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CHAPTER 1

SOMETHING WRONG

I'd never been in big trouble before. Not once. I like to follow the rules. I never imagined starting seventh grade would mean the beginning of the worst time of my life—which included nearly going to jail. I did sense something bad was coming a few days before school started. I knew it as soon as I talked to my best friend, Margo.

I sat in my bedroom that August morning with my one window open so I could hear the eastern bluebirds singing. They seemed jumpy. Maybe a storm was on the way. I heard the oak tree leaves nervously rustling from the wind, and I closed my eyes to listen before I texted Margo. Definitely a storm. I closed my window tight even though I couldn't see dark rainclouds yet. I trust the birds and the leaves.

My room feels like the forest: dark green bedspread, light brown walls, and window curtains dotted with pink cherry



blossoms. I keep my stuffed animals arranged like a classroom on my bed, and I rotate who gets to sit facing everyone as the teacher. Yesterday I chose Bunny. Today I chose Huckle the gorilla. I'm twelve years old, and I'm starting to wonder if I'm too old for stuffed animals.

I'm supposed to work on "acting my age" according to my little sister, Cally, who tries to act older for her age than an eight-year-old should now that she's on the competitive dance team. She's the worst. Well, maybe not the *worst*. If I'm being really honest, maybe I'm just jealous. Cally's everything I'm not. She's confident and draws people to her like she's got some gravitational pull. I could hear her downstairs, yammering away about dance practice at the breakfast table over a stack of Dad's pancakes. I ate fast and finished way before her. My mom hates the way I eat. I'm supposed to work on slowing down and not jamming food into my mouth.

I don't talk very much, which my mom says I should also work on. I do like to write in my journal, which is like talking, but it's to myself. It's like my diary, but it's mostly notes about anything cool I learn about nature. Like how birds can predict storms because of changes in air pressure and sounds or how I saw a porcupine in a hemlock tree last week. Did you know they have 30,000 quills?

So basically, I write more than I talk.

I'm also supposed to work on washing my face and keeping my room clean. And wearing deodorant every day. The list keeps growing of all the ways I need to improve. Ugh. Every time my parents talk to me, it feels like a lecture. *Act your age. Eat slower. Talk to people. Wash your face. Clean your room. Wear deodorant.*

I sighed and pulled out my phone. I knew Margo just returned from New York City where she stayed with her cousins for the last two weeks. Before that, she went to an art camp in Boston.

“r u awake? welcome home!”

Instead of a text, my phone rang. Margo likes to call me instead of texting because she talks so fast and is super impatient with how slowly I text. Her voice sounds like how hummingbirds fly. Up and down and lots of energy.

“Margo! Do you want to come over and play?” I blurted out.

“Oh, you mean hang out?” She giggled. I pictured her twirling her long, curly hair. She didn’t say it, but I knew what she meant. Play was for little kids. We were soon turning thirteen. We don’t play. We *hang*.

“Yeah. You know, go fishing or just walk around the woods or whatever.”

“I’m actually busy. I kinda already invited Kee over to make crêpes.” She said the word, and it sounded like *crehpa*. A light, fluffy word. A butterfly landing on a buttercup.

“Crêpes?” I asked. But I really wanted to ask why she invited Kee and not me.

“I learned how to make them with my aunt. They’re like these little French pancakes that you fill with all sorts of things like fruit or chocolate. Kee visited me on her way home from field hockey camp in New Jersey. We shopped together for school! Eeek!!” she squealed as if she’d been waiting for middle school her whole life.

“Yeah, um, cool.” My throat felt tight. My eyes stung. When Margo didn’t say another word, I said, “Well, I can’t wait to hear



about art camp and New York. Did you get new clothes or what?”

“I mean, you could come over, too, if you really *want* to.” Her words slowed down now, dark and shadowy. Something wrong. I didn’t know what to say.

