



CHAPTER ONE

IT'S FRIDAY MORNING AND, as usual, I'm sitting cross-legged on my unmade bed, balancing a bowl of Lucky Charms on my knees and trying not to spill milk on my laptop. Again. And, just like I do every day, I'm half paying attention to the morning news show playing on the TV that sits on the corner of my dresser. The hosts are cooing over a cat that learned how to ride the bus. As interesting as that story is, it's no match for what's happening on my computer.

Things are heating up on *We Are Not Alone*, or, as its tagline describes it, *Roswell's Destination for All Things Extraterrestrial*. It's an Internet hangout for super nerds, space freaks, sci-fi lovers, and paranoid weirdos near Roswell—and, as a major alien obsessive from Reardon, an hour away, I definitely qualify.

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rebuttal of the claims that aliens were behind the recent disappearance of an Air America flight over the Atlantic. I mean, yes, I believe in aliens, but I also believe that planes crash all the time. (My brother, Linc, says the only thing nerdier than being obsessed with aliens is being the downer who destroys everyone else's theories.)

LittleGreenMen: AlienHuntress OMG YOU ARE MY QUEEN

BlueSuperNova: AlienHuntress wins at everything!!!

BeamMeUp: AlienHuntress, that's nice in theory, but it's not totally rigorous. Planes crash all the time, but they don't usually disappear into thin air. No one's found any debris and . . .

Ugh. BeamMeUp appointed himself my own personal devil's advocate two weeks ago and hasn't looked back. His most recent comment is true to his pompous, know-it-all form.

Cringing, I read on. He actually uses bullet points to list all the ways I'm wrong. Bullet points! What is this, a PowerPoint presentation?

I shake my head and mutter, "Not today, buddy," and begin typing my reply. The click of the keys keeps pace with my mom's heels as they tap across the floor downstairs.

AlienHuntress: BeamMeUp, you think we should just assume every missing aircraft is the result of aliens? Should we amend all of Amelia Earhart's biographies to state that she was probably abducted by extraterrestrials?

I'm getting into the groove when the morning show host's soothing voice announces that it's time for a check on weather and traffic, which means it must be 8:15, which means . . .

Shit. Class is at 8:25. And I'm going to be late.

I slip my laptop off my lap and pound down the carpeted stairs, straight through the dining room into the kitchen. My cereal bowl rings against the sink when I toss it in. My mom, who's adjusting a high heel while shoving some gross protein bar in her mouth, scowls.

"Are you running late again?" she says with her mouth full.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" I shout, shooting upstairs as she sighs a long, overly dramatic "*Mal . . .*" in frustration.

My laptop whirs on my tiny twin bed. Even though my fingers are itching to get back to *We Are Not Alone* and the virtual smackdown I'm laying on *BeamMeUp*, I put some effort into picking out a normal outfit to appease Lincoln. My brother's so eager to be a film director that he thinks he can art direct every aspect of our lives. He still hasn't forgiven me for a sweatshirt/sweatpants combo that he claimed made me look like "an '80s workout instructor."

Today, I'm going with the "Classic Mal": a pair of jeans and nondescript but fitted T-shirt. Then, on to hair. My BFF, Jenni Agrawal, a beauty vlogger who posts weekly tutorials on topknots and contouring for her adoring fans on her YouTube channel, *Just Jenni*, would probably try to give my locks a cute name, like "beachy waves." But I'm honest enough to know that "As Good As It's Going to Get" is more accurate. My shaggy brown bangs will not be tamed.

"Crap!" I mutter when I can't find my books in the pile of clothes on the floor. They must be on the kitchen table, where I did homework last night. I go back downstairs and slide across

our perpetually polished hardwood floor into the kitchen, where my books are stacked next to my mom's giant red purse.

Sighing, I pick up the purse and open the front door just as my mom is pulling the minivan back into the driveway. The dry heat is already almost unbearable, and I immediately start to sweat.

"I swear, that's the last time I forget!" she calls out from the driver's-side window.

"I'm going to start charging a fee!" I shout. My toes curl nervously over the edge of the doorframe.

"Just bring it here, honey," she calls, holding her hand out.

I push one bare foot out the door, wincing when it touches the porch. A bead of sweat drips down my forehead and my stomach starts to churn with the force of a thousand chalky marshmallows. A pair of big, invisible arms squeezes my chest and my breath gets shallow.

"Mallory!" Even from a distance, I can see that her cheeks have gone slack—her disappointed look. I despise that look, how it's become so familiar. Before I can stop myself, I take a full two steps onto the porch so that look will disappear. But her minivan, which I *know* is only fifteen feet from me, looks like it's at the end of a tunnel that's getting longer and longer.

I'm shaking harder. It's loud now, like someone turned the volume up on the world. The purse feels heavier by the nano-second while the taste of cereal climbs up my throat. With one deep, shaky breath, I walk down the porch stairs and fling the purse toward her open car window. Her slender hand plucks it out of the air and the sound of her mascara tube falling to the ground explodes in my ears. My toes catch on the sharp edge of the entryway as I haul myself through, but the pain is drowned out by the animal need to just get inside.

The door slams behind me so hard that it bounces off the frame and swings back open, like it's mocking me. My chest heaves.

Back in the cool, brightly lit safety of my house, everything snaps into focus—the neat line of our shoes by the door, Lincoln's tennis racket on the living room sofa, the clock on the mantel that reads 8:27.

Double shit.

I launch myself up the stairs and straight to my laptop, logging in just in time to say, “Here!” when Mr. Parker calls my name.



CHAPTER TWO

Many juvenile birds possess plumage that allows them to blend into their surroundings. Because they can't yet fly to escape predators, these vulnerable young birds camouflage themselves until they're older and stronger.

—*The Birder's Guide*, 1989

MR. PARKER'S FACE LOOMS on my screen, Coke-bottle glasses and all, like it always does when I log in. Satisfied by my telepresence, he moves down his class roster, ignoring the flood of snickers and whispers that greets me when I log on.

From my vantage point at the very back of the class, I can see almost everybody. To my left, there's evil Pia Lubeck, whose dark hair is so shiny it practically creates a glare. To my right, a bunch of football dudes appear as one giant mass of Reardon's blue and gold. Jenni, my official BFF, is subtly waving at me from her seat in the front row.

Maybe a more progressive school would have allocated some of the football budget for one of those "remote telepresences," but good old Reardon High just set up a laptop in the back of all of my classrooms. Not very high-tech, but it works,

albeit in an incredibly awkward way. If that's the price I have to pay for attending school via webcam because of, as Reardon High School's guidance counselor, Mrs. Boone, put it, my "personal issues," I'll pay it.

