gram!” Ethel whispered as Principal Frederick winced. God, what would have happened if he had canceled the entire school trip—didn’t the entire school already hate her enough?

“Right now, the best evidence we have are these printouts,” Principal Frederick said, looking down at the crumpled papers. “Since the site is now down and all we have are a few printed pages with comments written under anonymous screen names, it’s going to be hard to attribute the comments to certain individuals. I’ll have to get a subpoena to verify certain identities—that is, *if* the girls used their real names in establishing an account, which I doubt. Certainly, if Ethel were accused of something, you’d want to see proof of wrongdoing, Mrs. Effelby.”

Principal Gordon added, “And if any public school kids are involved, it’ll be much easier to prove it if they contributed comments to this site on school time. We can verify that by checking our computer logs against sign-in sheets. Otherwise, it’s impossible to monitor every little thing they do at home, Mrs. Effelby.”

Ethel could hear the fabric of Gram’s navy suit rustle slightly as she bent forward in her chair. “Let me get this straight. These kids can put up and take down these mean and nasty websites all under your nose, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Principal Frederick interrupted. “Let me say, Mrs. Effelby, I do understand how upset you both are. We don’t condone bullying.” He cleared his throat. “But I’m afraid we’re really limited in what we can do. Like I said, we’ll be having a serious talk with those four girls when they get back.”

“But you aren’t going to suspend them?” Gram shot out.

“If we find proof or if we can find witnesses, we’ll make that decision. Obviously, we’ll be monitoring the Internet for any new websites or comments on the chat rooms, and if we catch anything . . .”

“That’s it?” Gram said sharply. “You’re going to monitor the entire Internet.” She rubbed her black stockinged knee. “I really don’t see how you’d have the time.”

The two principals exchanged a look, and Ethel could read exactly what they were saying to each other: Gram was now a problem for them. How were they going to handle this problem enough to get her out of their office? Ethel dug her fingers into the sides of her plastic chair. It was going exactly the way she had predicted.

“Listen, this is a kid who has just had her reputation *slaughtered*,” Gram pointed at Ethel. “You may not think that a twelve-year-old has to worry about her reputation, but let me tell you, she has a good name to uphold just like any of you do.” She leaned forward and placed her hand on Principal Frederick’s desk. “You’re telling me you run a leadership school for girls, yet you have no policy in place to suspend any kid who cyberbullies?”

Principal Frederick looked as though he’d rather be anywhere else than here the day before Thanksgiving. Principal Gordon looked distracted, as if the same thought had occurred to him.

“Gerry,” Gram said, staring at Principal Frederick. “I feel like I’m not getting through to you.”

Principal Frederick gave a pained smirk at the familiarity. He folded and unfolded his hands. His face was tight and his lips twitched, making Ethel realize that even the most powerful man at their school could get really uncomfortable.

She threw a hard look at Principal Gordon. “And you. Are you going to talk to every single one of the kids in your school, including their parents?”

“I’ll make sure a letter goes out to every parent over the break,” Principal Gordon said, staring at her evenly. Ethel watched him, plastered as far into the back of the leather chair as she could be.

Gram clasped her hands in her lap, collecting her thoughts. “This is a small town. Everybody knows a little something about everybody. Say I were to post to my own website the details of your divorce, Mr. Gordon, and included some information about that third party who now works in a doughnut shop across town. I’m just curious about how you would react to that.”

Principal Gordon emitted a little snort of surprise. Before he could say anything, Gram pounced on Principal Frederick. “Or you, Gerry,” she said with a whip of her wrist. “Can you imagine if the entire world knew about that loan you got yourself in trouble with when you were an assistant principal in Bethel? What do you think it would feel like to have your entire reputation trashed by people who would stop at nothing to expose your dirty laundry to the world?”

This was the most stunning thing Ethel had ever seen in her life. It was impossible not to feel tension in the room. Principal Gordon was now livid. “You’re absolutely out of line. We can keep to the subject or we’ll ask you to leave.”

The navy blue lapels of Gram’s tight-fitting jacket heaved in and out. “You go ahead and have a little *talk* with all of those kids. Two months later, watch them start the campaign all over again from another website that you don’t control. You think the anger and embarrassment you feel right now is any different from hers?” She rose then, pointing to Ethel. “This is an A student who now wants to drop out—not just out of Seaside, but from school altogether!” Ethel looked at Gram, frightened. She’d never seen her so worked up in her life.

“See this picture?” Gram stabbed at the page of the cartoonish woman in jail. “That’s supposed to represent my daughter. Dropped out of school at age fourteen, and that’s exactly where she is now—in prison. So, there you go. There’s my dirty laundry. And Ethel’s.” Gram placed a heavy hand on Ethel’s shoulder. “I have worked very long and hard to make sure this kid doesn’t go down the same path. And I swear to God, if I have twenty years left to live and I look back on this moment, I will know this was the fork in the road where she turned from someone who had all the potential in the world to someone like this!” Gram pounded the picture, her voice shuddering with the last few words.

Suddenly, Gram stepped back unsteadily and both principals rose from their chairs. Ethel grabbed Gram’s hand, alarmed. Gram’s face was unnaturally white, the skin around her eyes strained. She was perspiring at her hairline.

“Mrs. Effelby . . .” Principal Frederick came around his desk.

Gram swallowed, sitting down gingerly in her chair. “I’m okay,” she said quietly, taking a proffered tissue to dab at her forehead. Everybody was silent for a few moments. Ethel felt ready to break. She clutched Gram’s hand with her own sweaty one.

“Listen,” Gram said in a low voice. “Talking to the parents is not enough these days, *especially* when most of these kids learn to bully from the parents. There needs to be some policy in each of your schools so other kids don’t end up like Ethel. You get what I’m saying?”

Ethel had never been more uncomfortable in her life, yet she also felt strangely calm. Principal Frederick stood looking down at Gram. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, turning back to his desk. "After the break, I'll personally investigate this further to see what we can come up with. Mr. Gordon, can I count on you to help me?"

"I will," Principal Gordon said, staring at Gram.

"I'd also recommend that you go over to the police station and file a statement, Mrs. Effelby," Mr. Frederick continued. "Just in case we find something useful to report."

By now a shade of pink had returned to Gram's face. Out of habit she gave the back of her beehive a quick pat, and she stood up to shake both principals' hands. "I'm sorry I crossed the line and was rude. I'm very upset. Thank you both very much for your time today," she said as Principal Frederick escorted them out of the paneled office.

Principal Frederick opened the outer office door for them. "Ethel, come back after the break. If we just give this a little time, I promise you everything will go back to normal."

Ethel shot him a glance. Was he kidding? He honestly had no idea. Things would never go back to normal. The Cherrybomb Girlz got away with everything. If she tried to show her face at school after this, they'd rip her apart. Ethel looked at the floor without responding.

