



How to
SPEAK
BOYZ

TIANA SMITH

The title 'How to SPEAK BOYZ' is rendered in a bold, 3D-style font with a light gray color and a dark gray shadow. 'How to' is in a cursive script, while 'SPEAK' and 'BOYZ' are in a blocky, rounded font. The text is surrounded by several short, thin black lines radiating outwards, creating a starburst or celebratory effect.

Swoon READS
SWOON READS NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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FOR MY PARENTS,
SORRY IN ADVANCE FOR ALL THE KISSING SCENES.

Chapter One

Pantyhose were invented by the devil. This is a well-known fact. They squeeze the life from your ovaries while simultaneously giving you a wedgie big enough to make any middle school bully proud. And to make things worse, they are *never* a perfect color match, no matter what the package says. But right now, they were the perfect distraction.

I picked up two different options and turned to my best friend, holding them close to my face to compare.

“Do you think my skin tone is closer to Peaches and Cream or French Vanilla?” I asked.

“Don’t they know it’s not good to call skin by food names?” Naomi asked, leaning in close to get a better view. “The girl in this one looks like Emma Watson. Think she modeled for Hanes back in the day?”

I shrugged.

She grabbed the one from my left hand. “This one.”

“M’kay. Help me find all the ones in size small.”

Naomi scrunched her nose and stepped toward the rack. “There’s no kind of organization here. Why do you need so many?”

“Because they get more runs than a marathon, and I need enough for the whole speech and debate season. Coach’s rules. If I ruin a pair each tournament, that’s sixteen pairs.”

“You know, if you got some nicer quality ones, they probably wouldn’t snag as much.” Naomi looked behind a pile of tights to see if more Peaches and Cream nylons happened to be hidden there. Her black curls fell into her face, and she brushed her hair out of the way.

“Like I have forty bucks to spend on a single pair of pantyhose,” I said. “I’m seventeen and I don’t have a job.”

Naomi didn’t reply. She just held out another package for me to add to the pile we’d started collecting on the floor. This was why we were friends. She didn’t judge me for my geeky love of speech and debate, and I didn’t act awkward around her because she was taller than Taylor Swift and 99 percent of the boys’ basketball team.

“Thanks again for driving me to the speech and debate barbecue,” I said, gathering the pile up in my arms. We’d only found eight, but that would have to last until I could get more. “And thanks for stopping here on the way.”

If I’d taken the bus, it would have eaten up half my day. And stopping for nylons would have added at least an hour to the trip. It wasn’t like Boise, Idaho, was known for its impressive public transportation system. I definitely didn’t need all that time alone with my thoughts right now. Then again, the whole point of this trip was to distract me from what was going to happen at the barbecue, so maybe I should have taken the bus after all.

Naomi slung an arm over my shoulders as we walked to the checkout.

“Life wouldn’t be worth living if I was actually on time for a game,” she said, and a pang of guilt zipped through me.

“Tell your volleyball coach it’s my fault,” I said.

Naomi grinned. "I always do," she sang. I tried to slug her in the arm, but she danced out of the way.

We made it to the front of the store and I let the nylons tumble to the counter. The worker raised his eyebrows, but I didn't feel like explaining why a high school senior needed so many pantyhose on a Friday night. Let him imagine what he would.

"September's almost over," Naomi said to me as the worker scanned my items. "Volleyball season ends soon anyway. If my coach hasn't cared before, she won't now."

"What must that be like?" I mused aloud. "To have a coach who doesn't have a death grip on every detail of your life?" Mine was a tyrannical robot in human skin. She controlled how I did my hair for tournaments (French twist—classy but alluring), how tight my skirt suit was allowed to be (just enough to remind judges I'm a woman and should be taken seriously), and even the MAC Ruby Woo shade of lipstick I reapplied between each round (okay, full disclosure, I really loved that lipstick).

"Forget your coach. And her opinions," Naomi said, helping the worker put all my nylons in a bag. "Like, take tonight, for example. You nervous?"

I grimaced. I'd been doing so well at not thinking about it.

Naomi saw my expression and put a hand on my shoulder. "See, Quinn? That's what I mean. It makes zero difference what your coach thinks. You're still A-plus team captain material, no matter who she announces at your speech and debate welcome barbecue thing."

I paid the cashier and we walked through the automatic doors and into the crisp fall air.

"If she doesn't pick you, it's her loss. You know you're the best on the team." Naomi clicked the button on her key fob, and her Jeep chirped.

"That's not true," I said, climbing in the passenger seat and placing the bag at my feet. Naomi turned the keys and I messed around with the temperature controls until I wasn't dying. This time of year always

ping-ponged between hot and cold, and the leather interior of Naomi's car magnified it by infinity. "She could pick Grayson."

Grayson Hawks. My mouth twisted in distaste. He was the poster child for Tall, Dark, and Handsome, and he wore trendy hipster glasses that were all kinds of pretentious. He had everything in life handed to him, no matter if he deserved it or not. Spoiler, usually he didn't. We'd been competitors in practically everything since he'd moved here, and he came out on top more times than I cared to admit. Sometimes I won, but he was always just *there*, making my life harder than it needed to be. In speech and debate, in school, in gym class—it didn't matter what it was, he made it a competition.

Everyone loved a good-looking geek, especially someone as charismatic as Grayson. He had this perfect light brown skin and wavy black hair that looked so smooth and shiny. Everyone thought he walked on water, even though it was all a show. It really wasn't fair. He was almost guaranteed the team captain spot.

He'd probably do anything to get it too. Just like when he ran for class president junior year, when he'd dated Zara, his only real competition, only to dump her right before the election speech so she'd bomb it. He never denied the rumors either. My friend Carter asked him about it once and Grayson had only laughed. Who does that?

Naomi snorted as she backed out of the parking spot.

"If your coach picks him, it's because he's the governor's son and she's playing favorites. As much as I think you're wrong about him, you're still the one who's been on the varsity team all four years."

Yeah, and once he'd made varsity, he'd proceeded to taunt and torment me at every competition. It was like he defaulted to some kind of "annoying" preset whenever I walked into the room. What made things worse—he routinely beat me at competitions. Like the universe had it out for me.

