

# Into the Spotlight Chapter 1

“You ruined my life!” My scream reverberates through the kitchen as I burst through the door. Who cares that I probably just permanently scarred my vocal cords?

Okay, possibly a bit overdramatic, but the severity of the situation needs to be conveyed.

My mother looks at me for a moment, her cell phone plastered to her ear. She covers the mouthpiece. “Hi, sweetheart. What are you talking about?”

“Your stupid book!” I screech and toss a copy of *Sadie’s Unexpected Role* on the kitchen island. Her newest masterpiece pirouettes across the smooth, gray-speckled granite and collides with the fruit bowl. Two precariously perched oranges roll off the counter and plummet to the floor.

Spinning on my heel, I march up the stairs and into my bedroom. The slam of my door punctuates my exit. I flop on the bed and bury my face in the down-filled pillow. How could my life be destroyed in a matter of mere hours?

This morning when I woke up, I was an ordinary teenager, thrilled that it was the last day of school. The curtain was at last closing on my lowly sophomore life. One final day to suffer through, then I would no longer be the unworthy bottom of a high school social class system where freshmen and sophomores haven’t earned the right to be cool. Jocks, cheerleaders, and poms are the popular crowd, the top of the hierarchy. If you’re unlucky enough to not only be an underclassman but also not be involved in an acceptably deemed activity, then you are basically nonexistent. And that was exactly where I had found myself for the last two years. But that was about to change. I still wasn’t in with the cool kids, and probably never would be, but I was about to be an upperclassman, safe from the tyranny.

Once I survived that one final day, the most amazing summer ever would begin. Teenage Utopia. Relaxing afternoons at the pool, glorious weekends at the lake. Here in Lake Forest, Minnesota, an unwritten rite of passage exists. Juniors and seniors overtake the lake on Sunday afternoons. (Such irony. In the land of 10,000 lakes, we have only one near enough to enjoy.) Families frantically pack up their picnics, stuff the childrens’ floaties in the back of their minivans, and flee the lake before teenagers flood the area, music blaring. To pacify the community, the local police make their presence known so all stays innocent. Of course, I’ve only heard the legendary stories of adolescent joviality since I’ve been too inconsequential to enjoy it myself. But that was all about to change. This morning I had envisioned the promising future ahead of me. What a waste.

My mother knocks on my door, and then—not waiting for an invitation—enters, like she owns the place.

“Josie, what’s this all about? Are you rehearsing a scene?” Her tone wobbles somewhere between worry and annoyance.

“No, Mommy Dearest.” My voice is muffled by the fluffy pillow. I roll on my side, allowing fresh air to fill my lungs. “This is not a problem that can be solved with a big musical production. This is my life, and you have completely destroyed it!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t go anywhere without being ridiculed and laughed at. That’s what’s wrong. How could you humiliate your own daughter like that?”

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

How can she be so clueless?

“Your book!”

“My book?” Her face twists in confusion. “I think I need a little bit more to go on here.”

“Next time you decide to destroy my life, can you at least warn me first?”

She sighs, then sits on the edge of my bed. She’s wearing her usual mom clothes, a T-shirt and stretch pants. The woman’s array of workout clothes rivals any sporting goods store’s collection. I’m not sure if she ever actually exercises, but she’s always well prepared if the mood hits. “Honey, I still don’t know what’s wrong.”

“You mean besides the fact that I can no longer show my face around this town *and* that you have ruined what was supposed to be the most epic summer ever?”

“What does this have to do with my book?”

“How could you write those *things*?”

“Josie, calm down. Nothing in the book is about you.”

“But no one knows that! You always include my most embarrassing moments in your books.”

As cool as it seems to have a mom who’s an author, it’s actually a total pain. My mother loves to scatter my unfortunate mishaps throughout her books. It’s not that I’m a total klutz; I mean, everyone has moments of ineptitude, right? I’m just lucky enough to have mine set in print for all eternity. Actually, I pride myself on being a pretty graceful dancer. But I have this horribly bad habit of diving headfirst into life without contemplating the outcomes. My classmates in elementary and middle school called these incidents “Josie-moments.” Those kids were like mini detectives, scouring the pages of Mom’s novels in search of every little “moment.” Her last book included my very dramatic fainting episode during the school choir concert in second grade and my unfortunate panic attack in the corn maze during the class field trip. Hey, getting lost in miles of towering maize can be extremely traumatizing.