**

"Oh, she did?" Gram said into pay phone at the police station. Ethel stood close to her side as another phone kept ringing behind the barred reception window next to them. A policewoman in a crisp blue cap behind the window answered the other phone as police officers walked past them across a dirty marble floor.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Gram said, still on the phone. "How many? Okay, you know what, I'm bringing Ethel in."

"What is it?" Ethel said as they exited through the double doors of the police station. She was so glad to be finally out of there.

Gram flashed her a wink. "It's a surprise," she said when they got to the sidewalk. She opened the creaky door to her rusted-out car.

As they drove through the Old Port, Ethel's eyes followed the people walking alongside the sidewalks of the wharf as the slate color of the ocean peeked through the restaurants and old brick buildings. Gram tried to engage her in conversation a few times, but Ethel didn't feel like talking. Meeting with those principals had done nothing. All she wanted to do was crawl away from the eyes that watched her.

Gram tapped the wheel. "I'm just going to say one more thing, and then we can be done with this," she said, keeping her eye on the road. "You don't have to go back to Seaside, but I'm not going to let you drop out. We'll find a new school, or a tutor. You have something many people don't, and that's a purpose. And I will fight anybody who tries to snuff out that little spark in you." She looked at Ethel. "From now on, I want you to fight too. Don't ever let anybody try to take it out of you. Got it?"

Ethel nodded, but she didn't say anything.

After fifteen minutes, Gram's car pulled into the lot of the animal shelter. Ethel couldn't imagine what the surprise could possibly be unless, of course, the donation truck had arrived and Gram and Georgina had planned a "surprise" for Ethel to unload it for them. Ethel sighed, getting out of the car. Oh well, at least Chico would be happy.

Georgina had a lopsided grin as she led them to the back of the building where the kennels were. The familiar smell of cats and dogs and urine-soaked newspapers permeated the air. She could hear the dogs barking, and Ethel wanted to greet Chico first. She hadn't seen him in weeks. But instead of going into the kennel, Georgina and Gram opened the door to the Quiet Room, a small windowless room for animals to give birth.

"Oh!" Ethel said, her hand to her mouth. Lying in a plush basket next to a brown chocolate Lab were nearly a dozen puppies. They looked a few weeks old and were nosing around the mother.

"Go on in," Gram said, pushing Ethel.

"We brought Bebe and the puppies in this morning," Georgina said. "This is the best room for them to all be together."

Ethel knelt down on the soft carpet, as the tiny pups, all golden, brown, and black, began to squeak and snort, climbing all over her. Beside her, the mother, Bebe, lay on her side.

“We’ll have them adopted in no time,” Georgina said as the phone began to ring. “Hey, are you and your friends coming again to volunteer for Muttsgiving Day?”

The day after Thanksgiving was traditionally a shelter adoption event. Yuki, Schreck, and Weezy had come last year, but Ethel wasn’t sure where everyone stood now. “I’ll be there,” Ethel said, nuzzling one of the puppies under her chin.

“Be careful, now,” Gram said as the puppies began to whimper and use their teeny claws to try to get up past her lap. Ethel could not stop laughing as they piled all over each other, to nip and lick her face. It was the first time she had laughed in weeks, the pungent smell of their puppy breath in her face.

“This is your real life, Ethel,” Gram said gently. “Remember that.”

Chapter 22

By noon, half of the dishes they'd planned to make had been scrapped. There'd been no time to make a turkey. But the calypso music was loud and the mood just as festive as always. Four of the neighbors in the apartment building had been invited to Thanksgiving dinner along with a few of Gram's best friends.

Uncle Fritz brought his new girlfriend, Gisele, who handed Gram a plate of stuffed moose chops from a moose that she'd hunted, killed, and prepared herself. She was six feet tall and bigger than Fritz, but when she took off her John Deere cap, she had long blond hair held back in a ponytail. Ethel could see why he was enamored of her. For a husky gal, she was really lovely.

"Can I do anything to help?" Gisele asked Gram as they stood in the kitchen.

"Sure, here," Gram said, handing Gisele the one appetizer she'd had time to make, a softball-sized ball of cheddar cheese rolled in pecans. "Ethel, help her clear a space on the coffee table for this. Oh, and we need some crackers."

Ethel viewed the bare coffee table from across the room. Besides a gnome candle centerpiece, there wasn't much to clear. Standing beside them, Gram wore a cheetah-print jumpsuit with four-inch cherry red heels. Her beehive had been adorned with a giant silk peony.

"I didn't know it was a dress-up party," Gisele said heartily, "or I would've worn my nice Carrharts." Her voice was the only one not drowned out by the calypso music.

By the time all the guests had arrived, no one seemed to care that there was no turkey, only moose chops, frozen peas, a Cobb salad, spring rolls, garlic bread, and Cantonese chicken wings on the rental table set up in the living room. The neighbors clinked glasses at the table with Gram's girlfriends as the wings got passed around, and Uncle Fritz seemed the happiest Ethel had ever seen him. After dinner, when everybody had just begun to clear the table for the pies, the phone rang. Gram answered, handing the

phone to Ethel. "It's your mother," she whispered, without her usual grimace. "Wish her a happy Thanksgiving."

"Hi, Mom?" Ethel said. For once she really wanted to talk to her.

"Hi baby," Charlene said. "Thought I'd call you today to see how supper's going."

"It's good. We have four pies to eat and Uncle Fritz's new girlfriend is going to show me how to dress a rabbit in the spring."

There was a silence. "Like . . . put an outfit on it?"

"No, she's a real good hunter. And she likes taxidermy."

"Oh . . . that's good for Fritz."

"How's Thanksgiving over there?"

Charlene tried to give her voice some lift. "Oh, you know, it's never as good as when you're at home with your real family, but I've got a few friends here, and we're spending it together."

"You know what?" Ethel said, turning to face the cupboards so she could talk privately. "We can pretend that I just made your favorite pie and it's now coming out of the oven."

"Ooh," Charlene said. "Pumpkin?"

"Yah. Here you go, I'm giving you a virtual slice over the phone. It's covered in homemade whipped cream. And it's got, um, a graham cracker crust underneath."

"I love that pie. I used to make that every Thanksgiving."

"I know," Ethel said. "How does it taste?"

"Oh wow," Charlene said. "Ethel, this is goooood . . ."

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The afternoon lingered into the early evening. Calypso music turned to some Jamaican dub reggae as Gram's neighbors helped fold up the rental table and put it into the bedroom so that they could clear a space for dancing. Gram had the stereo loud, louder than normal, because the neighbors were all dancing with her, so nobody had any reason to complain. Fritz and Gisele were trying to dance, but they were squeezed beside Fifi

and the black fishnet-stocking lamp, so with Gisele towering over him, they waltzed in impossibly small circles. As Ethel was putting tinfoil on the half-eaten pies, her cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hi Ethel.” It was Schreck.

“Hi.”

“Can you talk?”

“Yeah,” Ethel said, glad to hear Schreck’s voice.