Personal issues. That vague phrase that always means "a person who's dealing with something super messed up." Like when our freshman year history teacher left school for a "personal issue" that really meant he got arrested for shoplifting, or when a celebrity takes time off from his career for a "personal issue" that's actually just a drug problem.

As Lincoln and Jenni tell me, some kids at school think I got pregnant and I'm at home with an ever-expanding midsection. Some kids think I started doing meth. Patrick Cruz suggested he has "proof" that I got arrested for a combination of those things and am currently attending Reardon High via a computer at juvie. Some kids think I have an allergy to sunlight and have to stay in my basement 24/7. And at least one person, noted weirdo Monica Bergen, is convinced that I'm actually dead. How she thinks I'm appearing on webcam, I'll never understand. If I were a ghost, the very last place I'd haunt would be Reardon High.

I haven't broken any laws or developed any drug problems, as much as the student population of Reardon High might think I have. The truth is much less sordid, but a whole lot more embarrassing: My dad left, and now I can't step one foot outside my house without feeling like the outside world is going to physically crush me.

I guess if we're talking about my anxiety, the even truthier truth is it started *way* before that, like pretty much when I popped out of the womb. While other kids were climbing trees and falling off their bikes, I was worried about hitting my head

and developing a brain injury, or a scrape that would inevitably lead to gangrene, or coming into contact with bird poop (which, FYI, can carry over *sixty diseases*). I've always been *nervous*, but it was all under control—at least livable—until the morning I woke up and my dad was gone.

He's always been prone to going away for long weekends by himself and conveniently “forgetting” to tell us when he'd be back. When he left, I tried to keep my worry at a 4.5 level . . . that is, until he didn't come back the next week, or the next. When a month passed, my mom told me, in language I'm sure she learned from her therapist, that it wasn't my fault. Lincoln said good riddance, took our years-old family portrait off the mantel, and didn't give it a second thought.

But me? I couldn't—can't—let it go. I knew my dad wasn't happy here with us—I'm not an idiot—but I didn't expect him to just *leave*. And if that one unexpected thing could happen, what else might happen?

And then there was the Cheesecake Factory Incident.

No, I didn't OD on pasta carbonara or fall into a cheesecake coma. That would have been so much better.

Jenni, Lincoln, and I were at the Cheesecake Factory celebrating our last final of the school year. Lincoln was happily digging into his dessert when I saw it: the tan jacket, the growing bald spot—*him*, at a table across the dining room. I stood up, my silverware clattering to the floor, and ran across the room. I grabbed his shoulders, shouted, “Dad!” and he turned around to reveal . . . a man who wasn't my dad, looking at me like I was about to assault him.

“Is everything okay?” asked a Cheesecake Factory waiter, barely covering up his alarm. Jenni and Lincoln caught up to me and each grabbed a shoulder, tugging me back.

That's when everything got blurry, when Jenni and Lincoln tried to hold me up as I sunk to the ground. Everything in that cavernous dining room with its fake columns echoed so loudly that it felt like the clanking silverware and murmurs were screaming inside my head.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't stand. I couldn't deal.

The next thing I remember is being in my room, safe in bed. The next day, when I tried to get the mail, I crumpled on the sidewalk. The day after that, I threw up all over the porch stairs. There was always tomorrow.

But tomorrow turned into weeks and months, and the reasons to stay inside kept piling up.

Mom, Lincoln, Jenni, some teachers—everyone who knows—think I'm overreacting. It's written on their faces every time one of them tries to "encourage" me out of doors and I break into a full-body sweat. But *you* try to leave your house when leaving your house feels like having eight heart attacks while your insides turn inside out. After four weeks and a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder complemented by agoraphobic tendencies, my mom and Mrs. Boone wanted me to go to school, even if I wasn't leaving the house. That's when my online education started.

As soon as Mr. Parker turns his sweater-vested back to the class to retrieve something in the classroom closet, one of the football players throws a wad of paper across the room.

Clearly, my room is a far superior learning environment to Reardon, panic attacks notwithstanding.

Plus, from the comfort of my room I get to be Jenni's "gossip mole," which means that I eavesdrop for her—because other than when I pipe up to correct someone ("Hermione Granger syndrome" according to my mom, whose book club read Harry

Potter for *Fantasy and Fromage* month), I'm basically in stealth mode. Monica Bergen (the one who thinks I'm dead) is talking about the French lessons she's taking for the Europe trip. Boring. Then she moves on to who she thinks will be on this year's homecoming court. Double boring.

I turn my attention to the football huddle, where Brad Kirkpatrick—also known as Reardon High's golden-boy football star and my next-door neighbor—is whispering to Cliff, a kid who had no choice but to become a football player after his parents named him Cliff.

"Having Jake back in town has been awesome," Brad says. "He helps me practice."

"Your brother?" Cliff asks. "Wasn't he in jail or something?"

Brad shrugs, or at least gets as close as his massive shoulders will let him get to a shrug. I'm even a little disappointed when Mr. Parker, now at the smartboard, *tuts* them. At least that conversation promised to be more interesting than football or homecoming, Reardon's hottest topics.

"Mr. Parker, are we going over the homework?" Jenni says from her seat at the front of class.

Pia Lubeck rolls her huge green eyes and mimes gagging behind Jenni's back. Cliff lets out a laugh that sounds like a pig's would if pigs could laugh. The back of my best friend's neck flushes red and she mumbles a small "never mind" before turning her eyes to her desk.

I mute my webcam and release a tsunami of insults that would definitely get me suspended if I were physically in the classroom. Pia's just jealous that Jenni is an incredible breathtaking perfect Indian supermodel walking the earth. Jenni, the only one of my friends who came to check on me, the only one who called every evening to ask me, calmly and without

judgment, when I was coming back to school. Everyone else—including Sarah-Beth Greeley, who used to round out our trio—either faded away slowly or disappeared immediately.

Getting more time in person with Jenni is one of the only things I miss about Reardon. Actually, it's the only thing I miss about Reardon. I'd rather spend my time talking about UFO crash landings on We Are Not Alone than hanging out in the school hallways. I was planning on taking some college courses during my junior year anyway.

As Mr. Parker shuffles through some papers at his desk, Jenni darts her eyes to her lap. I can just see the flurry of her fingers as she types out a message. Five seconds later, I get her text.

Caroline asked me to be in her lab group!!! THANK YOU!!!

I smile to myself, impressed by Jenni's relentless social striving and my cyber-stalking skills. Reading tons of inane conversations between Caroline and her friends on Facebook and Twitter and tumblr and Instagram helped me deduce that she missed a deadline for a summer course at Reardon Community College. It's amazing how much one girl can complain in missives of 140 characters about how she'd never be able to get into Vanderbilt without that class. It just took one conversation with his favorite daughter for Mr. Agrawal, head of admissions at RCC, to bend the rules a bit. And apparently it paid off.