Mom waves her hand dismissively. “That’s ridiculous. It’s a fictional novel. No one will think it’s about you.”

“Mom! The lead character is a sophomore in high school who’s in the theater club. Of course everyone thinks it’s me!”

“You’re overreacting.”

“Then why did I get a hundred texts calling me Josie the Juvie?”

“Oh, honey, it’ll blow over.” She’d used the same patronizing tone when I was five and thought my world was over because I

didn't get the part of the gumdrop in the *Nutcracker* pageant.

"No, Mom, it won't blow over. Want to know how I know it won't? Because today my locker was covered in feminine hygiene products, thanks to you. Not one little metal inch was left showing."

She cringes a little, then defensively says, "But those things I wrote never happened to you."

*Does she really not understand how my high school works?*

"It doesn't matter. The damage is done. No one will listen.

They all believe that it was *I* who marched on stage to give a speech with the hem of my skirt tucked into the waistband of my tights, and that *my* string bikini top was spotted floating in the pool after I jumped off the diving board trying to impress a guy, and that *my* video diary was hacked into and broadcast during a school assembly. Of course, the fact that no such assembly ever happened, or that I've never been in speech club, or that I would never wear such a skimpy swimsuit, means nothing to these people. Because facts don't matter. Only the opportunity to humiliate." I suck in a quick breath so I can effectively project my final sentence. "So thanks, Mom. I'm never going to be able to face any of these people ever again!"

She reaches out and rubs my arm. "Come on, honey, let's go make some popcorn and watch an old movie. That always cheers you up."

"*Mom!*" I flinch a little at the degree of sharp ridicule in my tone. "Seriously! This isn't some little problem that you can tidy up like in one of your books with some lovely mother-daughter time. *You* wrote those horrible things, and now *I* have to live with the consequences. My amazing summer has been stolen from me."

I bury my head back in my pillow. She eventually takes the hint that I'm done with the discussion and leaves.

Even now, in the safety of my room, a wave of nausea sweeps over me as I think back over the horrific events of the day. I can still feel how the curiosity of seeing the enormous crowd gathered in the hallway turned to pity when I realized they were laughing and pointing at some poor, unsuspecting soul's disgustingly decorated locker. That pity quickly turned to panic with the realization that the locker in question was mine.

As I stood there staring in disbelief, the blood throbbing in my head, someone yelled, "Hey, that's her. That's Josie DelRio." I watched as the mob turned toward me like lions about to pounce. The pointing, laughter, and whispers made my knees weak. How could this be happening? Why was it happening?

Before I could collapse from the sheer force of the mortification, a strong arm yanked me into the bathroom. Thank goodness for best friends.

Liz instructed me to sit on the tile floor, then left to track down some answers. I sat there stunned, wondering what could possibly have sparked the incident. But as the bell rang and the crowd dispersed, a voice filtered in from the hallway. "If you think that's bad, wait until you get to chapter four."

Horrified, I sucked in a breath that burned all the way to my

toes. I knew without a single doubt who was responsible for the collapse of my world.

My own mother.

I hole up in my room the rest of the afternoon, trying to calm myself. But a comprehensive check of all forms of communication leaves no doubt—my life is officially over. The repulsive things people are posting sicken me. If this is what social media has come to, I opt for being antisocial.

Seriously, how could people be so cruel? Even if all those things in the book really had happened to me, why would people so horribly exploit my misfortunes? What a stupid question. They don't care who they hurt. They just want to look cool. I'd learned that lesson long ago. Most of the kids in that school will do whatever it takes to be accepted and avoid the wrath themselves.

Depressed, I fall back on my bed and contemplate my mom's stupid book. I was almost clear from the dangers of being an underclassman. Why'd my mother have to thrust me into the spotlight? And what kind of person even comes up with that stuff? Who is this woman who gave birth to me? Suddenly it doesn't seem possible that I could have her genes coursing through my body.

Maybe my parents picked up the wrong baby at the hospital sixteen years ago. Maybe they have unknowingly been raising someone else's child. It would explain a lot, like how no one in my family seems to understand me, or why I'm the only one in this house who can somewhat carry a tune and remember the order of gifts in "The Twelve Days of Christmas."

I picture my real parents, totally rich and chill, right now probably hanging out on their yacht in the Mediterranean, martinis in hand. They're watching their daughter pondering how she, of nerdy brains and unusually strange sense of humor, could be from their uber cool loins.