“Um, every time I try to IM you, you’re not on,” Schreck said. “I’ve left you like fifteen messages.”

Ethel twisted the cord. She’d put away her iPad in the farthest corner of her closet and covered it with clothes. “Yeah, I kinda have been doing other things.”

“I even called three times yesterday, but no one was home.”

“Wait. Yesterday? You didn’t go on the Boston trip?”

“No,” Schreck sighed. “I’ve been so depressed. Yuki didn’t go either, and I guess Weezy has been sick all week.” Schreck hesitated, her voice barely audible. “I guess I’m just calling to see if you hate my guts.”

“Nooo,” Ethel said. “No, Schreck. I know they tricked you. It wasn’t your fault.”

She could hear Schreck exhale on the other end. “Oh, good. ’Cause I’m really so so so so sorry . . . again.”

“It’s okay.”

“Everybody’s been IMing me about what you said to Carrie and Stephöñë; they think it’s awesome,” Schreck confided. “Everybody’s getting sick of the whole Cherrybomb Girlz thing anyway.”

“Yeah,” Ethel said without enthusiasm.

“Did you get in trouble with the school?”

Ethel didn’t have the energy to mention her decision to drop out. “I had to go to the school yesterday and tell the whole story to Mr. Frederick. The public school principal was there too. I would’ve had more fun rolling in broken glass.”

“Oh, wowzers. Now they’ll get punished!”

“Nope,” Ethel sighed. “They pulled everything down, the websites, the Paperdollz profiles, and even the KidVid videos. Mr. Frederick said he can’t punish anybody, ’cause he doesn’t have proof that they did anything.”

“You’re freakin’ kidding me,” Schreck said.

Ethel became aware that Gram was signaling her to get off the phone. “I have to get back to the party.”

“Kay. Is it still okay if I come to Muttsgiving Day tomorrow?” Schreck asked.

“Yeah.” Ethel chewed her lip. “Do you think Yuki or Weezy might come?”

“You NEED to check your messages. They’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Kay.” She dreaded getting back on the computer, yet it was the only thing that kept them all close.

“Virtual hugs,” Schreck said.

“Thanks. You too.”

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At 9:00 p.m., Fritz and Gisele were the last ones to leave. Gram’s beehive was lopsided, her peony wilted. “Bye, Fritzzy, me boy,” Gram said, leaving red lipstick on his cheek. She then tried to wipe it off with her thumb.

Fritz grinned. “Bye, Mumma. Thanks for dinner.”

“You take care, doll,” she told Gisele, leaning against the doorjamb. “You two make a lovely couple. And thanks for the chops. They were out of this world.” She blew them a kiss and closed the door. “Oh,” Gram sighed happily. “We pulled that off, didn’t we?”

Ethel came back into the living room with a mop and a bucket. She stretched a pair of yellow gloves onto her arms. “Yeah, even though we didn’t have a turkey, everything was pretty good.”

“Except for those moose chops,” Gram said, flopping down onto Clyde. “Good God, they were gamey.”

“You said they were out of this world.”

She began to unstrap her cherry red heels. “That’s the polite thing to say when you don’t want to kack all over the dish your guest brought. Oh, don’t clean now,” she said as Ethel began to squeeze the water from the roll mop. “We can do it in the morning.”

“It’s just that this is my bedroom floor, and it’s really sticky and gross from all the martinis you dropped,” Ethel said, opening a window. The cool fall air mingled with the lemon ammonia scent of the floor cleaner.

“Oh, in that case,” Gram said, smiling, and closed her eyes. “I’ll be right here if you need me.” She stretched out on Clyde and Ethel hoped Gram didn’t think she was going to fall asleep there. She could be a wicked crank if she were awakened after a brief catnap. Ethel’s cell rang again and she hurried to answer it, glancing back at Gram, who still had her eyes closed and a smile on her face. She glanced at the stove clock: 9:46 p.m.

“Hello?” Ethel whispered.

“I found it,” Schreck whispered on the other end.

“Found what?”

“I knew Stephöñë wouldn’t take down her KidVid videos. She just unsubscribed her tags so nobody could search for them under the name Cherrybomb Girlz. But I found them under her new tags now: Da Bomb Girlz. She set her privacy settings to a Friends Only list so the public can’t see the videos, but I hacked it a couple hours ago. Just now I got approved as one of her new ‘friends.’”

“No way,” Ethel breathed.

“Yeah, and get this. I cut ’n pasted the URL of her videos and uploaded them to YouTube, so now I have control over the copies.” Schreck sounded like she might burst. “Ethel. I got it all. I screen-capped all the comments. People are using their real names now because they think it’s private. It’s all there!”

“Oh my God,” Ethel squealed.

“Oh my God,” Schreck squealed back.

“Oh my God,” Ethel said.

“I know!” Schreck said.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Ethel said, holding the phone with both hands.

“Wow.”

“I would do anything for you. You’re my bestest bestest.”

Ethel heard a snort from the couch. A giant helmet of flyway blond hair began to emerge as Gram sat up, one eye squinting.

“Uh oh,” Ethel said, cupping the receiver. “Dawn of the Dead alert. Gram just woke up.”

“Eek. IM me tomorrow. ’Bye,” Schreck said quickly, and hung up.

Chapter 23

“Well, there you go,” Gram said, hanging up. She cinched her robe. “Hot damn, now, there’s some justice.”

“Yup.” Ethel focused on her cereal, watching three Cheerios cling together for dear life in her spoon.

“He said all four of them are suspended for a week following the school break.” Gram pulled the old filter from the coffeemaker and dumped it in the garbage. “Good thing too, ’cause my next step wasn’t going to be pretty . . .” She shoveled fresh coffee into the paper filter and singsonged, “*Lawsuit.*”

Gram had been on the phone all morning. Once Ethel showed Gram Schreck’s hacked URLs to the KidVid videos, Gram and Principal Frederick had exchanged a series of calls while Ethel sat motionless at the kitchen counter. More calls followed. Gram scratched notes onto her legal pad when Schreck’s mom called back the second time to give her information about the production company Stephöně’s father worked for.

“You know something?” Gram said. “Looking at those videos, I almost felt sorry for Carrie and those two other girls. I mean, they have no idea what they’ve gotten themselves into—but the leader, what’s her name again?”

“Stephöně.”

Gram shook her head. “That kid is messed up. You can see it in her eyes. She’s desperate for attention, and she’s doing all the wrong things to get it.”

Ethel tipped her spoon, watching the Cheerios fall back to the bowl. “Yup.”

“All right, I’m going to take a shower,” Gram said, rounding out of the kitchen. “Be out in five.”

“Kay.”