Jenni treats the popular kids like they're celebrities and she's an E! red carpet reporter. And, when she's not working on the yearbook committee, attending workout classes at the Y, volunteering, or going to private chem and calc lessons, she works

on her YouTube videos. Even to someone like me, who's never going to attempt milkmaid braids or perfect a cat eye, they're awesome—though the “popular” girls don't seem to think she's pretty and put-together enough to fit right in with them. I've tried explaining to Jenni that her inability to be insta-besties with Caroline and Pia probably just means that she's, you know, a *nice person*. But Jenni still, more than anything, just wants to be accepted.

The best thing about not having to go to school is that I'm free to do whatever I want as long as I'm sort of paying attention—which is why Mom installed Focustime, an app that limits the time I spend on non-approved “school appropriate” sites, on both my computer and my phone. My minutes tick down as I scroll through my Instagram feed—a cat picture from my cousin, a baby picture from my other cousin, a picture Lincoln took of his new Alfred Hitchcock poster, a selfie Jenni snapped at breakfast, a selfie Jenni posted at her locker—as Mr. Parker passes out the handouts explaining our huge physics project, due at the end of the marking period.

“Mallory,” he says, looking right at me—or, I guess, the computer—“I'll be e-mailing you the handout, so be sure to check for it.”

“Okay,” I say. Mr. Parker isn't exactly up-to-date on technology—the last time he tried to e-mail me a handout, he forwarded me a lasagna recipe from his mom. He repeats himself no fewer than four times to “make sure that I heard.” Juniper Brieze, a girl whose parents presumably named her after a Bath & Body Works spray, giggles like she's in the front row of a Comedy Central special.

When he's finally moved on from making sure I heard, Mr. Parker announces that we get to pick our own

partners—thank God—and Jenni turns around and mouths, “Duh.” Luckily, partner selection rarely adds to my anxiety.

Once the flurry of partner choosing calms down, Mr. Parker says, “For those of you looking to avoid the midterm, there is an incentive to excelling on this project. The pair who receives the highest grade when they turn their projects in will be exempt from the midterm.”

Caroline, who I can just see on the edge of my screen, snaps her head around so fast that she almost falls out of her seat. Jenni’s sleek black ponytail bounces around as she bobs excitedly in hers. Brad high-fives Cliff, even though I think it’s about something else entirely. Monica seems to have fallen asleep. The best and brightest, right here at Reardon.

But now I’m paying attention, too. The terms of my at-home schooling clearly stipulate that I must take midterms at the school if the teachers want me to. No one is taking advantage of this except for, of course, Mr. Parker.

“Yes, Pia?” Mr. Parker asks as Pia raises her hand.

“That’s the Monday after the homecoming dance,” Pia says. “Don’t you think that’s, like, unfair to us on the homecoming court? I mean . . . unfair to the people who will be on the homecoming court.”

I’m afraid my classmates might actually be able to hear my eyes rolling.

“Physics,” Mr. Parker intones, “waits for no man. Or dance. You and your partner must create a project that captures how physics can make your everyday life more interesting. You will track your progress in a journal. Remember, results are not everything. In science, just as in life, you learn even more from your failures than you do from your successes.”

Only Mr. Parker would make this a physics lesson *and* a life

lesson. Luckily, Jenni is just as organized about her schoolwork as she is about her school-celebrity stalking and her nail polish collection, so I know we have this one in the bag.

When the bell rings, I log off and take out my notebook to start brainstorming.

How *does* physics affect my everyday life, I wonder as I tap my pencil on my paper. Mr. Parker probably doesn't consider a marathon of *Doctor Who* or old *Quantum Leap* reruns an A+ example of how physics makes my life more interesting. A couple of weeks ago, he gave a huge lecture about ramps, and I can easily find plenty of those. There's even a skate park two blocks away, and taking a picture of a skater would be a perfect journal entry.

Two blocks away. I start feeling my anxiety creep in, the familiar panic that starts in my chest and swells to include every part of my body—curling my toes, blurring my vision, shortening my breath.

I snap my notebook shut. Jenni can help with collecting information, and I'll just do something else to contribute. Maybe I should look at Mr. Parker's handout for some inspiration.

I have one e-mail in my inbox, but it isn't from Mr. Parker. My stomach somersaults. It's a Google Alert for the name "Robert F. Sullivan."

My father.



CHAPTER THREE

E-MAIL ALERT. THE ONE I signed up for months ago but completely forgot about—until now. It’s a link to the Bird-Watcher’s Association website, whose dull gray background and barrage of ads for field guides and festivals are ingrained in my memory. My dad’s been a member for so long he used to act like he invented it. I’ve already checked their site about five hundred times hoping for some kind of explanation of where he is.

I scroll around for his name. There’s a newsletter marked with today’s date and *boom*, jackpot. Under a photo of a gray-and-yellow bird on a tree branch, the caption, “Cedar Waxwing. Photo credit: Robert F. Sullivan.”

Holding my breath, I open the folder where I store all of my dad’s photos. Because he was “allergic to technology”—he doesn’t even have a *cell phone*—I was the one he tasked to save and catalog all of his photos, which are all still in one folder on my laptop. The cedar waxwing photo is *definitely* not in this folder—meaning it must be new.

I'm hoping Google will tell me that the cedar waxwing is found only within a five-mile radius of our town. But according to allaboutbirds.com, the cedar waxwing is found just about everywhere in the continental US. So much for narrowing it down.

I click on the bio he has up on the Bird-Watcher's Association site, but it's the same as it's been the other five hundred times I've read it. *Robert F. Sullivan has been a member of the Bird-Watcher's Association for twenty-three years. Robert F. Sullivan has loved birding since he was a small child.*

Robert F. Sullivan, apparently, didn't think to mention his family in his profile.

I swallow the lump in my throat and look through the newsletter one more time. There has to be something else. I stare at the photo of the cedar waxwing like it's a Magic Eye and my dad's whereabouts are the secret hidden picture. Then I see it: a tiny little announcement beside the photo.

The annual Bird-Watcher's Association excursion will take place from November 13th to 18th. Details given upon registration.

Of course. The excursion. It's a big deal and it's shrouded in secrecy, or at least as much secrecy as a bird-related trip can have. The board doesn't reveal where they're going except to those who register, and they've traveled all around the country to look at the rarest, most beautiful birds. I know my dad's been dying to go on one of these trips again; he organized one years ago when I was a toddler. But when Mom went into labor with Lincoln, he had to give his space on the trip to some other fervent birder, and since then, there's always been something that's kept him from going.