But I tried to believe Naomi. Tried to stop my racing heart from banging out of my chest. I wasn't sure if it was because I was anxious about

tonight or simply because thinking about Grayson made my blood boil. I hummed along to the radio for a measure or two, but my throat turned dry and I swallowed instead.

More than anything, I really wanted to beat Grayson at *something*. Maybe he got better grades and he had all the teachers in his pocket, but I wanted to take something from him that he wanted for himself. So that just once, he could know how it felt to come in second.

I changed the radio station again and again until Naomi swiped my hand away from the controls. We'd first bonded over our love of boy bands, and now music was a common theme of our friendship. But her Jeep was older than we were, and didn't have any way to connect our phones to the speakers. We had to endure whatever happened to be on the air at the moment.

As we drove closer to my coach's house, my pulse picked up speed. Before I was ready, we pulled up front and I was out of reasons to delay.

"You sure Carter can give you a ride home?" Naomi asked, putting the Jeep in park. Carter was my closest friend on the team. Off the team as well, except for Naomi. We grew up together, so he'd seen me through all my worst stages, including the years of braces and the time I'd accidentally gotten a brush stuck in my hair and had to shave the left side of my head—he stuck by my side the whole time. That was true friendship right there.

Carter had no filter whatsoever, and I liked that he was so open with his thoughts. So many people in high school were fake, but with Carter, I knew where he stood. I was always so introverted and I counted on him to bring me out of my shell. When we were together, he didn't act quite so out there, and I didn't hide from all social interactions. I clung to that with a strange kind of desperation. It wasn't like I had a whole lot of friends to begin with.

I would have asked him for a ride here, but shopping for pantyhose might have actually killed him.

"I'm sure," I said, unlocking my seat belt. I took the nylons out of the plastic shopping bag and began placing them in my shoulder bag, taking my time. Naomi saw through me, of course.

"Go on, get. Your coach has already made her decision by now, so you might as well get it over with."

I sighed and stepped out of the car. Naomi was gone by the time I'd made it up the sidewalk and walked around back, the way we always entered. Coach was grilling on the patio and she nodded in approval as I took off my shoes and left them in the pile already gathering outside. We'd had enough events at Coach's house to know wearing shoes inside meant murder. Voices drifted from the open door and I made my way inside the kitchen, smiling at Carter when I saw him leaning against the counter, talking to someone. My smile froze when I saw that it was Grayson.

I wasn't sure I could make polite small talk right now, at least, not with the one guy who could take away my chance at being team captain.

"Quinn!" Carter called, motioning me over before I could pretend I had someone else claiming my attention. I moved slowly. Grayson was wearing a blazer. Like an actual suit coat with jeans. The suck-up.

"Hey, Quinn," Grayson said, turning to me. "You ready to lose tonight?" His question, and the way he said it, with eyebrows raised and cheeky grin in place, set my teeth on edge. I wondered what his mom would think of his political mind games.

"Oh, I'm sorry, are you talking to yourself again?" I asked.

That's when Carter cut in, probably sensing the verbal spat coming this way. Grayson always knew how to get under my skin.

"Did you get whatever girly things you needed at the store?" Carter asked.

My cheeks flamed and I very carefully did *not* look at Grayson so I wouldn't see his reaction. I knew he'd look smug. I fiddled with the strap of my bag and tried not to overreact.

"I told you I had to buy pantyhose for the speech meets, not period stuff," I said.

Carter's eyes opened wide. "Oh, no, that's not what I meant. I was just saying—" He stumbled over his words and brought his hand to the back of his neck. "Never mind, sorry." The tips of his ears turned pink and his lips formed a tight line, like he was trying not to say anything else. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair and shrugged an apology.

I wanted the floor to eat me alive, but Grayson smiled like he found the whole thing amusing, as he would. He grabbed a chip from a bag on the counter and popped it into his mouth with a crunch. Glancing around, I tried to find someone else I could talk to. Or maybe the nearest exit.

No viable escape routes opened up, so I said, "So, uh, Carter, can you give me a ride home after this?"

"Did your mom bring home any leftovers from the diner last night?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then yes."

Carter was the definition of a mooch. Or maybe it was just the teenage boy in him that made him inhale any food within a ten-foot radius. Even now, he'd taken a handful of the chips from the counter and was busy shoving them into his face like we weren't all about to eat dinner in a few minutes.

"You know how her mom works at that diner on Ninth?" Carter asked Grayson.

I didn't know why he bothered prolonging this conversation, but that was just Carter. Always thinking the best of people and being friendly to everyone, like a shaggy puppy dog. I wanted to be more outgoing like that. Just not with Grayson.

"At the end of the night, they let her take food home if they made too much," Carter said.

"Nice," Grayson responded. I couldn't tell whether he was being

sarcastic or not, so I bristled in silence. Sure, my mom worked at a diner. But it wasn't like Grayson was any better just because his mom was the governor. My mom was also an amazing photographer, and one day that'd be her primary business. I'd been helping her set up a website and portfolio, and since she let me take over her Instagram account, she'd had more bookings than ever.

I loved doing it too. Seeing results like that? It was intoxicating. Maybe it was geeky, but my plan for college was to go into marketing. I couldn't get enough of it, and even after I helped get my mom's business up and running, I'd still use those skills in influencing the world around me. I wasn't entirely sure what industry I wanted to go into the most, but everybody could use a good marketer. In the meantime, I'd be able to help out my mom. Okay, yes, most teens might not be that excited about working with their parents, but then again, I never claimed to be normal.

"Oh!" Carter slapped his forehead with his palm. "I forgot I said I'd give Mike a ride home already. But I can tell him to get someone else."

Carter didn't drive a two-seater convertible. It had five spots. But the back of his car was a literal pigsty, with more fast food bags and questionable gym clothes than anyone should ever be forced to touch, let alone sit on. I'd probably contract some kind of deadly disease.

"That's okay. I'll find someone who—" I started.

"I can help you out," Grayson said.

I froze. What fresh torture was this? Grayson lived on the other side of the city. I knew, because Idaho was one of a handful of states that didn't have a governor's mansion, so his mom got paid a stipend to live in their home.

"Oh, I don't want to bother you," I said overly sweetly, hoping he'd let it drop. "I know how much it physically hurts you to think of anyone else before yourself."