Ethel pushed the empty cereal bowl to the side and rested her head on her arms, listening to the sound of the coffeemaker burbling. She didn't know how to feel. Suspending the Cherrybomb Girlz seemed to wrap everything in a big red bow for the adults, but Ethel couldn't shake the uneasy sensation that by doing the right thing, she'd invited an even bigger war. When Stephönë, Carrie, Amanda, and Taylor returned to school, the old games and the tricks would start all over again. Maybe not right away while teachers were watching, but after a few months, in the privacy of their homes, Stephönë would keep it coming, a steady drip of online abuse. Only this time, it would be under a different identity. She'd proved she could always get an audience of strangers willing to join in and make comments. Suspension would do nothing to stop her if she wanted to keep going and make a reality show.

Ethel pulled out her iPad from its hiding place in her closet and unwrapped it from a bundle of clothes. She wondered if her stomach would always tighten like this when logging on to a computer. She checked her email first. There were twenty-one messages in her inbox, mostly from Schreck with subject lines like Arrgh get on IM! and Why don't u write back? She clicked on one from Weezy, written yesterday on Thanksgiving.

Hi. I have been sick all week. It stinks. I can't stand any more soup. How was your t day? Yuki called me today! I waz so happy. She said sorry. I love her. I prob cant come to muttsgiving. Wahhhh! I want to pet the wee kitties.

On the same day, a line down, was a message from Yuki, subject line: ETHEL
READ ME

I heard wat u did in Mizz T's class!! U stood up to them! Yay you! Btw, I called weez. I will tell u l8tr. Ethel call me! I have been dying 2 talk 2 u. call me today I don't care if we are in middle of dins. Arrghh I have to share a room with my bro tonight!

Ethel smiled, feeling better. She clicked on the icon to open her IM program. In her buddy list, as expected, Schreck's screen name was already active. A chat box immediately popped up with the Triceratops icon.

Schreckno: sup effy! Ur back!

Ethanol: Yup. Gess what. Prince fred called. they all got suspended.

Schreckno: I know.

Ethanol: ??? how

Schreckno: Mom just saw it on CNN.
check out front page—scroll down

Ethanol: R U KIDDING?

Schreckno: omg we r in the newz!

Ethanol: Brb pulling up site

The familiar heart gallop was back. Ethel sat hunched in the corner of Clyde and pulled up her bookmarked CNN web page. It wasn't in the immediate headlines. Her mouse rolled down to the news subcategories. There it was under Education, a hotlink with the headline "Dad Tells Daughter: Make Cyberbully Videos." Opening the link tracked back to a local story in the *Portland Press Herald* site.

Cyberbully's Dad Behind Girls' School Suspensions

Portland, ME—A 13-year-old girl at the Seaside School for Girls, whose father encouraged her to cyberbully a classmate and document it through KidVid, has been suspended, along with three of her participating friends.

Larry Gallagher, a resident of Los Angeles and a writer for Harmon-Fields, a reality show producer, told his daughter that if she made some catchy mini-documentaries with her friends on KidVid, he would be able to shop it around to executives for a new teen reality series on YouTube . . .

"Okay, perky pants, time for you to get dressed," Gram said, breezing out of her bedroom, a gigantic towel piled atop her head. "God," she said, staring at herself in the living room mirror, using her finger to pull at the skin under her eyes. "I need coffee like you only read about."

Ethel shut everything down. She stowed her iPad under Clyde, debating whether to tell Gram about the news article. Aside from the mention of Seaside and Larry Gallagher, no one's real names had been mentioned. At least not hers. The news would cycle over and be gone by tomorrow. As long as she didn't have to go back to Seaside—that's all that mattered. Ethel took a breath and opened her closet. She stepped into the three-by-three-foot area to get dressed. Once the door closed, it was completely dark, and she stood there with her eyes closed. Until Gram called her name, she'd forgotten how long she'd been standing there.

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"I looked into Mary Catherine's Sacred Heart for you," Gram said, holding her stainless thermos of coffee as she backed out of the driveway. "Good Catholic school."

Ethel's nose wrinkled. She pictured a horror movie: Mary Catherine stumbling forward in a bloody white gown, a sacred beating heart still pumping in her outstretched hands. Gram took a left onto Congress Street, taking a straight shot through the Eastern Promenade.

"I thought you hated Catholic school," Ethel said, playing with the door lock, flipping it up, then down.

Gram grabbed her hand. "Stop that. Just because Catholic school was a hell ride for me doesn't mean things haven't changed in forty years."

"I thought you said the girls were mean and locked you in a bathroom stall until you gave them confessions," Ethel said, yanking on her shoulder strap so that it zippered back repeatedly.

"Once again. Forty years ago."

"And that the nuns hit your hands with a ruler if you didn't finish a book report."

Gram sighed. "Okay. Leave the seat belt alone. You know one good thing?" she said, taking a sip of coffee at the light. "You'd never have to deal with the hassle of your outfit matrix again. Got one uniform: white blouse, navy slacks or kilt. Tartan bow tie. Done. Ready for school."

As appealing as the idea of “slacks” was, Ethel wasn’t too sure about wearing a plain old white blouse. Boring.

“Maybe,” Ethel said, staring out the window.

Hordes of people clogged the city the day after Thanksgiving: Black Friday. Traffic moved more slowly than usual. It took them fifteen minutes to push through the snarl, and by that time, Gram was getting impatient. They had to pick up party platters and rented coffee urns completely across town, then fight the traffic all the way back to the shelter before it opened. Muttsgiving Day, the shelter’s biggest event, started in a half hour. Crowds would be piling in.

“Swell, the van’s here,” Gram said, pulling into the shelter parking lot. The mobile spay/neuter conversion van sat parked next to the entrance. A professional canvas sign hung across the top of the doorway. MUTTSGIVING! FREE DOG BATHS! SPAY/NEUTER FOR FREE!

Ethel helped Gram lug a plastic bin of files out of the car, along with the coffee urns and groceries donated for the event. “Here,” Gram said, whipping out a plastic bathing cap from her trench coat pocket. It was a wonderfully fruity mermaid cap adorned with green plastic scales and pink lotus flowers. It was one of Ethel’s favorite things to borrow from Gram’s closet. Sometimes she liked to wear it while taking a nap.

Inside, it felt like a party. Green and blue balloons filled the waiting area. A video presentation about the shelter rolled on a TV in the corner while large colored posters featuring close-ups of Chico, Bebe, and the puppies flanked Georgina’s front desk. Georgina strode forward, taking the party platters from Gram. “I’ll get this. Ethel, can you come help?”

Ethel followed Georgina to another side table, where volunteers were setting up the coffee urns.

“So you gonna quit school and come work for us?” Georgina said, pulling the plastic off the vegetable platter.

Ethel tried not to get in the direct line of Georgina’s breath, which smelled like stale smoke. “I wish.”

“Hmm. Don’t suppose Marie is going to homeschool you?”

Now, that was a nice image: Gram flipping back and forth in a math book, trying to figure out how to do equations so she could teach Ethel, then swearing and giving up. Hucking the book against the wall. “I don’t think that would work out,” Ethel said, balling up the discarded plastic in her hands.