Unfortunately my switched-at-birth daydream shatters when I remember how I break out in hives whenever I wear wool, just like my dad. And how my kindergarten photo looks eerily like my mother's—same crooked smile, big brown eyes, and curly brown hair sticking up in odd places, all Medusa-like. Alas, I guess I'm stuck with the parental units I have. A mom who writes adolescent fiction, loves old movies, her church and of course those comfy pants, and a straight-laced lawyer dad whose idea of fun is finishing the Sunday crossword puzzle.

Eventually my mom knocks on my door.

"Sweetie." She tentatively peeks her head in my room. "Cameron's here. He's waiting for you on the front porch."

Cameron. My boyfriend—for about the last month anyway. Over the last two years, we've done every Lake Forest High theater production together. Our Broadway-obsessed drama teacher specializes in musicals. I'm primarily a dancer but sometimes get a minor role. Cameron always gets the leads. Even as a freshman he won the coveted roles. He's tall, good-looking, and has been

blessed with a knee-weakening tenor voice. He's used his claim to fame to go out with most of the freshman, sophomore, and even a few of the junior theater girls at one time or another. For the longest time I never understood his appeal. Immune to his charms, I recognized him for the conceited and totally full of himself jerk that he is.

That is, until the spring musical, *The Music Man*. As I was Picka-Little-ing around the stage, he was singing about seventy-six trombones. He must be a better actor than I realized because somehow I fell under his Professor Harold Hill spell, just like Marian the Librarian. I mean, when he gazed into perky Katie Phillips' eyes and sang "Till There Was You," well, who wouldn't have melted?

So Cameron and I started going out. Sadly, and embarrassingly difficult to admit, I'm way more attracted to his Professor Harold Hill character than to Cameron Richardson. In real life, he's never once acted romantic or asked me to meet him at the footbridge or sang a love song—except maybe to his own reflection. Cameron's ego is as big as his stage presence. But it has been nice to have a "boyfriend," especially one that can drive.

I know what you're thinking—because I've thought it many times myself: This girl is desperate and pathetic. Shoot me, but frankly, since I don't have my own car, I much prefer being driven to school by a cute guy than by my mom. I live too far from school to walk (unless I want to wake up at the crack of dawn—not likely), but not far enough to take the bus. So yes, I will put up with a lot because there is no way I can show my face climbing out of my mom's SUV now that I'm sixteen. Total target for humiliation. But truth be told, I've been contemplating what to do with Cameron. He doesn't really fit into my summer visions, and now that I don't need a ride to school, his usefulness is over.

But here he is, at my door, in my hour of need. I may have misjudged my arrogant crooner. He's actually not the worst boyfriend in the world. Maybe it's good I haven't dumped him yet. At least I'll have someone to hang out with this summer, to shield me from all the haters. I mean, if I overlook his grating narcissistic tendencies, he's actually not that bad. He could help me brave this storm, and he might actually learn to think about more than himself. I guess you find out who really cares for you when your world crumbles to pieces.

I sweep down the stairs, all Scarlett O'Hara-like, and push open the screen door to the front porch. There he stands. Sporting his fedora. *Seriously?* Sure, a fedora can be cool at a cast party, maybe totally acceptable for a night on the town, and certainly appropriate attire if you're an original member of the Rat Pack, but not when you're coming to console your grief-stricken girlfriend, who doesn't need any more attention drawn to her. But the concerned look on his face warms my heart. It's nice to know he really can think of others. I throw myself in my leading man's arms, ready to be protected in his strong embrace.

"I'm so glad to see you." I bury my face in his shoulder, trying not to suffocate in the overwhelming scent of his cologne. Does

he bathe in the stuff? “You have no idea how bad my day has been.”

“You think your day was bad?” He takes a giant step away from me. “This whole book thing is really hurting my reputation.”

“*Your* reputation?” I gape at him. Did he really just say that?

“Hey, I have an image to maintain, and your embarrassing moments are not helping it.”

“They’re not *my* embarrassing moments. They’re fiction,” I spit out.

“Either way, it’s too much for me to handle. Maybe when things calm down, we can hang out again.”

“Wait a minute. Are you breaking up with me?”

“Hey, it was fun while it lasted, kid.” He winks then quickly turns and saunters down the walkway toward his car.