"Maybe I joined the Boy Scouts," he said, smiling. His teeth were so white, I wondered if he used bleaching strips. "Or maybe I just want to try some of your mom's leftovers."

I sucked in a breath while plotting how to get out of this. There was no way Grayson was taking one step through my front door.

Coach came inside the kitchen, looking at us from the doorway.

"Hamburgers and hot dogs are ready," she called, and a surge of twenty teenage bodies headed toward the door. I picked up a paper plate and grabbed on to Carter's arm, holding him back from the crowd so Grayson could move ahead. Carter glanced back at me incredulously.

"We're going to be at the end of the line," he said, and I picked up some more chips and put them on his plate.

"You'll survive. That's your payback for forcing me to talk with Grayson. And for not giving me a ride."

Carter sighed and looked wistfully at the grill on the backyard patio. "You can still come with us, but we're going to leave a little early. I can make Mike sit in the back."

I patted his arm. "Thanks, but I'll figure something out. I don't hate Mike enough to do that to him."

We moved forward a foot in the line, and for a bit, neither of us spoke. Then Carter broke the silence.

"You know, if you're team captain, you'll have to talk with Grayson a lot more," he said, picking up a chip from his plate.

Oh, I knew that, unfortunately. I was trying not to think about it.

"If I win, then there won't be a problem," I responded, stealing a chip for myself. "He can't talk back to the team captain."

Carter's look was skeptical, and I didn't say anything else, knowing there was no reality in which Grayson would ever not talk back to me. I chewed on my lower lip while we waited. Grayson was one of those naturally gifted people. I wouldn't fault Coach Bates for picking him. Sure, I'd been on varsity longer. But would that be enough? Maybe Grayson had already sabotaged me in some way and I just didn't know it.

"What if he wins?" Carter said.

It was the one question I hadn't allowed myself to actually ask out

loud. The noise around me muted to a buzz, and I focused on taking one step after another. My paper plate was shaking a little, so I gripped it harder. Traitorous plate.

“I mean, what if he wins *and* you have to ride in his car all the way to your apartment?”

My stomach dropped and I genuinely thought I might be sick, right then and there. I would spend the whole night begging people for rides if I had to. There was no way I was walking into that trap willingly.

Coach was dishing up the meat at the grill as students slipped their shoes back on. Her eyebrows pinched together when Carter snuck a second hamburger patty onto his plate, but she didn't say anything. She had her straight brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail as usual, and her reading glasses were perched on top of her head. She smiled when she saw me, and I couldn't help the flutter of hope that rose in my chest. She wouldn't be smiling if she wasn't planning on making me captain, right?

We took our seats on the grass with everyone else. My teammates were all talking excitedly about something, but I was too busy wondering if Coach smiled at Grayson too.

The whole time we were eating, I couldn't taste my food. Twenty minutes had never felt so long in all my life. By the time Coach stood up on the porch and waved for us all to be quiet, I was pretty sure I was developing an ulcer.

“Welcome to a new season of speech and debate!” she announced, and all I could think was *Blah, blah, blah, get on with it already.*

Coach Bates cleared her throat.

I died a little inside.

“We have a few announcements, like the itinerary, information on our home tournament since we're hosting the state competition this year, and other specifics, but I know you all want to find out who this year's team captain will be.”

I didn't breathe.

“There were so many qualified candidates this year. The problem was narrowing it down.”

I sneaked a glance over at Grayson, who didn't seem nearly as concerned as I was. I could feel the eyes of my teammates on me like a heavy blanket. Grayson leaned back nonchalantly in the grass, putting his weight on his elbows. I sat up straighter.

“I'm breaking with tradition this year,” Coach said. “I couldn't pick only one, so there will be two. Everyone, please congratulate Quinn Edwards and Grayson Hawks, who will be co-team captains this year!”

I heard the clapping around me, but it didn't register. Once again, I hadn't been enough to beat Grayson.

“Think of it this way,” Carter said, leaning over, “at least the car ride home won't be so awkward.”

But that was where he was so, so wrong.

Chapter Two

So, is it true you and Grayson kissed last week?" Naomi asked as AP Government and Politics was getting out. We'd picked up our bags and were making our way toward the cubbies that held our returned assignments.

"What?" My head jerked back. "That so did not happen." I actually stopped where I was and someone bumped into me from behind. I let them pass before continuing at a whisper. "Who said that?" I was going to kill them.

"Not in so many words," Naomi said. "Carter said Grayson gave you a ride. I guess I was hoping that someone finally managed to shake your resolve."

I resumed walking down the aisle. Yes, I'd gotten a ride from Grayson, because no one else was available. Carter hadn't been kidding when he'd said he had to leave early. I'd barely asked a handful of people by the time I looked around and realized my backup plan had already left.

"I'd rather kiss a blobfish than Grayson Hawks. Besides, schoolwork

doesn't allow time for a boyfriend," I said. This was a common refrain of mine, and the more I said it, the more I almost believed it. This way, my single status was something I'd chosen, rather than the sad reality of my life.

Some people were naturally good at school. It was effortless. I was not one of those people. I spent twice as long on my homework as Naomi, but you wouldn't know it by looking at my grades. This was yet another area where Grayson also seemed to excel without trying, which was all kinds of unfair when you competed with him in everything.

This AP Government class was going to be my doom especially. It was the worst of them all. In general, my grades were okay, enough that my guidance counselor suggested I take this AP class to beef up my college applications. I'd picked Government, figuring that if history relied a lot on memorizing events and stuff like that, I would be fine. If I could memorize speeches, I could memorize historical facts.

Problem was, memorizing a speech involved strings of words that made sense one after another, and history involved random dates that had nothing to do with anything else. Besides, speech and debate was all about the presentation. The show. A multiple-choice test didn't care whether you appeared confident or not. It cared whether you knew the answers.

"Did you at least invite him in?" Naomi asked.

I scoffed. "Right. I invited my biggest competition into my home for teatime and cookies. Then my mom showed him her photos and we chatted about world peace. *No, I didn't invite him in!*"

The only good thing about that car ride was that I made it from point A to point B when no one else had been able to drive me. The whole time he'd pushed my buttons and made me flustered to the point that simply stepping out of the car had been a relief.