Before I could answer, Margo rushed into her good news. She never stays in a shadow for long. She’s like a blue sky with sun shining every single day. “My TikTok is exploding. I’m doing my outfit of the day and Kee and I did this one dance that my mom totally interrupted and then tried with us. I was dying and so mad, but it ended up being hilarious. Come over. I’ll show you the video.” Margo knows I’m not allowed to have TikTok. You have to be thirteen, but most kids just lie when they sign up.

“Okay. Maybe I will. My mom and I made brownies. I can bring some.” I put down my phone and chewed my knuckle. Why would Margo and Kee hang out without me? And why hadn’t I shopped for new clothes for school?

CHAPTER 2

MARGO'S OUTFIT

I ran up the big staircase to Margo's room where she and Kee sprawled out on Margo's enormous purple bed. Margo loves purple *everything*. She's been wearing purple nail polish since like the fourth grade. Margo lives in a big, modern-style house near the university. Her mom is a French professor, and her dad is an engineer who invented something that made them super rich. Margo doesn't brag about it or anything, but she does like to post videos of herself in her house. She posts about fashion, anything involving French culture, and makeup. She calls it GRWM—*Get Ready with Me*—and she shows her followers how she chooses her outfits for school. She started this in sixth grade, and apparently, she's a big deal. Her mom doesn't mind, but my mom won't let me do stuff like that. I'm not allowed on social media until I get to eighth grade. Margo and Kee text me funny videos or links to new songs they like, so it's not like I'm



really missing out. People think Margo lives in a mansion because of the big staircase and chandelier and all. And she has her own bathroom right off her bedroom.

She says I shouldn't compare our houses or ever be jealous because my little house is cozy and simple in a good way—like a cottage in a fairy tale. I guess that's cool. She once said nobody has time to get lonely or feel afraid in a small house.

"Elita!" Margo and Kee both cried as they jumped up and ran to hug me.

I took a step back and looked at Margo. Her hair was straightened flat and sleek and long—not frizzy like before. And she had these golden highlights in it. She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes with both hands cupping her face to show off mascara, eyeshadow, and this glossy pink lipstick. We used to play dress up and use her mom's makeup, but this time, Margo meant it for real.

"Wow—you look totally different."

"I had my glow-up. You would know if your mom let you on TikTok," she teased. "Aunt Claire took me shopping for my school wardrobe." She clapped her hands as she ran to her closet. "Here's my first day outfit."

Margo pulled out a purple plaid skirt with a gold belt with two gold Gs and then a black cropped sweater. "They go with my hoop earrings," she said as she pulled back her hair to show me. "And look," she pointed. Shiny black boots that would come up to her knees leaned against the closet wall like they needed to support themselves. She mentioned the brands, and I kept repeating, "Awesome. Wow!" She told me that the Gucci

belt was the most expensive thing in her closet but that it wasn't polite to talk about it.

"You are seriously the most beautiful girl in the seventh grade," Kee said and threw herself back on the bed and began tossing a tennis ball so high up into the air it almost hit the ceiling. "What you see *me* in now?" she said as she caught the ball and pointed to her Nike shorts and T-shirt. "That's my first day outfit. This is as good as it gets."

"You don't *need* to look cute," Margo said. "You're an *athlete*, and the boys' soccer team loves you. Who else gets invited to their parties? Not me." Margo kept smoothing out her hair and turning to look at herself in her mirror. "And you have the best skin of us all."

"A party?" I slowly sat down on Margo's bed. Kee's long legs stretched out beside me. She must have grown two feet since I last saw her. She was pure muscle from head to toe.

"Okay, well not exactly a *party*. Just the soccer boys. It was just a bunch of us sitting around and listening to music, and you know, making funny videos. You know, joking about coaches and stuff. And our camps. That kind of thing. And yes, Matt Bouton was there." She glanced at Margo. Her crush. "Stephen Rackley was there. Did you hear he broke his ankle?" Kee elbowed me.

Stephen Rackley was my crush since first grade. I hadn't heard about his ankle. "I hope he's okay." I imagined him on his couch, his black hair matted against his forehead like after he's played soccer.