There's no way he's not going on this excursion. He's probably even in charge of it. If I could just find out where it's taking place, I could find him.

That is, *if* I could leave the house.

But this is it. I nod my head resolutely as I stare at the screen. This is the motivation I need to finally step off the porch and get back into my life. I used to leave the house pre-Cheesecake Factory Incident, and there's no reason to think I can't do it again if I have a reward more powerful than visiting the hallowed halls of Reardon High.

I see the cost and feel my heart sink into my stomach.

Five hundred dollars.

Since I currently have about twenty dollars to my name, this presents a problem. I quit my job at Sub Stop when I stopped going outside. I can't ask my mom to spot me, and Lincoln's out, too—he changes the subject every time I bring Dad up. Besides, he spends all of his tiny salary from Nickel and Dime, the local thrift store, on foreign films.

Short of rooting through my mom's purse or collecting change between couch cushions, how am I supposed to make money at home? I exhale, pushing my bangs off my forehead. I scroll through the job listings on Craigslist, but unless I'm willing to write SEO-optimized posts about penis-enlargement pills, I'm out of luck when it comes to at-home job opportunities.

I'm in a state of Craigslist-induced desperation when I see that Jenni texted me. Five times.

We're at lunch!

Where are you?

FACETIME ME. PLS. IT'S IMPORTANT.

Mallorrrrryyyyyy. If you don't call me I'm ending our friendship, effective immediately.

Where are you?? Linc is doing his impression of you . . .

I sigh. Jenni and I have very different ideas of what's "important." I'm sure she's just going to tell me that Pia or Caroline changed eyeliner brands, but I call her anyway.

"Mal! You made it!" Jenni speaks in exclamation points. Even in the shitty cafeteria light, her skin glows. "I was worried you were going to miss the homecoming court announcement!"

Of course. Jenni's acting like we're at a red carpet premiere and Jennifer Lawrence just showed up. But today I can't even humor her. "That's great, but I have something I need to—"

Before I can finish, Lincoln grabs the phone and his flushed cheeks take up the screen. "Mal, you will not believe who's sitting behind me in homeroom. Scott Lawson. You know—*Hot Scott*," he says, tugging impatiently at the lock of hair that always stubbornly curls out behind his ear.

"Linc."

"And let me assure you, the nickname is well deserved."

"LINC!"

He stops. "What?"

I take a deep breath, trying to act natural. "Hey, I have a question for you. . . ."

Lincoln narrows his eyes. An unfortunate side effect of growing up together is that he can almost always tell when I'm trying to bullshit him.

"This had better be about Scott," he mutters.

"I found the pair of toilet paper tube binoculars Dad made

us when we were little, and then I started thinking about that crazy secret birding trip that used to happen every year; remember how Dad always talked about that?" I say in one breath. Hopefully, he won't be able to see how forced my smile is on the phone screen.

Lincoln purses his lips. "You know, we should change the direction of this conve—"

"Do you know how to find out where this year's excursion is?" I blurt out, abandoning all hope of being subtle.

"Good God, Mallory. No, I don't know, and frankly I don't *care* where some weird-ass gathering of bird freaks is happening." He takes my defeated silence as an opportunity to barrel forward in his discussion of Scott. "Listen, have you even *seen* Scott lately? I swear to God, his eyes are like . . . you know that shade of blue Mom painted the guest bathroom?"

There's no point in pushing my line of inquiry. He's got his *Don't* face on.

"You're saying his eyes look like a bathroom?"

"No, I am not saying the cutest guy in school has eyes like a bathroom."

"Brad Kirkpatrick is the cutest guy in school," Jenni corrects him, off camera.

"I'm just *saying* Scott's eyes are a deep—"

"—Cerulean," Jenni's voice cuts in again.

Lincoln snaps his fingers. "Exactly. Thank you. Cerulean."

"Cerulean Iris," I muse. "I'm pretty sure that's the exact shade Mom used."

As Lincoln shouts, "Scott's eyes do not look like a bathroom!" Caroline Fairchild's unmistakable golden princess curls come into view behind him. She struts into the cafeteria with all the confidence of one of the ponies I'm sure she shows on weekends.

Once, in third grade, Caroline pulled down my pants while we were waiting in line for the water fountain. Just because she thought it was funny. Frankly, I think that's all the evidence I need to conclude she's a psychopath. She's also one of the most popular girls in school, which just figures. And Jenni, in her never-ending optimism, always insists on sitting at the lunch table directly next to Caroline's usual. You know, just in case Caroline deigns to pay attention to her.

I try to tamp down my simmering bitterness only because Jenni's dying to be her friend. And because I have bigger things to worry about. Case in point: figuring out the Dad mystery.

Lincoln moves on from Scott's eyes to the shape of his nose ("Roman but not too Roman"). Ten feet away, Caroline shoots a look at him while leaning over to say something to her friends. All of them crack up.

For once, my hands aren't trembling from panic; they're dying to throw a sloppy joe right at Caroline's perfectly powdered face. There aren't many times I wish I were in school, but this is definitely one of them. Lincoln only came out last year, and it kills me that I can't be there to make sure no one's bothering him.

"There are so many cute guys you're missing." *Just Jenni* is as oblivious to meanness as ever. She scooches her face into the screen with Linc and lowers her voice. "Like Eric Brown. He's stopped wearing jorts. Big improvement. And Max, the guy who looks like a sixteen-year-old baby? He grew a beard and it's really helping that whole situation. And Brad Kirkpatrick is just as hot as he's been since second grade—"

I butt in. "Please don't tell me you're lusting after Brad Kirkpatrick as a second grader."

"I'm worried you're going to forget how to think boys are

cute. The only guys you see are your brother—no offense, Lincoln—and David Delaney.”

“Duchovny,” I mutter, regretting ever telling her about my *X-Files* obsession. “And he *is* cute, he’s just . . .”

“An actor playing a fictional character and, like, a hundred years old.” She raises her perfectly plucked and penciled eyebrows.

I sigh, then Lincoln sighs harder, and Jenni laughs at his impression of me before filling me in about some band kids who got caught making out in the tuba closet.

“That’s disgusting.” Lincoln waves a hand through the air. “I wouldn’t want to make out near anything that has a spit valve.”

Maybe Lincoln isn’t interested in helping me figure out where Dad is, and for once, I don’t want to listen to band gossip, so I change the subject. “Listen, I know this isn’t as interesting as the spit-related activities of tuba players, but have you been thinking about our physics project? Maybe you can come over after school today and—”

Jenni cuts me off with a dramatic “Shhhhh!” as Principal Lu’s voice booms over the loudspeaker.

“Good afternoon, Reardon High!”