My fist clutches a begonia from the planter on the porch. Not thinking things through, I yank it out of its pot, clumps of dirt clinging to its tiny little roots, and throw it at Cameron’s head. My aim, inconsistent as usual, causes the pathetic flying plant to fall short of its intended target. Dirt and leaves scatter across the walkway. Why couldn’t my parents have forced me to stay in sports so I could learn to throw a decent fastball?

I stand on the porch with my hand covered in soil and watch the familiar black sedan pull away, Cameron’s *Best of Broadway* soundtrack diminishing as he drives past the immaculately manicured lawns of my boring suburban neighborhood. How do you call someone your own age “kid”? What a loser. Worse yet, I can’t believe *he* broke up with *me*.

And there you have it—now my mom has even managed to ruin my love life. At the moment, the fact that just this morning I was orchestrating how to break up with him is beside the point. I mean, is it too much to ask to have a boyfriend who will be there for me?

I plop onto the porch swing. Face it, Josie—life is not a musical. There are no happy endings. My vision blurs as hot tears burn my eyes. This was supposed to be the best summer ever. Instead, *Sadie’s Unexpected Role* has morphed into Josie’s total destruction.

Despite my pleas to begin a life of solitude, my parents force me to attend my brother’s evening baseball game. Do they really believe fresh air will dull my pain? The thought of being out in public terrorizes me, so even though I’m wearing a baseball hat and dark sunglasses, I beg my best friend Liz to meet us at the field.

“You’ve got to get out of the house, Josie,” Dad lectures as we pull out of our driveway. “I’m sure this whole situation is just your imagination.”

“You don’t know how cruel kids at my school can be,” I answer.

“So they pulled a tasteless prank. It’s over now.”

“Did you actually attend high school?” I plaster myself next to the door to avoid being overtaken by Riley and all his gear.

“Relax, kiddo, most people probably won’t even read your mom’s book.”

“Hey,” she complains.

“Sorry, it’s a great book, dear. I’m just trying to make the point that it’s not like the whole town will tease her.”

“No, just a few hundred of my classmates,” I grumble.

It crosses my mind that the folks may be more understanding if I open up and really express to them how horrific the day was for me instead of hiding behind anger and sarcasm, but sharing my feelings with my parents is not something I’m very comfortable with.

“Honey,” my mom says sweetly, “if it’s bothering you so much, why don’t we pray about it?”

Of course. That’s her answer for everything. But you know, I’ve tried it her way, and I’ve never really seen any results. For instance, I spent my whole freshman year praying for a good part in one of the shows and to become cool and witty so the “in” crowd would stop picking on me. But when the prayers kept going unanswered, I kinda stopped bothering to ask. Hey, I get it—the big guy in the sky has way more important things to deal with, like famines, plagues, and whatever. I just learned to handle it myself. And I guess that’s what I’ll have to do now.

I turn my attention back to Mom. “By the way, since when do you write young adult books anyway? You’ve always written middle grade chapter books. When you said your next book was being released, who knew I had to worry about my friends reading it?”

She turns to look at me, her face crinkled in confusion. “Josie, seriously? I’ve talked about this book for months. Where have you been for the last year and a half?”

“Umm, surviving high school?”

“Josie, you never listen to me.”

“Sorry, but it’s usually not very important. Mom, you’ve really got to check for the non-comprehending, blank look before you tell me these things.”

She shakes her head.

“Can’t we have some nice family time where no one argues?” asks my dad.

“Sure, just one last question: How exactly does one ‘accidentally’ go on a blind date with their cousin?”

“I love that scene,” snorts Riley. “I mean, how funny would it be to show up to Homecoming with your own cousin?”

Mom looks back in time to catch the murderous look I shoot my brother. “How about we not talk about the book anymore this evening?”

“Great idea,” Dad chimes in. “Tonight we celebrate the end of the school year. It’s going to be a fun evening. Fun, fun, fun.”

“So what should we do this summer?” Mom’s voice suddenly turns annoyingly perky.

“Won’t you be busy touring around with your new masterpiece?” I grumble.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to add more postcards to my collection,” Riley says. His bedroom walls are plastered with the postcards Mom sends from each of her Midwestern book tour stops. The postcards are never of the beautiful sites or famous landmarks of

the cities she visits but are instead of ridiculously obscure and odd attractions, like a three-story mustard bottle, a life-size grizzly bear carved out of chocolate, or the world's largest ball of string.