Naomi nodded like she agreed with everything I'd said, but her eyes told a different story. They were all squinty at the sides and she wouldn't

really make eye contact. We made it up to the front of the room and separated to our perspective cubbies. Hers was on the right and mine was on the far left, because our school ID numbers were so far apart.

We never used names for any of our assignments at our high school. School IDs were on everything. Supposedly it was to help the teachers grade fairly, but I was pretty sure they all had my number memorized by now. I bet they laughed about me in the teacher's lounge. *Oh, that poor 15511. Will they ever pull it together?*

I grabbed my assignment from the cubby and shoved it in my backpack without looking at it. Naomi met me at the door.

"How'd you do?" she asked.

"Don't know, don't care," I replied.

Naomi rolled her eyes at me.

"Not looking at your score won't change it. I know you secretly care. This is like when you kept putting off going to the barbecue. Sometimes you simply need to face the facts."

"I *will* look at it," I said. "Just somewhere more private, thank you very much."

Naomi raised an eyebrow, but let it go. "Congrats on the team captain thing, by the way."

"Co-team captain," I corrected her. "I have to share the title. With Grayson." I'd been stewing about it all weekend. On the one hand, I'd gotten everything that I'd wanted. But on the other, well, so had Grayson. Was it really so much to ask that I beat him at just one thing? It'd been far too long since that had happened.

Naomi and I walked down the hallway toward our lockers. AP Government was our last class of the day, so we took our time.

Naomi turned to me, and I knew she was up to something. There was that glint in her eye. "So, if you and Grayson are co-team captains, does that mean you'll be spending a lot of time with him?" She waggled her eye-

brows suggestively. I pushed her away, but she was not deterred. "Because you two would make the cutest couple."

"Hush, you," I said, looking around to see if anyone else had noticed the breakdown my best friend was having. Thankfully, everyone else was too preoccupied with what they were doing.

"I thought you were supposed to be my friend. Why would you wish that kind of evil on me?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You know he only teases you like that because he's dying for your attention. He likes you."

"Right." I snorted. "Like how he liked Zara Hayer? What happened there again? Oh, yeah, he used her to win the election. We're *competitors*, Naomi. Zara just wasn't smart enough to see it coming."

"Never judge anyone by their exes." Naomi shuddered, and I pounced on the opportunity for a subject change.

"Oh, you mean like when you dated Matt 'Mouth Breather' Brayford?"

"For one week!" Naomi laughed. "In eighth grade!"

"Mmm-hmm," I hummed, playing it up.

The more I got her thinking about herself, the better. Then maybe she'd forget about playing matchmaker between me and my sworn enemy.

I opened up my locker and started organizing the books I'd need to take home.

"You know, I hear Matt's single," I said, hoping to leave the topic of Grayson far behind.

"Speak of the devil," Naomi murmured, and I turned to face her so she could get the full force of my teasing grin.

"Oh, is the mouth breather nearby?" I asked, not bothering to keep my voice low.

That was when I heard him behind me, and it wasn't Matt Brayford.

"Hey, Quinn," Grayson said.

I turned so fast my backpack hit him in the stomach, and he steadied himself by grabbing my shoulder. Why was he standing so close?

“Ummm, hi.” I wasn’t sure what my face looked like right now. Then again, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. I could already feel the heat creeping up my neck, and I was pretty sure my skin was blotchy. It tended to do that when I got nervous, like when I was waiting for something horrible to happen. Grayson removed his hand and leaned against the row of lockers.

“I forgot to get your number on Friday.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, like he had no doubt I’d give him my number simply because he asked.

I looked at Grayson, confused and unable to actually do anything besides stand there. Students moved all around us, but it was like I was caught in my own mini bubble of inactivity. Naomi nudged me from behind and I regained enough sense to utter a single word.

“What?”

“Your phone number?” Grayson asked, his brows pulling together.

Grayson Hawks was asking for my phone number. But why? So he could prank call me in the middle of the night?

“You know,” Grayson said. “Because we’ll be co-team captains, unfortunately. I guess we should have a way to get ahold of each other.”

I stared at his phone, wondering how many ways he could use my phone number against me. Then again, did I have a choice? Whether I liked it or not—hint, I didn’t—we’d have to work together this year. Ugh.

“Right,” I said, nodding to my internal thoughts as much as I was answering him. “Here, give me your phone and I’ll put it in.”

My fingers moved robotically, punching the numbers in, one by one. By the time I handed him back his phone, I was pretty sure I could talk civilly.

“Smile,” he said, taking a picture of me. I heard the click before I could process what he was doing.

I scowled. “I wasn’t ready.”

He looked at his phone and pinched his lips to one side. “Whoa, you’re

right. You're usually much more photogenic than this, Quinn, yikes. What's going on with your hair?"

I quickly swiped his phone from him to see for myself, but the picture I saw was normal. But that didn't matter, because Grayson was already laughing at my response.

"Relax, you take everything too seriously." He took his phone back, presumably programming my picture in with my phone number. A second later, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

"I just texted you so you have my number now." Grayson's eyes crinkled around the corners when he smiled. "I know it might be tempting, but try not to send me anything too scandalous."

I rolled my eyes and he started to walk away, but I couldn't let him get the last word.

"So, you get an awkward picture of me, but I don't get one of you?" I called. Grayson turned, a smirk already on his face. He held his arms out to his sides, as if to say, *Ready when you are*.

I clicked his picture. It was a shame he was so good-looking. What a waste of a pretty face.

"You good?" Grayson asked, and I nodded.

"You have my number. Don't be afraid to use it," he said. Then he turned and walked away again. I brought my phone back to my pocket and spun around to find Naomi watching me, her smugness radiating off her in waves.

"What?" I asked, already knowing what she was going to say, even though she was dead wrong.

"He was flirting with you. I totally saw it."

I scoffed. "I was there too, remember? And he definitely was not flirting." She should know; that was simply part of Grayson's enigmatic personality. Sometimes he was cheeky, sometimes he was smooth, but he always had his own agenda in mind. I knew better than anyone else that he wasn't to be trusted. It was a show, just like his speeches. His mom had

taught him all she knew about winning people over, and Grayson was a natural. When he wanted to be, or when he had something to gain, he could be very charming. And sure, maybe sometimes I enjoyed our little spats. When I came out on top. But that was a secret I'd take to my grave.