I didn’t think that it was possible for a crowd to cheer sarcastically, but that’s what happens in the cafeteria.

“This is it!” Jenni hisses. “She’s about to announce the court!”

“Woo-hoo!” I say, but Jenni’s too preoccupied staring at the loudspeaker to notice.

My computer pings, so I balance my phone in my left hand as I use my right hand to open *We Are Not Alone* on my laptop. I have no interest in the homecoming announcement when I’m so close to figuring out where my dad left to, so I might as well

enjoy some quality WANA time. There are plenty of replies on my latest post, mostly from BeamMeUp. I snort. Why won't he or she just accept that I'm right?

I hear some whoops and cheers as Principal Lu gives her routine "we're role models at Reardon so let's keep it that way" preamble. Jenni helpfully (but unnecessarily) pans the phone around the cafeteria. I groan. "Jenni, do I have to stay on the line for this?" I can't imagine anything more boring than watching three girls get the dubious honor of running for homecoming queen. But Jenni keeps panning; she's even more excited for homecoming than last year, because homecoming court is nominated entirely from the junior class. Seniors get prom—our school is small enough that having separate proms for the juniors and seniors would just be kind of pathetic.

"The nominees are . . . Caroline Fairchild!" Principal Lu booms.

Jenni gasps as Caroline stands up, doing her best "Taylor Swift at an award show" impression.

"Pia Lubeck!"

Jenni keeps holding the phone up as Pia, who is of course sitting right next to Caroline, stands up and pretends to be embarrassed. For all the clapping and cheering, you'd think she won the Nobel Peace Prize.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter.

"And the last junior girl on Reardon's homecoming court is . . . Mallory Sullivan!"

The cafeteria that was just abuzz with cheers, claps, and shouts becomes eerily silent.

"Let's all give our sincere congratulations to Caroline, Pia, and Mallory!"

"What?" I whisper.

Jenni's phone is still aimed right at Caroline and Pia, and I see them look at each other, smiles playing on their faces. And then I hear it: laughter.

This is a *joke*.

Jenni's face appears on-screen. "Do you want to stand up?"

My mouth opens, but the *no no no* doesn't come out. Of course I don't want to stand up. But suddenly I'm looking down on my classmates, and I can tell that Jenni is standing up, brandishing her phone as if this is a totally normal occurrence.

Caroline looks right at me and says something to Pia, who tips her head back in laughter.

My body feels like ice that's melting; even sitting in my chair, my legs start to tremble. They voted me onto homecoming court as a joke. As if it's not embarrassing enough to be The Girl Who Attends Class on a Computer, now I'm also cast in a remake of *Carrie*, except that I don't have telekinetic powers . . . and I'm not even at school to do anything about it.

With the sound of my classmates' laughter ringing in my ears, I hang up.



CHAPTER FOUR

Migration can be extremely dangerous for birds, and many don't make it back to their starting point.

—*Audubon magazine*, 2012

I WRITE MYSELF AN imaginary doctor's note for my afternoon French and history classes. *Mallory Sullivan is under debilitating stress due to all the total jerks she goes to school with. Also, she still hasn't figured out a way to raise five hundred dollars. Please excuse her from all classes.*

I shove my phone under my mountain of pillows, trying to forget about the laughter in the cafeteria. I try to distract myself as I scroll through a We Are Not Alone thread about one woman's passionate affair with a Martian. But even 50 Shades of Extraterrestrial can't take my mind off what happened, and I have the masochistic desire to know what people are saying about me.

I bounce around online but don't find much. Someone shared a photo of Caroline and Pia making ridiculous kissy faces with the caption, "CONGRATS, BITCHES!" Other than a few

generic “Can’t wait till September 26th!” statuses, there’s nothing of interest. For a few minutes, I think people have just totally forgotten me.

Then I see the post that makes my heart stop. I always thought people were exaggerating when they said that—obviously your heart didn’t really stop or you’d be dead, dummy. But I actually put my hand on my chest to make sure my heart is still beating.

It’s a tweet from Marco Beveridge, a douche bag whose claim to fame last year was showing everyone the X-rated photos he had of Emma Finnerman on his phone.

Nominations today were totally epic! Can’t wait to see if the freak shows up at the dance! #stayathomecoming

My breath gets shorter and shorter. I clutch the edge of my desk with both hands until my knuckles are white. This is Marco, I remind myself. He’s known for a sexting scandal, not for his incisive commentary. Probably no one’s even noticed this.

I should just shut my laptop. I should go eat lunch and forget all about this. But the part of me that’s full of sick curiosity searches Twitter for #stayathomecoming.

“Oh my God,” I wail as I scroll through all forty-seven results.

Can’t believe what happened at lunch! #stayathomecoming

This is definitely the most interesting court we’ve ever had haha #stayathomecoming

Whose idea of a joke was that? LOL #stayathomecoming

Blinking tears out of my eyes, I close my laptop before flopping onto my bed. The silly glow-in-the-dark stars that have been up on my ceiling since I was seven stare back at me, creating a fake sky for me now that I almost never leave the house to see the real one.

How did this happen?

I always sort of assumed I was just a Reardon nobody, not a freak or a loser to them. Someone they barely even thought about except to theorize why I wasn't there anymore.

Clearly, that isn't the case.

I'm the butt of the whole school's joke. I was an idiot to think that my classmates would accept that I was home for "personal reasons."

My dad's gone, I'm broke, and someone conspired to make me a school-wide circus act. I don't want to think about any of this right now, so I pull my laptop into bed and try to numb my thoughts with my favorite *X-Files* episode, "Monday." It's about a girl who's stuck living the same day over and over. I want to do this—live a day over and over again, changing my decisions until I get it all right with just one small action.

I wonder, as I watch the main character walk into that bank for the millionth time, what could have stopped Dad from leaving. A cup of coffee from Mom? Tripping over the rug? One less sarcastic remark from me?

If I could live it over again, could I fix it and avoid all this?

I wish I could be like Lincoln—his reaction was the exact opposite of mine. While I shrunk further into myself, Lincoln seemed to grow two inches overnight. He got more extroverted, he smiled more, he laughed all the time. It's almost like he was *relieved*. He just says I need to move on, like Dad has.

But how am I supposed to move on without an answer? Isn't

it normal to be concerned when one of your parents disappears without a trace?

I'm not the weird one here, am I?

My phone buzzes from inside its pillow prison. “Crap,” I say when I realize that it’s time for my weekly appointment with Dr. Dinah. The last thing I want to do, besides explain hashtags to my therapist, is relive anything that happened today. But last time I didn’t answer her call, my mom threatened to take away all of my Internet time.