“Well, my oldest kid, Donny, goes to military school,” Georgina said, laying out napkins with kittens on them. “That might be the right school for you. You like guns?”

“Umm.”

“Let me see how fast you can eat that slice of ham,” Georgina challenged, picking up a rolled slice from the cold cut platter. She opened Ethel’s hand and slapped it in.

Ethel held it between her fingers like a dirty dishrag. “Why?”

“‘Cause at military school, they train you to shovel down each meal in three minutes,” Georgina said. “It’s all mushy too: starches, yams, potatoes, gooey stuff so you can ram it easily down your gullet. But if you take longer than three minutes, they make you skip your next meal. That’s the way they train you to eat at military school. Donny said he learned pretty quick not to taste anything.” Georgina gave her a sharp wink.

Ethel held the limp slice of ham in her fingers. Okay. There was *no* way she was going to military school.

Almost instantly, the phone began to ring and Georgina was back at her desk. Before Gram could put the OPEN sign on the door, people began to pour in with their dogs, wanting free baths.

“Showtime!” Gram told Ethel as a woman with an Irish setter trotted in. Gram spoke with the woman for a moment and handed the dog’s leash to Ethel. “Don’t spend too much time. Wash ’n go. Get ’em in, get ’em out.”

“All righty.” Ethel led the Irish setter back to a white-tiled washroom. Upon closing the door, the Irish setter’s legs began to shake; he resisted stepping into the lip of the large shower until Ethel had to coax and tug him. “It’s okay,” she cooed, clipping him into the restraining straps. Last year, this had been much easier with her friends there. Schreck had been the self-appointed “Dog Whisperer” while Yuki and Weezy performed the wash ’n rinse like a well-timed car wash. She shimmied out of her sweatpants and stood in her bathing suit, beginning to sing to the dog as warm water from the hose doused them both, darkening the Irish setter’s red fur to rust brown. By the time she was

finished, her pink-and-green lotus bathing cap was gripping her head like the nipple on a baby bottle.

The door opened. “We’re here—” Schreck poked her head in with Yuki and Weezy behind her. Schreck was already wearing her Wonder Woman bathing suit with matching gold wristbands.

“Oh my God!!” Ethel screamed happily. She stepped out of the shower to give everybody a hug.

Yuki’s hair was balled up in a deformed bun under her nylon Speedo swim cap. “Ethel, you’re getting me wet. I gotta take my jacket off.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

Weezy looked even funnier without her glasses and her hair tucked into an equally lumpy black swim cap.

“I thought you were sick!” Ethel said.

“I’m feeling a little better,” she honked with a clogged nose. As Weezy pulled off her sweater, she stood, a tiny skinny thing in a red bathing suit.

“Hey,” Ethel said, noticing Weezy’s wedding band looped through a chain around her neck. She saw that Yuki had hers around her neck too. “Your rings!”

“We didn’t want people to make fun of us, so we took them off,” Weezy explained, her fingers touching her necklace.

“Ya, we’re kinda over the whole ‘being married’ thing,” Yuki added. “But we decided we’re still going to the same college and that we are *definitely* going to be roommates.”

“What about Dinesh?” Ethel asked.

“Ehh,” Weezy said, shrugging. Weezy could look so small with her shoulders hunched. “There’s really nothing to say; we’re just friends.”

Yuki took the hose from Ethel. “We’re still going to be CEOs of Knittin’ 4 Kittens,” she sniffed. “I doubt Dinesh will be working for Google with a B-minus in French, but whatever, Weezy’s gonna have a six-figure income.”

“Unless he’s like one of those traditional husbands who wants you to stay at home,” Schreck noted, rubbing the Irish setter dry with a towel.

“Pbbbt.” Weezy stuck out her tongue. “I’m still gonna be a CEO.”

“Yeah,” Yuki said, putting her arm around Weezy. “That’s my girl.”

Georgina appeared at the door with the next customer in her arms, a Pomeranian. “Keep hustling, ladies, the line’s backing up.” She gave the balding Pomeranian over to Schreck. “Meet Mr. Loveybunches,” she said dryly as she turned to leave. The dog wiggled, snarling in Schreck’s tight grip.

With bared teeth, Mr. Loveybunches gurgled and snapped, trying to sound ferocious. Weezy tried to take him from Schreck’s arms. “Oh, he’s like a big kitty!”

“Why are we washing him?” Schreck asked. “He’s got no hair.”

“Be nice,” Yuki said, fingering the sparse wispy strands on the dog’s back. He’s just got a comb-over.”

Schreck squeezed the lever on the retractable showerhead to keep warm water running over Mr. Loveybunches. “He’s in the Hair Club for Dogs,” Schreck said. The Pomeranian kept up a steady growl like a lawn mower. “He’s not just a client—he’s the president!”

Weezy yanked her fingers back before he could bite her. “Maybe they should’ve named him Mr. Snappybunches.”

The door swung open. Ethel looked up, expecting Georgina with their next customer. Instead, Mizz T ambled in, hands in the pockets of a dark pea coat.

“Mizz T!” the girls chorused, and Mizz T broke into a smile. “Hey gals.” If it were possible, Mizz T looked even more casual than she did at school. She wore a Portland Pirates ball cap, her dark hair in two loose ponytails. Ethel felt uncomfortable, recalling the last words she’d said to Mizz T. She bent down to hose the suds off Mr. Loveybunches’ back, unsure of what to say.

“Mizz T!” Schreck said, picking up the haggard Pomeranian by its tummy. “You wanna meet Mr. Loveybunches?” He bared his teeth, snarling at her.

A brief smile flitted across Mizz T’s face. She took her hands out of her pockets and squatted down before them. “Girls, gather around for a second. I have something to tell you.” She caught Ethel’s eye, hoping to hold it. “I just got a call from a local TV station here in Portland . . .” Just then Gram stepped into the room with some towels. Ethel took a towel from Gram with shriveled white fingers.

“A national TV network picked up the Cherrybomb Girlz story off CNN and saw the videos,” Mizz T said. “Ethel, they want to interview you and me at seven o’clock tomorrow morning at their affiliate studio here in Portland.”

Gram knew about this, Ethel could tell. Weezy and Schreck gasped, excited. Ethel remained still. Excited was the very last thing she felt.

“What they want to do is to bring in Stephönë and her mother on one side of the studio and you and your grandmother on the other. The producer told me that they really want to hear your point of view,” Mizz T said gently. Hearing this, Ethel’s eyes closed. This was her worst living nightmare. Now the Cherrybomb Girlz video was going to reach millions of people, just as Stephönë had intended all along. She turned from everyone.

“Noooo,” Ethel said, feeling her very foundation begin to slide away. She hated whoever’s horrible idea it was to make this a story—so they could pin her with a stupid name like the Dream Girls Boy? So millions of people could judge her? Now it would never end. She turned to Mizz T in anguish. “Why can’t anybody leave me alone! I don’t want to go on TV. I don’t want this!! Gram!”