I hiked my backpack up on my shoulder and closed my locker door. Naomi watched me with one eyebrow raised, but I pretended not to see.

"You're like a pesky little gnat. Or a tall one, rather. Don't you have practice?" I asked, motioning for her to shoo.

She scowled, then sighed. "Catch you later." Her curls bounced as she walked away.

It was only after she'd rounded the corner that I finally allowed myself to look at my returned assignment for AP Government.

I pulled it free from my backpack and stared at the red A at the top, not understanding what I was seeing. Seriously? An A? That had never happened before. Well, not in my hardest class.

Finally, all my hard work actually amounted to something. I grinned and brought the paper close to my chest, clutching it there in a hug. My entire body felt weightless and I leaned back against the lockers before I could do anything reckless, like shout my success to the hallway. But I couldn't stop smiling, no matter how hard I tried. Passing freshman gave me weird looks. Not that I cared. I brought the paper in front of me again, to make sure I hadn't been imagining things. But there it was, a bright red A, slashed across the top like a crimson kiss of approval.

But then I saw something I'd missed earlier, and my grin dropped. The student ID number at the top of the paper was one digit off from mine. Instead of 15511, this one read 15211.

This was not my assignment.

Chapter Three

I had my own practice to get to. But on the way there, I stopped by my AP Government classroom. No one was there to witness my humiliation, including the teacher, thankfully. I didn't need her apologetic look as I explained to her that I'd actually thought I'd earned a good grade in her class for once.

I checked the cubbies surrounding mine, looking to see if perhaps my assignment got shelved to the right or something. They were all empty. Most likely my assignment had gotten switched with 15211's because our numbers were so similar, so I found theirs and looked inside to see if my assignment was there. It wasn't.

But I'd had mixed up assignments happen before over the years, so the odds were pretty good that it'd happened again. Whoever it was must have taken mine home without realizing the teacher's mistake. Poor A student, thinking they'd bombed the homework. Well, I didn't feel too sorry for them.

I ripped a page from my notebook and pulled out a pen to write 15211

a note. If they didn't have my assignment, at least they'd be able to tell me so I could ask our teacher what might have happened.

Sorry if I gave your AP Government-loving heart some kind of an attack when you saw my grade instead of yours. I'm guessing our assignments got swapped, and even though I'm sure my grade is spectacular in comparison, it'd be great if I could get it back. If you don't have my assignment, please let me know so I can hound Ms. Navarrete about the black hole in her office. But yeah, if you do, please send it back. You know, so I can hang it on my wall of shame or something like that.

More like, I needed to know which questions I'd gotten wrong, so I wouldn't make the same mistake twice, which I was sure to do anyway.

I placed their assignment and my note in their cubby, then walked out the door and to the stairs leading to the second floor. Speech practice was held in the theater classroom, which was ironically one of the farthest rooms from the auditorium where they actually performed. But Coach Bates also taught theater, which was why we met in her room.

At the base of the stairway, my phone dinged with a text from my mom.

First speech practice as team captain. SO PROUD OF YOU!

She took the cheerleader thing a little far sometimes, but I loved her anyway. I sent back several kissing face emojis and put the phone back in my pocket. I squared my shoulders and walked up the stairs. It was time.

Grayson was already there. Of course. He'd probably come straight here after he'd left my locker because he wanted to make me look bad.

I pulled up the desk next to him and sat down, pretending like I wasn't itching to leave his presence already.

"So," I said, pulling out my notebook, "I guess we need a game plan on how we're going to not strangle each other. How do you think we should divvy up the captain duties?"

He placed his elbow on the edge of his desk, bringing his hand to his chin like he was pondering life's mysteries.

"Not even a little strangulation? What about light hazing?"

I rolled my eyes and he chuckled, leaning back in his chair and placing his hands behind his head.

"Okay, okay," Grayson said. "We should probably do the food planning for our home tournament together, since it's the state meet and that's kind of a big deal. But Coach wants us to work with some of the newer members during practices and we could do that from opposite ends of the room, if you can't stand being next to all my awesomeness. What do you want to do about team activities?"

"Yes," I said dryly. "It's so hard to be next to your . . . awesomeness." I leaned over as if inspecting something unpleasant. "Is that a TARDIS on your shirt?"

He smiled, completely unfazed by my scrutiny, holding out the bottom edge of his shirt to better show off the graphic. "The fact that you called it a TARDIS and not a phone booth means maybe there's hope for you after all."

I sighed. "Back to business, please. I could plan the Thanksgiving party if you want to do the bus cheer on the way to tournaments." The bus cheer was the one thing I did not want to touch with a ninety-nine-and-a-half-foot pole. The team captain had to come up with a different one for each meet and, on the bus ride there, was forced to stand up at the front and get everyone pumped to compete. It was humiliating. And I didn't want anything to do with it.

“Nice try,” Grayson said. “But there’s no way I’m going to let our fellow classmates miss out on your best performances.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t want to deprive them of yours either,” I said.

Grayson barely gave a hint of a smile before replying, “Fine. We’re both doing it. What about the Thanksgiving party?”

“I’m not doing it by myself if you’re not doing the cheers alone,” I said in warning.

“Guess we’re stuck doing that together too,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

Great. I tried not to let my dismay show on my face, but Grayson was laughing at me when Coach Bates came over to where we were sitting.

“Hey, you two, I’ve been gathering the new team members over in that corner of the room.” She pointed. “It’d be great if you could give them a run-down of the different speech and debate events so they can pick what they want to compete in.”

Coach left to help someone else and Grayson started gathering his things.

“I’ll grab the handouts,” I said, already heading to the file cabinet. Grayson went to introduce himself to the freshmen and I pulled out enough flyers so everyone could have their own copy. By the time I made it to the group, three of the freshman girls were already staring dreamily at Grayson like he was some kind of Greek god. I dropped the papers on the table with a thump and everyone jumped.

“All right. So, there’s different events you can compete in, and you’ll need to decide whether you want to do things on the speech side or debate side,” I said.

“Aren’t they the same thing?” a boy asked, not even bothering to pick up a handout. “Like, you stand up in front of people and talk about something and then it looks good on your college applications?”

I grabbed a paper and placed it in front of him. “No. Speech and debate are two separate things, and they each have at least five different events. You’ll see them listed out here.” I pointed to the location on the

handout. "I'm not going to go through them all since I'm pretty sure you all can read."