“Hello, Mallory!” she chirps, and I wonder again how her voice can simultaneously communicate warmth and the ability to cut me if I cross her. “What’s going on with you?” she asks.

“Well . . .” I’m still not leaving my house, I spend about 95 percent of my time wondering where the hell my dad went, I need five hundred dollars to register for a top secret bird-watching trip . . . oh yeah . . . and I just got nominated to homecoming court as a joke. Things are swell.

“Same old, same old,” I say.

Dr. Dinah doesn’t miss a beat. “Let’s get into more detail. What’s your progress like on the action item we discussed last session?”

“Expanding your comfort zone and meeting new people?” I *do* have something to tell Dr. Dinah. “BeamMeUp!” I say.

After a long pause, Dr. Dinah says, “I’m sorry?”

“No, I mean . . . that wasn’t a command. That’s who I’ve been talking to—er, *engaging with*—on We Are Not Alone.”

Dr. Dinah is already well versed in the intricacies of We Are Not Alone. I spent an entire session assuring her that WANA’s moderators check that all users have a verified high school or college e-mail address—those who don’t or “age out” move up to WANA’s sister site, GalaxyFest. Since I don’t like to talk about my

dad or not leaving the house, there's not much else I *can* share with her. Five minutes later and I'm still just getting into my Air America argument and why it was so ridiculous for BeamMeUp to even attempt to argue with me when she cuts me off.

"Mallory, this is all great to hear. I'm glad you care about something so much—enthusiasm is important. But I have to ask . . . We Are Not Alone doesn't require you to leave the house, does it?"

Technically, We Are Not Alone doesn't even require me to leave my bed. "Well . . ."

That's when Dr. Dinah puts on her "business voice," the one that I know means she's going to make me do something I don't want to do.

"If you remember, our 'action item,'" she says, even her voice implying air quotes, "was to literally expand your comfort zone by taking at least one trip outside."

Biting my lip, I realize I have a death grip on my *X-Files* box set. The phone is hot against my cheek.

"There are no literal locks and chains keeping you inside," she continues. "The only locks and chains are in your mind."

Dr. Dinah must have a PhD in awkward silences, because she waits a solid thirty seconds before continuing.

"So what I'm going to need you to do is to try your best to open those locks and break those chains. I know you can't do it all in one day. Maybe you'll just jiggle the metaphorical door-knob. I want you to step outside. . . ."

"Step outside of the prison of my metaphorical heart?" I say, clearly without thinking.

"No, Mal." Her voice goes stern. She's definitely a mom, or the owner of a very well-behaved dog. "You need to literally step outside today."

“But the thing is, it’s sort of hot today, and I—I don’t want to risk heatstroke . . . ,” I stammer.

“For five minutes. You don’t even have to leave your porch if you don’t want to, okay? And I’ll wait right here on the line for you to come back.”

I swallow hard. “I’m just not really *feeling* outside today, you know?”

“Tomorrow is always one day away, Mallory. Today, you’re going outside.”

Damn, Dr. Dinah. The woman is tough. But the thing that really sucks is that she’s right—how will I ever go on this birding trip if I can’t even go in the backyard? Leaving the house today is the first step toward getting things back to normal.

“Fine,” I say, standing up. “Are you sure you—”

“Just put the phone down and go outside.”

“Can I take you with me?” My voice is small, and I know her answer before she says it.

“What do we say, Mal?”

I swallow. “I am safe, I am secure, I am capable.”

“I couldn’t quite hear that,” Dr. Dinah says, and I curse her sick sense of humor. She is always trying to get me to say—believe—this dumb mantra, and nothing could make me feel more like a self-help book reader than actually saying it out loud.

“I am safe. I am secure. I am capable.” I over-enunciate each word for her benefit.

“The more you say it, the truer it gets,” Dr. Dinah reassures me. “Now, go on.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going.” Maybe getting a break from the aphorisms will be worth the pinpricks of hot and cold that will shoot through my body when I step onto the porch. Taking the stairs lightly, my breathing gets heavier. “I’m just putting the

phone on the stand in our entryway, okay? But I'm going to be right back. So . . ."

"Mallory. It's okay."

I set the phone down next to a bowl of keys and walk toward the front door.

Then I take a deep breath and open it.

My heart starts beating so hard that I'm a little concerned it might pop out of my chest altogether. My palms prickle as I curl my fingers around the door frame. Slowly, I move one foot out like I'm trying to test the water temperature in a pool before stepping onto the coral tile with both bare feet. I have to really think about breathing; it's like I forget how to do it in real time.

I try to focus on how pretty it is out here. My mom spent a lot of time on our porch and the plants in our front yard. The outcroppings of cacti stand out against outdoor furniture spray-painted bright teal and yellow and, of course, multiple bird-houses hang from the trees. She's great at making things look good from the outside.

I take another deep breath. All I have to do is focus on one thing; I choose the tree house my dad built. The sound of my feet on the porch as I walk across to the railing smacks in my ears. Narrowing my focus makes it a tiny bit easier to forget that I'm outside.

My gaze fixed on the tree house, I close my eyes and try to imagine what's inside as my heart slows down from "jack-hammer speed" to "frantic hammering speed." Another one of Dr. Dinah's tricks. I inhale slowly as I think about the faded and creaky wood, the old toys we never bothered to clean out, the crayon-drawing "art" Lincoln and I tacked onto the walls, the view of the night sky out the window, the birding

maps where Dad pointed out all the places he hoped to go someday. . . .

I breathe in sharply, and for once it's not because I'm panicking—my hands want those maps, to see the highlighted spots where he'd pointed out his favorite birding spots while I leaned over his shoulder.

To see, maybe, where he would have planned a top secret birding excursion.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I step off the porch and walk across the yard. Pebbles and rocks poke at my bare feet and the sun beating down on my face feels foreign, but I keep going, keep focusing on the tree house.

"You can do this," I whisper as I put my foot on the first old wooden "step" of the ladder. The explosion of sound in my ears, like someone turned the dial on "outdoor" noises to at least one thousand decibels, is scary—but familiar. The wood cracks loudly under my feet and I imagine plummeting to my death and confirming all my fears about leaving the house.

But I press my body up one more foot.

A door creaks. I look up and across into the neighbor's yard to see Brad Kirkpatrick sitting on a lawn chair—except Brad *definitely* doesn't have the tattoos that peek out of this guy's sleeves. He must be Brad's half-brother, Jake, the one who went to the same fancy celebrity rehab as Lindsay Lohan and then turned his back on a life of crime with a vicious New York City street gang to live with his dad.

Okay, so *all* of those rumors can't be true. But one of them has to be, right? Tattooed, rugged guys don't just move home to live with their parents for no reason.