Gram’s mouth twitched. She took Ethel into her arms. “I don’t know about this,” Gram said to Mizz T quietly. Yuki, Schreck, and Weezy huddled around, each with a hand on Ethel’s shoulder.

“Believe me,” Mizz T’s voice wavered. She looked miserable, hunkered down, staring up at Ethel. “What you said to me that day in the hallway . . . It just punched me in the gut. I couldn’t sleep that night. I kept thinking about what you said, how we were a leadership school and yet we didn’t even know enough to protect you.” Mizz T bit her lip. “Ethel, they’re going to run this segment with or without you. The only reason I’m asking you to consider it is because this might be your only chance to show the world who you really are. You are not the girl that Stephönë portrays on that video. You’re a strong, intelligent girl who needs to get her life back.”

The sound of water dripped from the showerhead. Ethel thought about Stephönë’s cool, implacable smile in front of a camera and how she would make the camera love her. The eyes were back, this time bright hot. Burning. By tomorrow morning, millions of

people would know Stephönë's name. What's more, because of the way secrets leaked through the Internet, everyone would know Ethel's name too.

"You know that if that flipping warthog goes on camera, she'll lie about everything," Yuki grumbled. "You need to tell people the truth about what happened."

Ethel blinked at Yuki.

"We can go with you," Schreck offered.

"Yeah," Weezy said, bundled under a large towel.

"I don't know," Ethel said weakly. "I wouldn't know what to say."

Gram pulled the pink-and-green bathing cap from Ethel's head; it came off with a *thwack*.

"You ought to go on that show with her, not me," Gram told Mizz T. "They'd bleep out every other word if I had to see that little devil's spawn. Sorry, that ain't right to say. But it's the truth."

Mizz T smiled. She reached up to work Ethel's hand into hers. "I know. This is terrifying. We can't control what people will do to us, but we can choose how we come through a bad experience. You can be bitter all your life because of it or you can use what you've learned to help other kids. I imagine thousands of kids who aren't as strong as you are going through the same thing. Think of what you could say to them."

Ethel licked her lips, thinking about what she would say to the Dream Girls Boy. She often imagined him sitting alone in his hospital room, feeling like nobody understood what it was like to have the world turn on him.

"Okay," she said, wiping her nose.

"You can do it," Yuki whispered, rubbing her arm.

"Yay!" Weezy said. She picked up Mr. Loveybunches, who responded with a snarl of gurgling outrage.

Schreck pulled the retractable showerhead down to her mouth and spoke into it. "Okay, people, take five."

Chapter 24

A young cameraman squatted beside Ethel, clipping a small palm-sized receiver to the elastic waistband of her corduroys. “Here,” the floppy-haired young man said, handing her a small lavalier microphone. “Snake this up your shirt; clip it to your top button.” Another young male assistant wearing a headset began to pat Ethel’s face with a cotton pad of translucent powder. Ethel squeezed her eyes shut as powder quivered in the beam of hot light from the studio lamps.

This was a young crew. Jennifer, the producer, had an intricate tattoo of a bracelet around her wrist. When they’d first walked into the TV studio, Gram thought that the TV station’s female news anchor resembled Doris the national news anchor they watched every night, and for a horrifying moment, Ethel thought Gram would refer to her as “ole helmet head” in front of the producer, but thankfully, she didn’t. Ethel waved to Gram, who sat in a dim little waiting area twenty feet away in her tan trench coat.

“Okay, why don’t you both move closer,” Jennifer told Ethel and Mizz T as they scooted their chairs an inch closer to fit within the frame of the camera. Ethel stared at the camera; it looked like the giant black eye of a spider.

“What we’re doing is called a remote, so you just look at this monitor here,” Jennifer said, tapping a black-framed TV next to the camera. “You’ll be able to see and hear Mr. Grady, the anchor for *The Morning Show*. When he tosses it over to us, watch for my signal. He’ll ask both you and Stephönë questions and you’ll probably have only about one or two minutes to talk, so make your point as quickly as you can.”

Ethel glanced around, worried. “Where’s Stephönë?”

“We’re doing a split-screen interview,” Jennifer replied, coming around the camera. She gave the dark blue sleeve of Ethel’s jacket a tug to even out the creases. “We figured it was best not to squeeze you all together in the same shot since I’m guessing you’re not the best of friends.”

“Oh.” That was a relief.

“She’s in another part of the studio with her mother. You will hear her in your earpiece and see her on the monitor. But don’t watch the monitor, just look at the camera; otherwise it’ll make you look all shifty eyed,” Jennifer said.

Ethel peered into the small monitor and then looked to the camera to see what “shifty eyed” looked like. “I really do look shifty eyed,” she said, marveling. She peered closer. “Ugh, and sweaty. Look at my bangs.” With five intensely hot lamps of different shapes and sizes framing them, how did anybody stay cool?

“You’ll be fine,” Mizz T said as the cameraman fit them both with earpieces. “Just be yourself and be sincere.” Mizz T nudged her.

Ethel nodded, thinking of the Dream Girls Boy, wondering if he might be watching from his hospital bed. An overhead camera moved on a lighting grid attached to the ceiling, catching her attention. Ethel found herself mesmerized by the local TV soundstage, dizzied by the TV monitors, thick, tangled black cords across the floor, lights, and teleprompters. Two minutes to air; the crew worked silently, crouching to adjust the dolly holding the camera. Buzzing electric sounds sputtered as the cameraman tested the sound feedback. Mizz T counted to five to test her mic. Ethel rubbed both sides of her corduroys with her sweaty palms.

“Okay, here we go,” said the cameraman, snapping on a spot lamp. Ethel could feel the heat on her face. The bright hot eye. Inside her blue velvet jacket, her damp armpits felt gross. The camera assistant stood to the side, counting down silently on her fingers. In Ethel’s earpiece, she could hear a familiar male voice, Mr. Grady, the anchor on *The Morning Show*, leading in to the story. “This next story we introduced at the top of the hour is not your usual cyberbullying story. We hear a lot about cyberbullying in the news. Well, this twelve-year-old girl’s father encouraged her to post this video about another student on KidVid in order to get the attention of the network he works for. Let’s take a look.”

Ethel remained rigid. For a second, she forgot to not look and stole a glance at the monitor. *Don’t look shifty eyed!* A quick clip ran of Stephōnē in a black wig, plastic black glasses, and ugly teeth. Ethel endured the clip, knowing it portrayed her. *They had to show that one! Gahhh!*

“You know how we feel about drama.” Stephönë’s odious voice filled Ethel’s earpiece. “We love it!” Ethel stared unblinking into the camera as the interview cut back to Mr. Grady. “We now go to our affiliate in Portland, Maine. The girl who posted this video, Stephönë Gallagher, is with her mother, Noreen. Also with us is Ethel Effelby, the subject of this video, and her teacher Miss Tucker from the Seaside Leadership School for Girls. Stephönë, let’s start with you. You and three other girls have been suspended for posting this parody of another student on KidVid. Yet most of this media attention has been focused on just you. Can you tell us why?”