Grayson must have thought I wasn't handling things well, because he jumped in. "What Quinn means to say is, read through the options, and then if you have questions about anything, we're here for you. Quinn and I both compete in Original Oratory, which means we write our own speeches, hoping to persuade listeners to adopt our point of view on a particular topic. It's one of the solo events for speech. But there's also pair events that you can do with a partner on both the speech side and debate."

"But Oratory is clearly the best," I said. "Except that then you have to spend more time with Grayson, and I can't recommend that for your health."

"All events are equally great," Grayson said, shooting me a look that was practically begging me to behave already. "So no matter what you pick, you'll have fun. Though, obviously we're biased toward Oratory. Even if the downside means practices with Quinn."

"Does that mean you compete against each other?" one of the girls asked.

I wanted to say, "Only in everything," but I held my tongue and simply nodded.

"Which one of you is better?" she asked.

I coughed uncomfortably.

"Duh," one of the boys answered. "They're both team captains, aren't they? They're probably about the same, right?"

"Sure," Grayson said.

The word was innocent enough. But his tone and the way he said it sounded so . . . so . . . condescending. Like he was patting a grumpy toddler on the head and trying to appease them.

It didn't matter that he was right. Sure, I'd been playing the part of the underdog lately, but it wasn't always like that. This year it was *my*

turn. State was going to prove that, when I came home with the first-place trophy.

Actually, it didn't matter what place I got, so long as it was better than Grayson.

"Read over the events," I said, careful to keep my tone even. "I need to leave by five to catch the city bus, so make sure you find me before then if you have any questions." I stood up from the table and turned away, prepared to leave them to it.

"Real team captains stay late, though." Grayson's voice was taunting, the way it was when he was being purposefully obtuse. "I'll be here as long as it takes."

I turned back around and addressed the group. "Practice is usually over by then anyway, so don't worry, you shouldn't have to resort to second best."

"You know, Quinn, I could give you a ride after practices. Consider it my gift to you." Grayson's signature half smile was firmly in place, his dimple pronounced.

"I'd rather have food poisoning for a week," I said politely, smiling the whole time. Grayson leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"You're always so uptight. Relax. It's not like anyone *wants* to ride the bus."

Fun fact: When someone tells you to "relax," the opposite actually happens.

Grayson went back to looking at the handout, but I was bristling. I knew it was all a game to him, but his comments always got under my skin.

"Better the bus than your company," I replied, flipping my hair over my shoulder. Then I turned and walked back to my own desk, fuming the whole time.

I knew working with Grayson would be difficult. But did he have to

be so . . . so . . . *Grayson-y?* With that smile that he knew was cute, and his too-witty comments that I never knew how to answer?

I pulled out my notebook and started working on my first speech of the season. There was only one solution to the Grayson problem. I'd have to crush him in the competition. No matter what it took, I'd make sure that happened.

Chapter Four

There was a note waiting for me in my cubby the next day. And it was there before lunch, which meant 15211 either had AP Government sometime in the morning, or whoever it was had realized the mistake too and had gone to return my assignment first thing. There had to be at least four or five classes of AP Government throughout the day, so really, 15211 could be anyone.

I'd checked as I walked to English because it was on the way. Seeing the letter in my cubby, I was glad I'd decided to come early.

I analyzed the handwriting, trying to figure out if it looked feminine or masculine. It didn't really matter, but it was strange not to know. The writing was slanted and bold, sure of itself, but somehow elegant at the same time. It was better than my own, but not as bubbly. I flipped it over, but they hadn't signed their name. I turned it back and began reading.

Dear 15511,

Believe it or not, I hate politics more than I hate cherry-flavored cough medicine, so no, my "AP Government-loving heart" didn't have some kind of an attack, thank you very much.

Sorry you bombed this assignment. If it's any consolation, I'll probably fail the next one since I'm writing to some girl (a guess from your handwriting) instead of paying attention to Ms. Navarrete talk about the role of social media in the latest presidential elections. Have fun with that today. She seems to think everyone's still on Myspace. I think that died like a century ago.

I'm second-guessing whether I'll leave you this note. Maybe I'll just return your paper with a quick "Here you go, enjoy!" Then you wouldn't think I'm a creepy guy. I promise I'm not. Just bored.

15211

By the time I'd finished reading it, I'd made it to English class. I wove through the desks until I made it to the back row, where Naomi, Carter, and I usually sat. I was pretty early and they weren't there yet, so I pulled out my notebook and debated whether to write 15211 back.

I didn't have to. He'd returned my assignment, so really, what more was there to talk about? He'd probably think I was the creepy one if I kept this going.

That was when Naomi dropped her book on the desk next to mine, folding her long legs into the space that was clearly meant for a much shorter person.

"Ooh, a note that isn't from me?" she asked, leaning over to grab the paper on my desk. "Look at you, expanding your circle of friends."

“Ha,” I deadpanned. “Don’t get your hopes up. I don’t even know the guy. He somehow ended up with my assignment in AP Government, so I asked him to return it and it came with this.”

“He sounds cute,” she replied, looking over the letter.

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked. “Do you have a super-power you never told me about?”

She placed the note back on my desk.

“Well, he’s funny. So.”

“Comedians are usually funny because they *aren’t* attractive,” I replied. “They have to develop other talents in order to stand a chance.”

“You’re going to write him back, right?” Naomi dug through her bag until she found her English book, which she placed on her desk.

“What’s the point?” I fingered the edge of my notebook, unsure whether I wanted her to convince me.

“The point?” She leaned forward. “The point is, you need more people in your life besides me and Carter. You’re too happy in your antisocial bubble. It’s great that you’re so techie, and helping your mom in your free time and all that, but you’re like a grandma in teenager skin. Besides, a little flirting never hurt anyone. You could use the practice.”

“Oh, so not only do I have to write him back, but now I have to flirt with him?”

She tore a piece of paper out of her notebook and handed it to me, as if I didn’t have my own right in front of me.

“I could use the entertainment.” Naomi didn’t say anything else after that. She just raised her eyebrows and motioned for me to continue while she used her phone’s front-facing camera to reapply her lipstick.