I haven't seen a human being other than my mom, Lincoln, Jenni, and the mail woman in months. My feet are literally

itching to jump off the ladder and run inside, so much so that I check to see if I've set off a nest of fire ants.

I wonder what Dr. Dinah will think when I tell her that my first time outside in months has given me foot splinters and a great view of a probable ex-con. Jake cracks open a can of beer and takes a swig. Day-drinking on a Thursday afternoon?

"Gross," I say before I can help myself.

He looks up—right at me. I freeze, but he simply offers a brief, guy-style raised-hand wave.

Panic swells in my chest. I kick my foot up, and the step I'm on splits right down the middle.

"Shit!" I shout, and grab for the tree house. My fingers just reach it, but instead of hanging on, I only manage to pull a bunch of old toys out of it as I tumble to the ground. The plastic dump truck, Barbies, and Lincoln's old xylophone do nothing to cushion my fall.

My mind screams at me to get up and run inside, but my yelping tailbone stops me from moving. Just as my breath is starting to come back, something blocks the sun.

The guy who might be Jake Kirkpatrick stares down at me.

"Are you okay?" he asks, a note of genuine worry in his voice. His knees crack when he crouches down.

"Um, yes," I say, trying not to hyperventilate as I slowly stand. "I only fell, like, a few feet."

"Are you sure?" he asks. I focus on his face. Instead of Brad's blond hair and green eyes, he has dark hair, deep blue eyes, and a sharp nose. In the right light, he might even bear a passing resemblance to a young Fox Mulder. You know, if you were imaginative.

He looks at me expectantly, and I realize he's still waiting for an answer. "I'm fine. I promise," I say, taking an eager step toward the house.

“Because if you’re hurt, I can call 911.”

“Oh no!” I shout, then try to rein it in, red coursing to my cheeks as I realize he’s probably joking. “I mean, oh . . . no need! I’m seriously fine, so I’m just going to go back inside.”

Jake picks up a Barbie who happens to be wearing only a skirt. He’s silent, but there’s a question on his face.

I am 100 percent not going to explain my entire life situation to this guy. “Oh yeah, I was just getting these for my little brother,” I squeak, grabbing the topless Barbie and pointing to her lack of shirt. My hands are so sweaty the Barbie almost slips out of my grip. “I need to talk to him about this, it’s super inappropriate. So you can just go back home and enjoy your beer.”

Shut up, I think to myself. Just get back to the house. Now.

Jake ignores Topless Barbie. “You’re clearly having trouble breathing.”

I place my Topless-Barbie-holding hand over my heart. It’s beating even faster than my short, labored breaths. “I’m fine,” I wheeze, taking two more tiny backward steps away from him. I’m calculating the seconds it’ll take me to cross the yard. He bends down to pick up the box that I pulled down, and I take the opportunity to bolt for my front door.

“Wait,” he calls after me. “Do you need this?” Jake’s brandishing the box. A dirty, rolled-up piece of paper sticks out of it—I instantly realize that it’s my dad’s map. I basically run back and lunge at him, plucking it right from the box.

“Thanks,” I say, sprinting back to the house before he can ask me any more questions.

“Hey!” Jake shouts as I grab the doorknob. I turn around to see him holding up the can. “This is root beer. I’m nineteen. Don’t believe everything you hear.”

But I’m already halfway inside. A cool wall of air hits me;

my house has never felt so good. I clutch the map to my chest like a prize, proof that I can do this.

As soon as my breathing has slowed to something resembling a normal speed, I grab the phone off the entryway stand.

“Dr. Dinah?”

“How did it go?” she asks immediately.

“I fell out of my tree house and ran away from my neighbor. Talk to you next week!”

I hang up.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WITH never leaving your house is that people always know where to find you.

Before I can “process” what just happened, Lincoln and Jenni burst through the door with awkward, totally transparent smiles pasted on their faces. I clutch Topless Barbie a little bit harder and slip the map under my bed.

“Are you enjoying your time in your cave?” Lincoln asks, grabbing Topless Barbie from me. I just shrug.

“Come look what we brought!” Jenni practically sings. She grabs my hand and pulls me downstairs into the kitchen, where there’s a bakery box sitting on the island. Twelve delicious-looking cupcakes, all covered in piped pink frosting and topped with delicate gold crowns, peek out of the box.

“You went to Sweet Nothings?” I frown. A full dozen? She normally only lets me have half. Jenni must know how bad the whole homecoming thing is.

Lincoln nudges me with a bony elbow. “When have you ever hesitated in front of a cupcake?”

He has a point, so I mutter a “Thank you” and grab one.

“So.” Jenni throws a quick glance at Lincoln. “We wanted to talk to you about today.”

Even though my mouth is still full of sweet, sweet frosting, I say, “We definitely need to work out a schedule for the physics project.”

“Mal—”

“Because Mr. Parker is right. We need to get started ASAP if we want to get the best grade in the cl—”

“We want to talk about home—”

“Let me go get my physics notebook,” I say, brushing crumbs off my shirt.

“Mal!” Lincoln grabs me by my shoulders and plants me firmly on a horrifically flowered kitchen chair. “You are so incredibly annoying.”

I shoot him a glare. He’s the king of avoidance, so what would he know?

“We have a plan,” says Jenni, directing my attention back to her. “Because you know what? You deserve to be homecoming queen.”

“You are so much more fun than anyone else who was nominated,” Lincoln continues. “Caroline Fairchild? Barf. She *looks* good, but she is literally so boring.”

“She pulled my pants down that one time.” I nod.

“In third grade!” Jenni cries.

“Jen,” Lincoln says. “Not helping.”

She holds up her hands. “Okay! But listen. Regardless of my personal feelings about Caroline, I think we all know that you’re the best candidate. You’re so fun, you’re unique, you’re nice to everyone. . . .”

“If by ‘nice to everyone’ you mean I just make fun of them behind their backs, then sure.”

Lincoln crosses his arms over his maroon polo shirt. “You don’t do it to their faces, and that’s what counts. But mostly, I *know* you want to rub it in everyone’s faces by beating those jerks.”

I think about it for a second. “You’re right, I do have a barely contained desire for revenge. But,” I continue, looking at Jenni, “I honestly find it hard to believe that you want anything to do with showing up the popular kids. How will you ever get in with them if you’re organizing a radical overthrow of their rule?”

I’m being sarcastic, but I regret the words as soon as I see Jenni’s shoulders drop. “It’s not like I’m going to ever date one of them or be friends with them anyway,” she says in a little voice.

“But,” my brother says, swinging an arm around Jenni’s shoulders. “Just imagine what life would be like for you as best friend of the homecoming queen! You’d get a front row seat to every bit of drama and gossip and . . . style tips and stuff.”