Again, Ethel couldn’t help stealing a quick look at the monitor. Stephönë’s long hair had been curled and pulled back from her face with a delicate white headband, which matched her white dress. She was wearing new glasses and her makeup had been done up in peaches and cream with pink lip gloss. She clasped her hands. “Probably because, you know, I was the one who came up with the idea of doing a video show. I mean, it was just this little joke between me and my friends.” Stephönë delivered the line with just the perfect, insouciant tone. “It was just something, you know, we did in my room just for fun.”

“Okay,” Mr. Grady said, measuring his next words. “Tell us how your father was involved. Is it true he encouraged you to make this video with the goal of getting you noticed in the reality TV industry?”

Stephönë shrugged. “Well, KidVid is like *the* place where all the kids post their videos and stuff. I’m not the only one. I just happened to make videos that a lot of kids thought were funny and cool. And like if somebody noticed, that was great!”

“Did you realize that posting this video online might hurt Ethel?” Mr. Grady prompted.

Stephönë’s mother broke in. On the monitor she looked sharply put together with a beveled blond cut. “Can I say something? This video was never intended to cyberbully. I think that’s a word people are too quick to use. My daughter was creating a variety show on KidVid with some of her friends. This little clip you showed was maybe only six seconds of the entire half-hour episode, and it was a parody. You ever watch *Saturday Night Live* or a mockumentary? The video you saw was set to private, but somebody hacked it and put it up for the public to see.” Mrs. Gallagher looked exasperated. Hearing

this over her earpiece, Ethel's eyes widened. She wanted badly to see Mizz T's reaction but dared not look at her.

Mr. Grady continued. "Do you think your husband's strategy to make Stephönë an Internet star has worked or has it backfired?"

"We don't speak very often, so I can't tell you what his motives were," Mrs. Gallagher snorted. "But I'm Stephönë's agent as well as her mom, and I can tell you that this one little video, which never even identified the other girl's name, has been blown completely out of proportion." She made another grunt of disgust. "I mean, Stephönë could've just been dressing up in play clothes and making a video about anybody! For Stephönë to be suspended over this is truly and utterly ridiculous."

"It wasn't just one video," Ethel mumbled.

Mr. Grady eagerly switched over to her. "Yes, let's hear from Ethel. Please go on."

Ethel's face flushed. She'd spoken without remembering the mic was clipped to her shirt. National TV. The black spider of the camera lens was two feet away.

"It was four or five videos," Ethel said, trying to sit as straight as possible. "Everybody at my school saw them, so they weren't set to private until a few days ago. They also made a website to make fun of me, so every time Stephönë posted a video, kids from my school and other schools would write these really awful things online. And when I told them to stop, they told me I could never stop them because they'd just find new ways on the Internet to get me."

"Where are these supposed websites?" Stephönë's mother interrupted, shaking her head. "I never saw any of them. And I'm not going to let my daughter take the rap for all of these kids . . ."

"I saw at least one of the websites," Mizz T said, her voice amplifying over Mrs. Gallagher's. "Our school has learned a harsh lesson over it, which is why we agreed to come on your show and talk about it. Ethel was a straight-A student, but because of all this cyberbullying, she's made the choice to drop out. That breaks my heart and tells me we failed her. She's a good kid. Stephönë's not a bad kid. But all this technology we're handing to these kids becomes weapons in the wrong hands if we don't teach them how to behave responsibly on the Internet."

“Mmm,” Mr. Grady said. “Fascinating. We’ve got thirty seconds. Stephönë, is there anything else you want to say?”

Stephönë drew her hand down the length of her hair. She took a breath and smiled. “I never meant to hurt anyone. My friends and I were just kidding around and it was always set to private, so I’m really surprised that Ethel even knew about it . . . I think people have made this into a bigger thing than it is.”

“Ethel,” Mr. Grady threw it to her. “Anything you’d say to Stephönë?”

Ethel gaped at the camera lens, unprepared for this. She felt a second or two go by before words could come. “I guess I’d tell Stephönë and the other girls that they definitely did hurt me even if she says she was just kidding. But it made me realize . . .” Jennifer, the producer, stood behind the camera, holding a hand up to indicate the countdown. Ten seconds left. Now or never. This was for the Dream Girls Boy.

“ . . . that I’m not afraid of her or anyone else anymore. ’Cause when I come back to school, I’m gonna help other girls so they don’t go through the same thing.”

Slapping down the pencil on a final exam couldn’t have felt any better than this. The remote interview took only three and a half minutes, but by the time Jennifer said “Cut” and told Mizz T and Ethel they could take off their microphones, it felt like it had been two hours.

“You nailed it,” Mizz T whispered to her.

Gram came trotting over in her tan trench coat, her purse on her arm. “Oh crap,” she said, getting her heels tangled up in some of the floor cables. “Sorry,” she told the cameraman. She stepped up to the platform and clutched Ethel’s head tightly between her cold hands. Ethel saw Gram’s mascara had begun to run. She planted an exaggerated smack on Ethel’s forehead. “You make me so proud.”

**

“Which brings me to my other point,” Principal Frederick said with a quick rub of his nose. He leaned back in his chair to gaze at Gram and Ethel on the opposite side of his desk. “After our meeting with our school board over these videos, we will be implementing a cyberbullying policy when school resumes. Anything that can be traced

to one of our students, whether created on or off school grounds, will be dealt with in an individual manner. Everybody is going to hear about this new policy in an assembly when they come back from the break.”

“Good,” Gram said, her purse on her lap. She glanced at Ethel. “Now, what about the public school kids?”

“Uh, well, in fact . . .” Now Principal Frederick spread his large fingers across his desk blotter. “They’re still going through chat records, but they now have evidence that at least six girls and four boys contributed comments to the General Genius site on school computers, and they will be punished for that. I can’t tell you how many students did it off school property, but that’s something I’m working on with Mr. Gordon. The Portland Middle School will also have a cyberbullying policy as well as a harassment prevention program starting in the spring.”

Ethel sat next to Gram in the cold oversized leather chair. She chewed the ends of her hair as she listened. Mizz T sat two chairs away; she offered Ethel a quick wink. *It’s going to be okay.*

“This is how we’re going to need your help, Ethel,” Mizz T said. “We’re going to set up a club on Monday after the break. You don’t have to have been bullied to be in this club, but we need girls who will be willing to stand up for other girls and be a friend if they need it. Can you help us with that?”

Ethel nodded. “I think so.”

“Good,” Mizz T said, her eyes on Mr. Frederick. “We’re gonna make sure this never happens to anyone again.”

**

After *The Morning Show* aired, dozens of Gram’s friends and coworkers called the house; Ethel’s friends IM’d her every hour.