I sighed as I picked up my pen. I had no idea what to write, despite Naomi’s meddling.

Somehow, I’d have to confirm he was right that I was a girl. He’d been nice enough to clue me in, and I wasn’t about to share anything more personal. No way was I going to tell him anything that might name me

as the person who “bombed the assignment,” as he’d so politely put it. I started writing.

You know “I’m not creepy” is exactly what a creeper would say, right? I’m not holding my breath. Besides, who gets that many answers right on an AP Government assignment? Either you study way too much, or you’re too smart for your own good. Either way, I think I’ve decided not to like you. It’s not good for my fragile girl ego to be friends with someone like that.

I smiled as I wrote that. Would he get my sarcasm? I debated starting over. But Naomi was looking over my shoulder and nodding in approval. Besides, if he couldn’t get my sense of humor, then it’d be better to know now. Especially if I was going to be forced to exchange notes with a stranger.

I glanced up to check the clock. Only a few more minutes until English started. Naomi was talking to the girl to her right, so I returned my attention to the note.

Anyway. I just saw Mr. Williams pick his nose, and I had to tell someone. There you go.

It didn’t mean I had English class right now, even though I did. I could have seen my teacher in the hall or between classes. And it wasn’t like I was delivering this letter before eighth period, so 15211 would have no idea what time I’d written this. I hadn’t given too much away. It was strange, how easy it was to talk to a perfect stranger. Like, by not knowing who he was, I could tell him anything. I was like those trolls who felt empowered on the internet. Anonymity made me bold.

I tried to think of anything else to say, but I was all out. My English teacher finished picking his nose, which meant he was probably going to start class soon. I signed my student ID number and put it back in my bag so I could place the note in 15211’s cubby when I had AP Government.

Carter walked in, saw us, and smiled so big, I knew he was up to something. The smile stayed there the whole time as he walked to the back.

“I have news,” he said, sliding into the chair to my left. His sandy hair stuck out from under his hoodie and he leaned toward me. “I’m switching events.”

“For speech and debate?” Naomi asked. She’d stopped talking to the person to her right when Carter joined us. She had this wild theory that Carter had a crush on me, and sometimes, I believed it. He’d randomly say things that made me wonder if he was flirting. Or trying to. Usually, I ignored it, because that would just be awkward. When you grew up with someone as a friend, it was impossible to see them any other way. But mostly, I thought Naomi was full of it. She wasn’t super close to him, so she didn’t know him like I did.

“What other event would I be talking about?” He shoved his backpack under his desk and looked back toward us.

“But you’ve always done Impromptu,” I said. “You’re good at it.” I tried to think of why Coach would have him switch, but came up empty. Carter was quick with witty responses and made up facts with such confidence that he could fool an expert in the field. It was like he was handmade for Impromptu.

Honestly, I’d always been a bit jealous, because Impromptu seemed like so much less work than my event. He didn’t have to research facts or memorize a ten-minute speech. He didn’t rewrite the same line five different ways to get the pacing and cadence perfect. He just showed up.

“Why, thank you,” he said, bowing slightly from the waist. So humble. I couldn’t help but laugh and Carter joined in. Naomi rolled her eyes and started talking to the other girl again, obviously bored with our speech and debate conversation.

“I wanted something different,” he said. “And this way, I’ll get to spend more time with you. Win-win.” He grinned and reached over to slug me lightly in the arm.

“Wait, you’re doing Oratory now?” I sat back and tried not to let my shock show on my face. It was bad enough I had to compete against Grayson, but now Carter, one of my best friends? The guy who always gave me his brownie from the lunch line because he knew I liked them?

“Yeah, so since you’re team captain, you have to give me pointers.”

Oh, and then there was that. Not only would I have to compete against him, I’d have to *help* him. I’d have to coach him in my own event, reveal all my secrets and tips, and hope it didn’t come back to bite me.

I already knew it would. If Carter could channel his natural talent into a memorized speech, then he’d have the perfect one-liners every single time.

This was supposed to be my year. The year I’d win state, and beat Grayson, and actually have things work in my favor for once.

Sure, I’d known I’d need to compete for it, but now even my friends were conspiring against me. Why couldn’t Carter have stayed doing Impromptu? Just to “spend more time with me”?

Making things worse, I couldn’t even tell Carter how I really felt. Only a week ago, we’d been talking about how hard it was to find time for friends our senior year. This was obviously his solution to the problem. I’d meant it was hard to find time to hang out with Carter and Naomi together when everyone had different schedules, but it wasn’t like I could clarify now. How could I be so harsh to express my displeasure when Carter was only trying to do something nice?

I plastered a smile on my face. “That’s great news,” I said, hoping Mr. Williams would start class soon and end my misery.

Such great news.

Chapter Five

The next day, I got another note.

Dear 15511,

You say you don't want to be my friend. Here are all the reasons why you should be so lucky:

- 1. I'm a pro at keeping secrets.*
- 2. I'd tell you if you had something stuck in your teeth.*
- 3. I'd never make you sing karaoke.*
- 4. I can beatbox. Okay, not really, but that'd be pretty cool, right?*
- 5. I'm a silent chewer.*
- 6. I know how to pronounce "Worcestershire."*
- 7. I never wear socks with sandals.*
- 8. I always text back.*

I'm running out of reasons, and I haven't even gotten to ten, which makes me worried I might not actually be good friend material, so if you wanted to crush my ego, then mission accomplished. With that happy thought, it's probably best if I stop writing now.

15211

I honestly hadn't expected him to write back. This was getting a little ridiculous. How long did he expect me to keep this up? I wasn't planning on responding, but then Naomi found the letter in my backpack and threatened to show everyone on the speech team pictures from when I stuffed my bra during a sleepover if I didn't write back right away. That was more ammo than I wanted my competition to have, so I pulled out a pen and wrote 15211 back. I kept it short.

You know how to pronounce "Worcestershire"? If you tell me you can draw stick figures too, you're hired.

His next note had been a stick figure drawing of two people. One had a regular circle for its head while the other had an elongated oval. He'd captioned it, *Why the long face?* Despite myself, I laughed.

I wrote back.

My best stick figures happen when I play hangman. So here's a word for you to guess. It also happens to be my favorite food.

It'd taken almost a week of back and forth for him to figure out I liked mint Oreos. The following day, a whole pack of them showed up in my cubby.