Mom joins his enthusiasm. "I won't be traveling all summer. We could do something special as a family."

"Road trip!" yells Riley.

"Oh, joy," I mumble.

"Josie, you can't sulk all summer. Riley, that's a great idea. Maybe we could drive to Mount Rushmore," Mom suggests.

"Or the Wisconsin Dells." Dad nods, and even though he's facing the front of the car, I hear the grin in his voice. "You guys always love those water parks."

"Can we go to that weird museum there?" Riley pleads. "Nathan told me they have a two-headed cow."

Excellent. My summer went from weekends at the lake to freaks of nature.

When we arrive at the field, I scan the area to check for anyone I know. Luckily, there's no one from my school in sight. My parents settle into their seats on the bleachers, near all the other parents.

I sit two rows behind them and daydream of being a turtle, able to hide away in my shell when the world becomes too overwhelming.

"I see you're coping well from the day's events." Liz, who has finally arrived, scrutinizes my attire.

Liz has been my best friend since forever. When she was little, her exuberance was contagious. She reminded me of a puppy, a bundle of energy and fun. Hanging out with her always turned into an adventure. Whether we were Amazonian explorers at the park or secret agents in the candy store, there was never a dull moment. But then her parents went through a rather messy divorce. That's when we were introduced to musical theater. Her mom was lonely and dragged us to every show she could find. She could relate to the problems of the protagonists. Cole Porter and Andrew Lloyd Webber became her therapists, dispensing wisdom just for her in the lyrics of their songs. I guess it was more fun and probably cheaper than going to a shrink. Anyway, Liz's zest for life kind of soured after that, which brought a new edge to her.

She plops down next to me. "Seriously, your disguise is totally sweet, like an incognito rock star."

"Here, put these on." I hand her a pair of dark sunglasses and a baseball hat.

She stares at the items. "Why do I need to hide?"

"Because I'm obviously me if my sidekick is sitting beside me."

"I'm your sidekick?"

I know she's trying to distract me from the horror that unfolded earlier today. Liz may be a bit quirky, but she's a good friend.

"My partner in crime, my BFF, my alter ego, what do you prefer?" I shove the lame disguise into her hands.

"I just always assumed you were *my* sidekick, but we can do it your way." She pulls the hat over her dark hair and dons the sunglasses.

"Okay, so if we're wearing costumes, I need to know what our role is."

"Can't we just be fans sitting at a ballgame?"

"That's pretty boring."

"Then maybe we're talent scouts checking out the boys' athletic abilities."

"Talent scouts? Maybe for a blooper reel." Liz watches the boys drop most of the balls thrown to them during warm-up. "Do they know they're actually supposed to catch the balls?"

"Believe it or not, they've improved a lot. You should've seen them last year."

"I'll take your word for it." Her attention turns from the field to me. "Hey, not to get all gushy and all, but seriously...how're you doing?"

I release a deep sigh, happy to have someone to confide in. "Liz, I don't know what to do. You know how vicious the 'in' crowd can be. They have the power to completely destroy people, and they never let something this good go. That book provides enough embarrassing situations to fuel them for months. And since no one wants to face their fury, you're basically the only person who will risk being seen with me now. To make it worse, my parents think I'm overreacting. They have no idea how hard we've worked to fly under the radar and go unnoticed. I'm not strong enough to face this battle alone. At least I have you." Thank goodness for the dark sunglasses that hide my tears.

"Um, about that—I've got something to tell you." Her tone holds a warning to brace for more bad news.

"What?" I ask wearily.

"Well, my dad wants me to go to his place this summer."

"You visit him in Chicago every summer."

"Yeah, but for some reason he wants me there for the whole summer this year instead of the usual week."

"What?" I blink furiously, desperate to blink away the tears before they roll down my cheeks.

"I know." Barely a whisper. "I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to go."

That's it. Final nail in my coffin. I'm all alone. First, Cameron dumps me, then Liz abandons me. I have no one to hang out with. How will I make it through three whole summer months? I can't go to the rec center, the pool, the park, or the mall without seeing someone from school. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do.

Liz leans her head on my shoulder. "You could become a crazy cat lady and adopt every stray you find."

I love her for trying to lighten the mood. "I'd best just turn into a hermit and stay locked away in my house."

"You'd make a cute hermit," she teases. "But promise me you won't stick with Cameron just so he can drive you around."