An email came in from Carrie that afternoon. Ethel hesitated before opening it. *I’m not going to be afraid anymore.* She sat quietly, reading the short note.

i just saw the show. my parents didn't want me to go on, but they are super pissed (with me, not u) and they're gonna call your Gram to talk to her. They told me I had to write a note to u, but after I saw the show i wanted to write one anyway. Stef was really out to get u—she lied on camera sayin it was just for fun. It wasn't 4 fun—she wanted to get a contract out of it. I shouldn't have done it. I rilly feel bad now and I am rilly sorry it happened. Glad ur coming back to school. Hope to ttyl. —Carrie

Ethel read it twice and didn't respond. It was technically an apology and that was good. But it was a sorta lame apology all the same. When she went back to school, she planned to be cordial to Carrie, but they would never, *ever* be friends again. A true friend was not someone you had to constantly worry if you could trust.

As for Stephönë, she got the fame she so desperately wanted after all. After *The Morning Show* aired, a wave of outrage poured through the Internet in thirty-six hours, pollinating in tons of tweets, multiple articles, and blogs commenting on the show. On impulse, Ethel Googled Stephönë's full name. Her model website came up as the number one listing. Directly underneath, a blog with the name of FamebusterBoy appeared.

FamebusterBoy: . . . dilettante teen auteur Stephönë Gallagher finds out the hard way ambition does not equal success . . .

Underneath that, more articles and columns appeared with a torrent of negative taglines denouncing Stephönë. Dozens of blog links commented on it. A few linked Ethel's full name in with Stephönë's. On Twitter, people were brutal, saying nasty things. Most people supported Ethel's decision to speak out on *The Morning Show*, but as always, on the Internet, a few didn't, calling her "pathetic" and "crybaby."

People! It has nothing to do with her parents. Stephonie is the one who bullied. Im so sick of kids using technology to bully. They have done it to my daughter so badly that she has come home crying . . .

That's what you get when you try and grab the brass ring at the expense of others!
GOOD u dum little idiot! Hope this teaches u a lesson!

stephony is a mean little snake. I watched her video and think it is disgustin she has no face or talent and is destined to be a no-name, has-been at the age of 15 mark my words she will go to Hollywood and end up some sleezy back room hooker.

And these were adults writing all this. After a while, Ethel couldn't read any more comments. The rage coming from everyday people scared her all over again. Now Stephõnë knew what it was like to have strangers on the Internet despise her, to rip her apart with their bloody teeth. Yet it was strange. Scary. People were out of control. As if all the frustrations and pain they absorbed in their lives had only one place to go . . . It poured out through their keyboards. Gnashing and screaming, they wanted to tear apart something, *somebody*, even a twelve-year-old girl, just to release their own pain. God help you if you were in the headlines that day.

Chapter 25

Mr. and Mrs. Yamazaki held their coats over their arms. “Meet us back at the cafeteria in two hours,” Mr. Yamazaki called, holding up his wrist and pointing to his watch.

“We will!” Yuki said. She linked arms with Weezy, Schreck, and Ethel. The Museum of Science was cavernous inside. The walls must have been twenty feet tall. It was packed with people with so many exhibits to see: from *Solar & Wind*, to the *Theater of Electricity* to *New England Habitats*. Schreck said she’d die if she didn’t get to see the dinosaurs and T. rex exhibit, so that was on the list. Yuki wanted to check out Mathematica first, then the Technology Learning Center. Weezy was crazy-go-nuts about the Butterfly Garden. She hadn’t stopped talking about it since last weekend, after the Yamazakis offered to take the girls on a special trip to Boston. Ethel just wanted to sit back and look at the stars in the Planetarium and listen to a soothing omnipresent voice talk about light, gravity, and the Big Bang: for her, it was like a bedtime story.

“Oh wow,” Weezy said, staring at the large TV screens built into the wall as the world behind animation, storyboards, and cels unfolded. “Oh my God, you guys, we’ve got to see that!”

“I know, Weez,” Ethel said, looking at the glossy museum map. “But we’ve got like fifteen things we need to see before noon, and that’s not counting the IMAX show.” All of the girls wanted to see the dinosaur IMAX movie, sitting high up in the nosebleed seats of the Omni theater. Schreck would explode if they didn’t see it first.

“We’rrrrre off to see the IMAX, a wonderful IMAX it was . . . ,” Schreck sang as she tried to coordinate all four of them to skip together. “Da da da dum . . .” She continued forgetting all the words. “Because, because, because, *be-cause!!!!*”

“Keep your day job,” Ethel told her, trying to read the map.

“We should’ve eaten lunch first,” Yuki said, looking intently as they passed a computer exhibit and its artificial intelligence stations. “I’m hungry.”

“All I had this morning was a yogurt,” Weezy complained.

“I love yogurt,” Ethel yelled suddenly, and the rest of the girls giggled. The Museum of Science was so loud with people talking that it didn’t seem entirely out of place.

“I always think of yoga when I hear the word *yogurt*,” Weezy said thoughtfully.

“I always fart in yoga,” Schreck added, and snorted.

“Ewww,” the girls echoed.

“Sicko,” Yuki said.

“Schreck,” Ethel said. “You’re a wicked sicko.”

“Come on, you guys, I’m just kidding,” Schreck said, giggling.

“Oh my God,” Yuki gasped, ogling a large panel featuring an enormous X-ray of a human rib cage. “We have to see that too.”

“Yuki,” Ethel said, grabbing her and pretending to slap her in slow motion. “Get hold of yourself, woman! We only have two hours!” Ethel began to shake Yuki by the shoulders in an exaggerated motion until Yuki showed her orange braces and snorted. “We’ve got to go to the Omni theater, and we can’t see everything!”

Schreck and Weezy stood by, grinning.

“Ethel, you’re weird,” Schreck said.

“Ya,” said Weezy.

“WOOT WOOT!” Ethel yipped, and once more they all linked arms as they strode in sync down the ramp that led into the dark Omni theater. There was *nothing*, nothing better than being called weird by your best friends. “I love you guys too.”

Acknowledgments

Fun fact: *Ethel Is Hot LOL* was written several years before our cyberbullying guide for adults *Cyberslammed*TM was published in 2012. *Ethel Is Hot LOL* was always meant to be a companion novel to *Cyberslammed*TM for tweens —so that kids in middle school could understand the type of cyberbullying tactics that blindsided Ethel. With *Cyberslammed*TM adults could then teach the kids how the most common cyberbullying tactics work and how to prevent them.

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About The Author



Kay Stephens is a Maine novelist and author of nonfiction. With more than 10 years of cyberbullying experience, she co-authored a guide for adults, *Cyberslammed*TM published in 2012 on the six most common types of cyberbullying. *Cyberslammed*TM won first prize in nonfiction from IndieReader Discovery Awards in 2013. *Ethel Is Hot LOL* is her first foray into middle grade fiction. To learn more about the latest cyberbullying tactics as well as how to protect teens in your life visit: www.cyberslammed.com