I'll admit, that went a long way toward making me like the guy. Anyone who bought me chocolate was okay by me.

When he told me it was physically impossible for him to watch a movie

without popcorn, I bought him a bag from the vending machine to return the favor.

The white cheddar kind. Because it's hands-down the best. Don't argue. You know I'm right.

Somehow I found myself falling into this new rhythm where I exchanged notes with a stranger almost every day. Sometimes it was one line, sometimes a full page, but it always made me smile. After enough time had passed, Naomi didn't even have to pressure me into it. It became something I looked forward to, rather than a weird social experiment.

Without divulging too much of my personal life, I also asked him advice on speech and debate topics. Our first tournament was coming up quickly and I still hadn't settled on anything.

What issues in the news today do you think are the most important?

Internet privacy. Antidiscrimination laws. The human carbon footprint. Immigration. I could go on and on.

Not only did we sometimes mention the assignments, but I often saw his grades whenever I left a note in his cubby, and his scores in AP Government were a testament to his knowledge of political topics. What was ironic was how much he claimed to hate politics.

Of course, talking about those kinds of things had somehow led to us discussing deeper and more personal topics. In one letter, I learned he didn't always get along with his parents, for one thing.

Dear 15511,

Did you get question three right on the last assignment? I didn't. I think Ms. Navarrete is wrong, but my parents prob-

ably won't let me explain my view. If I miss one answer on an assignment, they ask me what went wrong. More than one and I might as well have failed.

It's like they expect me to be a rocket scientist or president of the United States or something like that. They can't seem to remember I'm just a teenager doing the best I can.

Sorry, that got deep fast. Didn't mean to lay that all on you, random stranger. All that to say, what'd you put for question three?

15211

I deflected his question about our assignments, because the truth was, I'd gotten a lot more than just question number three wrong. Parents, though, that was something I could talk about.

I was lucky. Random spats aside, my mom and I got along. The night before I got that letter, we'd binged *The Good Place* and laughed so hard there was actual waterworks. Later, she'd shown me some of her latest photos from a wedding and we'd both about died when she'd photo-shopped horns onto the bride. Still, we had our moments.

For about a week after that note, I swapped parental horror stories with 15211, leaving my dad out of it since he wasn't in the picture anymore.

My mom didn't like this Goth emo guy I used to date. So anytime he came over, she'd blast the Top 40 hits from her room just so he'd leave. Our walls would actually shake. And no, she doesn't like pop music.

Looking back, it actually was kind of funny. My mom had to have hated it almost as much as he had. Personally, I liked pop, so it was probably all for the best that it hadn't worked out between me and Emo Guy.

One time my mom locked me out because I missed curfew. I had to sleep on the porch swing. Luckily, it was the summer.

His parents seemed a lot stricter than my mom. My mom did things in good fun, but his parents' expectations were sky high. It was clear he respected them immensely and put a lot of stock in their opinions, which was great. But, the more I got to know him, the more I felt bad for him, and I was getting to know him more every day.

It was strangely exhilarating writing a stranger a note. A physical, handwritten letter that wasn't something that'd be forgotten on his phone the minute something better came along. The letters I collected seemed more solid than anything I'd read in a long time, which was maddening considering I didn't even know who it was doing the writing. How could something so full of questions be so concrete at the same time?

He seemed to feel the same way.

Is it weird that I kind of like not knowing who you are? Sometimes it's not knowing something that makes it all the more exciting.

Soon, it wasn't a question of *if* I'd write him back, but a matter of how quickly I could whip out my pen. Curiosity was nibbling at my stomach, making me anticipate AP Government for the first time ever, simply because I'd get to put a letter in someone's cubby. Really, it was absurd, and I knew it.

I didn't even know his name, or anything that could actually identify him. All I had were pieces of a whole, things that made him who he was, but when looked at separately, could apply to anyone, really.

On Monday night, Naomi and I tried to figure out who my mystery pen pal could be while I waited for my mom to come home from the diner. Music blasted from my computer and we talked loudly over it.

“His parents are still together?” Naomi asked as we sprawled out on my bed. Ms. Navarrete’s class rosters and 15211’s letters were spread out around us like a sea of white foam. A paper cut waiting to happen. Ms. Navarrete had four classes of AP Government throughout the day, and each class had about fifteen guys, give or take. We’d sweet-talked the office aide into printing them out. Well, Naomi had sweet-talked. I’d stood there awkwardly and debated whether this could count as a felony or end up on my permanent record somehow.

“Affirmative,” I said. “His parents are still married.” I searched through the names in third period.

“There’s got to be at least sixty-five guys here.” Naomi put down the paper she was holding. “Remind me again why you can’t just ask him?”

I had to turn down the music because my mom was going to be home any minute.

“And spoil the fun?” I asked. My voice was light, but inwardly, I was tense, a coiled-up snake. Conflicted. Did I really want to know who this person was? Some things were better off unsaid, after all. I gathered the papers together just as my mom poked her head through my door.

“Nice to see you’re so focused on homework,” she said. Naomi bounced her head enthusiastically. I sat there frozen, like a meerkat sensing approaching danger. My grades in AP Government hadn’t been stellar lately, and my mom had agreed on Naomi coming over as long as we used the time to study.

Well, in my defense, we *had* been studying. But not schoolwork.

“You girls want some dinner?”

Naomi was off the bed and on the way to the kitchen before my mom was even done offering. Like me, she’d probably smelled the apple pie aroma that was wafting through my now-open door.

“I got another photography booking this morning,” my mom said, waving her phone at me. “I’m doing newborn shots for a lady across town. She

said she found me through Instagram, which you know I can never do without you.” She waggled her eyebrows and I smiled. Direct results. It was the best feeling in the world. “You know you’re my favorite kid, right?”

I scoffed and said the same line I always did.

“I’m your *only* kid.”

“Still my favorite. Now let’s eat.”

She left and I finished gathering the papers, separating them into two piles. One for 15211’s letters, and the other for the lists of potential names in Ms. Navarrete’s classes. I debated throwing the lists away. My hand hovered over my trash can, the papers touching the edge.

Then I pulled back, placing the lists of names on my desk instead.

Right now, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know who 15211 was. But something told me that might not always be the case.