"You don't have to worry about that. He dumped me this afternoon."

Her eyes widen. "He broke up with you? But we just put the finishing touches on your break-up monologue."

"Yeah, well, he beat me to it. Apparently my problems are too embarrassing for him."

"What a creep. You never should have gone out with him in the first place."

"You dated him too," I remind her.

"Is it my fault he made an incredibly charming Sky Masterson?"

Liz fell hard for him last year during *Guys and Dolls*.

"One thing's for sure—I won't miss him suddenly breaking out in show tunes," I say.

"And you no longer have to pay for your dates when he 'forgets' to bring his wallet." Liz rolls a pair of over-expressive eyes.

"Plus, I won't have to avoid walking past shiny surfaces for fear of him trying to catch a glimpse of his reflection." I let out a little giggle, happy to forget my problems, even for a brief moment.

"Oh, I always hated that dumb smirk and head bob he does when other girls walk by," Liz adds.

"I know," I agree. "And would it be so much to ask for a guy to open the car door for me?"

"Don't hold your breath. My mom says the dumb feminists ruined it for the rest of us. Guys are now afraid to open doors for women or offer them their seats for fear of being read the Riot Act. Face it, chivalry is dead." Liz's mom is still a little (extremely) bitter. Divorce has changed her outlook a lot.

"Well, maybe that's why we both fell for Cameron. He plays these characters from back when guys were gentlemen." I defend our poor judgment.

"Nice try, Josie, but he was playing con men when we fell for him."

How typical, falling for the bad boys and not the sweet nice guys.

"*Shut. Up.*" Liz squeals and clamps onto my arm.

I follow her gaze to the field and Ryan McNaulty, one of the high school baseball players. Totally cute jock. As he walks toward home plate in tan cargo shorts, a ref's blue polo shirt, and a backwards baseball cap, I picture him in one of those lame TV movies where the wind blows through the hero's hair as he enters the scene in slow motion, muscles tense, smile gleaming.

Liz lets out a deep sigh. "He's one beautiful specimen."

"I suppose he's okay if you like the tall, dark, and handsome look. I mean who wants chiseled cheekbones, perfectly styled hair, and chocolate brown eyes?" I tease.

"For your information, his eyes are green. But what's he doing here?" she ponders.

"A detective you are not. Notice the clothes, Liz...he's the ump. Usually someone from the high school team is the official for these games."

"And why have you never told me this? I'd have come more often if I'd known that was the case. Ryan's extremely hot—although I prefer when he's in his baseball pants."

"That's right. You were one of the official stalkers of the baseball team this year."

"It's called school spirit. Whenever I wasn't at rehearsal I went to their games. What else was I supposed to do? You were always with Cameron. Besides, baseball is our national pastime."

"But did you ever watch the games?" I ask. "Or just ogle the guys."

“Hey, believe me, if you saw them in their uniforms, you wouldn’t judge. I don’t know what special material those baseball pants are made of, but it sure makes them look amazing.”

“Polyester, maybe?”

Again she ignores me. “Why do you think they are dubbed the Dream Team? Not because of their baseball skills.”

“The Dream Team?”

“Sure, there’s Heart Attack Jack, Ben the Perfect Ten, and Scotty the Hottie.”

“What’s Ryan McNaulty’s nickname?”

“Mc*Naughty*.”

My eyebrows raise. “Mc*Naughty*?”

“Have you ever noticed when he thinks something’s funny he does this adorable head tilt and crooked grin thing? It makes him look like he’s been caught doing something naughty.” Who knew she could be so enthusiastic?

I stare at her.

“No criticizing. If you hadn’t spent all your free time with Cameron, you could have contributed.”

“Maybe you should focus on someone attainable.”

“Who says jocks aren’t attainable?” She nods toward the field.

“He was in my chem class, and he’s pretty nice.”

“Um, have you been to our school? Ryan McNaulty is definitely tier-one material, which means he dates other tier-one people, like cheerleaders or the female varsity athletes.”

“Just because that’s usually how things are done doesn’t mean it always has to be that way. Maybe we can change the status quo.”

“Like any of them even know we’re alive.”

She glances at me. “What, you don’t think they come to see the theater productions?”

“Highly unlikely.” We watch Ryan pull a Keanu Reeves and smoothly matrix-dodge a stray pitch.

“Maybe you can try to get to know some of them this summer when you’re at the lake and I’m trapped in Chicago with my old man,” she says.