Jenni sits up a little straighter. “I *do* need to keep *Just Jenni* relevant. A beauty-and-style vlogger has to be on top of trends.”

“And speaking of gossip,” Lincoln says, crossing the room to the small window above the sink. The faint sounds of laughter and a ball bouncing float in through the window. “Did you hear that football practice got canceled this afternoon? Someone vandalized the practice field.”

Usually nothing would bore me more than sports talk, but I’m thankful that some drama might have drawn some attention away from #stayathomecoming.

“Who would do such a thing?” I say in mock horror.

“They’re pretty sure it was someone from Mayfield High, since they burned the words ‘Mayfield High Rules’ into the grass.”

“Clever,” I say, peering over Lincoln’s shoulder. Brad—real

Brad—and all of his teammates are in his driveway, playing basketball. Even through the closed window I hear them yelling profane insults at one another. Jake seems to have retreated inside.

“They do know they’re playing the wrong sport, right?” I ask.

“Cross-training, Mal,” Lincoln says, but the way he’s staring at them doesn’t suggest he’s thinking about their athletic prowess.

“Gross.” I wrinkle my nose. “Those guys are terrible.”

“Not all of them,” Jenni says. I sit back down next to her and pop one of the cupcakes’ candy crowns into my mouth. “I know you like to pretend that every single popular kid is horrible, but some of them are actually nice. If you get to know them.”

“Have you seen the hashtag?” I ask.

Jenni widens her eyes innocently. “Hashtag?”

“Nice try.”

She twists her ponytail. “Promise me you won’t look at that again.”

“Seriously,” Lincoln adds. “Only the dregs of humanity would take part in a hashtag bullying campaign.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Fine! I promise.”

“Hashtag aside,” Jenni continues, “it would be so great if you really tried to do this—to win. We’ve been working on an awesome, foolproof plan aaaaall day.”

“It was more like five minutes,” Lincoln says without looking away from the window.

Anxiety shoots up as quickly as a dandelion in my chest. I unwrap another cupcake. “Foolproof, huh?” I ask, trying to sound as skeptical as possible.

Jenni sits up impeccably straight and, clearly already

planning her next vlog on how sugar causes breakouts, folds her hands on her lap. “Totally. Guaranteed victory.”

I cross my arms. “Against my better judgment, I want you to tell me about it.”

Jenni claps her hands together. “Okay, so you really only need one thing to get that crown . . .” She pauses for dramatic effect. “A popular date.”

I laugh so hard that some frosting flies out of my mouth and hits the table.

“So let me get this straight . . . your ‘plan’ just involves getting someone ‘popular’ to be my date?”

Jenni nods, looking proud. “If you can get a super-hot, super-popular guy to be your date, you can totally win,” she continues.

“You’re my friend and I love you, but that isn’t a plan.”

Jenni opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. “I mean, I was considering calling my grandpa and asking if any of his friends would like to attend a high school homecoming, but now you’re telling me I should invite a young, good-looking boy? This is revolutionary.”

“I told you she’d be like this.” Linc breaks his eye contact with the moving sculptures outside for the first time and makes a face at Jenni.

“There’s something else,” Jenni continues. “Remember how last year Liza Baker’s mom complained that homecoming was just another patriarchal beauty pageant that existed solely to lower girls’ self-esteem?”

“How could anyone forget?” I snorted. “She’s the only person in the history of ever to have launched a one-person anti-homecoming protest outside the homecoming game, complete with a bullhorn.”

“Well, I guess she wouldn’t stop calling Principal Lu about it and it got super annoying, so now we have a homecoming committee and spirit points.”

“Spirit points?” I ask. “Like . . . rah-rah, pom-pom school spirit?”

Jenni’s ponytail bobs as she nods. “The committee is made up of teachers and students, but no one knows who they are. They’re awarding spirit points to candidates who show school spirit in the next three weeks.”

“Each spirit point is worth *fifteen* votes,” Lincoln says. “Which means you could get a low popular vote and still win—as long as you get enough spirit points.”

“There are, like, a million ways to get spirit points,” Jenni says, counting them off on her fingers. “Going to football games, participating in the pep rally, helping out the team. So let’s say you get a super-hot date on the football team. Instant spirit points! And popular votes!”

I shake my head. On top of everything else that happened today, this plan makes me want to crawl back into bed. “Guys . . . you do know that most of those would require me to leave the house, right? And I don’t do that anymore?”

Jenni nods vigorously. “Which only makes you *more* attractive to guys! Guys love a chase and they love a mysterious woman. No one even sees you anymore, so you’re *super* mysterious.”

Lincoln grabs my wrist and yanks me to the window. “Jenni’s right. You don’t even have to leave the house. We’ll just find you a date close to home.”

I laugh. “And how are you going to swing that one? The only guy who lives nearby is . . .”

I trail off as I follow Lincoln’s gaze out the window to the

Kirkpatrick's driveway, where Brad is effortlessly making shot after shot.

"Are you insane? Brad's lived next door for two whole years, and he hasn't even said anything but hi to me."

Lincoln turns to me, pushing his swooping, dark blond hair out of his eyes. "You should do this because we love you and you want to get the ultimate revenge. But you also deserve this."

"Yeah . . .," I say. Jenni's cheeks tighten into a huge smile just before I finish. "No."

The dribbling next door sounds like a machine gun. Then silence, then a cheer and the slap of high fives.

Lincoln crosses his arms. "Okay, Jenni. Tell her the thing we haven't told her yet."

Jenni pipes up. "They're not giving out gift cards to Fat Boy's Pizza this year. The winner gets five hundred dollars. Which could buy an entire semester's worth of textbooks, which I've heard are *really* expensive . . ."

Lincoln's turned to the window again like what Jenni's saying is no big deal, but I can't even speak. Five hundred dollars? As in, enough money to register for the birding excursion?

"Think of what you could do with that money," Lincoln says. "Buy all the junk food you want, shower your wonderful brother with gifts . . ."

"Lincoln," Jenni scolds. "The average freshman spends that on just one class."

"Jenni, Mal has a *year* before she even starts her applications. . . ."

In my head, a million scenarios play out as my heart beats overtime. This could lead to massive-scale humiliation, like teen-movie-style, pig's-blood-dumping, life-ruining embarrassment.

And even if I do get the money, it could lead to the Cheesecake Factory Incident Version 2.0.

But if it worked—if I *actually* win that five hundred dollars and go on the excursion—it would be worth it. So, so worth it.

I could fix everything, and we could go back to normal.

“Okay,” I say quietly.

Linc’s mouth literally falls open. “What did you say?”

“I said . . . okay.” I throw my hands up in surrender. “Let’s do this. It’s on.”