“Like Ryan McNaulty would want to chill with me.”

“Well, not him. He’s leaving town for the summer too. I overheard some parents talking at the last game of the season. He was asked to play summer baseball on a farm team back east somewhere. College scouts go check them out or something. It’s apparently a big deal for someone going into their junior year to be invited.”

“Just as well, since I’m probably never going to leave the safety of my bedroom this summer.”

“Hey, don’t give up. Any of the Dream Team members will do.”

I roll my eyes. She’s clearly delusional.

“Look! He’s doing it!” She thrusts a sharp elbow into my side.

I wince from the stabbing pain but turn toward the field. The little rugrats from Riley’s team surround Ryan. Just as she described, his head cocks to the side and an amused grin graces his perfect face. He is quite alluring, but I prefer to watch Liz’s reaction

as she practically melts into a puddle of hormones.

“See, isn’t baseball the greatest sport?”

“I admit, I’ve never appreciated these finer points of the game before,” I tease.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m here to educate you. You must not focus on the ball but on all the other things going on around the actual game. That’s where the true excitement lies.”

“I really have been missing out.”

We turn our attention back to the game. Riley somehow makes contact with the ball and hits a grounder to second. After his initial shock, he sprints to first base. The shortstop scurries to the ball and throws it toward first in an attempt to get the out, but the first baseman totally misses the catch. Riley keeps running toward second as the ball rolls toward the dugout. Riley glances over his shoulder and continues on to third, where he pauses. The first baseman finally throws the ball toward third but accidentally hits the pitcher in the groin. The kid falls and squirms around in agony on the mound. Riley scurries toward home plate and dramatically jumps on the base. Ryan calls him safe, then shakes his head, his signature grin wiping away the umpire-serious expression.

During the third inning of a game filled with seemingly endless walks, my fears come true. Two of the juniors from the pom squad—Missy Harper and Brooke Garfield, along with their lax bro boyfriends—walk toward the stands, carrying their lacrosse sticks like security blankets. Missy’s brother plays on Riley’s team, but she’s never graced us with her presence before. Why today of all days must she begin being a devoted sister? When Missy and Brooke spot Liz and me, they stop, exchange a glance, then look back at us. So much for our disguises.

I pull my hat down lower. What are my chances of squeezing through the narrow space between the metal sections of the bleachers and dropping to the ground below? Better not try, though—with my luck I’d get stuck and the fire department would be called out to rescue me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the foursome climb up the bleachers and head our way. They sit right in front of us. A tidal wave of dread crashes over me.

“Oh, Mrs. DelRio, I love your new book.”

I’m drowning, sinking to the bottom of an ocean, unable to surface for air, the weight of the book pulling me under.

“Why, thank you.” Mom turns around to look at the group.

“Yes, it was very entertaining and quite *revealing*. Don’t you agree, Josie?” Missy giggles at her own joke, then whispers something in her boyfriend’s ear. The beefy jock stifles a laugh and looks away.

“And don’t you worry about swimming in the lake this summer.”

Brooke’s voice oozes fake concern. “I have a lifeguard whistle I can bring. We’ll have random ‘Josie- bikini-top checks.’ It’ll be like our very own public service announcement.”

“See, we got ya covered, girlfriend—pun intended,” adds Missy.

Brooke nods. “And since there are no cute lifeguards on duty to rescue you if you get another cramp while swimming, we can

all bring floaties for you.”

“Oh!” Missy’s eyes light up. “Maybe we could have members of the football team take turns carrying you to safety.”

The boyfriends snicker.

“Excellent idea,” Brooke agrees. “And to ensure against any embarrassing mishaps, we’ll all bring extra sanit—”

“Gee, Brooke,” snaps Liz, cutting off any further humiliation, “there you go again, proving your IQ and bra size are the same number.”

Brooke turns her wrath on Liz. “You’re just jealous since you’re still shopping in the junior department.”

“Well, enjoy the rest of the game.” Missy is unable to keep a straight face. “Don’t worry, Josie, we’ll record every special moment to guarantee it will be a summer to remember.”

My parents sit there in shock, their mouths frozen open.

The four miscreants get up and move farther down the bleachers, not even trying to conceal their laughter. My parents look at each other, horror in their eyes, then turn back toward the game, like it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

“You were right, Dad.” I refuse to give them a complete pass. “This is fun. Fun, fun, fun.”