Margo squealed and clapped again. "You've got to invite me



next time. Kee, you know a party invitation is my seventh grade goal. Maybe I'll have one if my mom lets people come over one night. Music, great food—”

Their voices warbled in my head, drowned out into muffles as my own thoughts took over. A strange, new feeling flooded me; my head started throbbing, and my stomach filled up with the same gross thing that makes you want to get carsick on long driving trips up Siler's Ridge.

A party with boys. New wardrobes. Hoop earrings. Makeup. Shoes. I looked down at my cut-off shorts and T-shirt with turtles on it from the Penn State Environmental Center field trip from last year. I hadn't grown at all, anywhere, in any way. My sandals had dried mud from the creek on them and my shins had bruises from falling off that one log I balance on. While Margo smelled like fancy perfume, I probably smelled like the minnows I caught yesterday for bait. Ugh. Why did I care now?

I caught sight of myself in the full-length mirror. That mirror had always been in Margo's room, but today, it loomed larger, and when I looked at myself, I saw a little girl who looked exactly the same as she looked when she started fourth grade.

I tightened my ponytail. “I left the plate of brownies in the kitchen downstairs. Do you guys want some? They've got caramel in them.”

We ate brownies together in Margo's enormous kitchen where everything gleamed, but I couldn't even taste them. And I couldn't focus as they talked about their class schedule and locker combinations and lunchroom plans for the first day of seventh grade, where I was about to hear the worst words I had ever heard in my life.

Margo's Outfit

The eastern bluebirds were right. I heard thunder outside and then the sad, lonely patter of rain on the roof and windows of Margo's enormous house. It matched how I was beginning to feel inside.



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CHAPTER 3

THE RULES

The rules aren't written down anywhere, but I knew them as soon as I walked into Siler Middle School for my first day of seventh grade. I told myself it would be just like sixth grade but with harder teachers. I'd go to different classes. I'd get a locker. I'd get to take electives funded by Penn State that most public schools didn't have, like Robotics or Nature Club or even Fashion Design.

I waved and said hello to all the girls from sixth grade I passed by. Most everyone I saw had their phones out, but we weren't allowed to have them in class. You're supposed to keep your phone in your locker if you bring it to school. I left my phone at home. I noticed how people were looking at their phones and then looking up and laughing at some big inside joke. And then I heard them talk about how Margo's TikTok went viral. Someone said, "Margo will get a brand deal. She's verified." Other people



took selfies in front of their locker for first day pics probably for their Instagram (which I also wasn't allowed to have). Someone else said, "I snapped you my schedule." I bent down to scratch a mosquito bite and then pretended I was late for something. I had to break away from all the noise in the hallway. That's when I confirmed Rule Number One: Get the Right Phone. And make sure you have Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram.

Did I have the right phone? Nope. A hand-me-down from my mom so I could text her to pick me up after school on days when I stayed later for Science Club.

My mom's great—don't get me wrong—but she's a second grade teacher, and all teachers think social media kills our brain cells and turns us into zombies or something.

But I guess it's better this way and good for my brain. That's another thing. My mom is always talking about what's *good for your brain*. She cooks fish for dinner because it's *good for your brain*. She enforces "reading hour" because it's *good for your brain*. Annoying. I'm supposed to work on my reading skills. Add it all to the list of improvements I must make. I wouldn't be surprised if my mom *did* have a list of ways to improve me. (PS The Reading Hour, her idea, isn't the worst. I reread *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, my two favorite books ever.)

Some things about Mom I do like. She's always sitting at the kitchen table and listening to Frank Sinatra. She'll sing along to "Fly Me to the Moon" while cutting out a zillion autumn leaves or little pumpkins from colored paper to decorate her class bulletin boards. She pulls her brown, curly hair up into what she calls a "messy bun" and wears her "cozy clothes" that always involve

her leggings and big Penn State sweatshirt. When she's working at the kitchen table, sometimes I help her. Cally wants to help us, but Mom says she's not the best with scissors and glue. She's sort of a tornado when it comes to details. Her room is a mess, for example, and she's always losing things. Half of my life with Cally involves helping find her dance shoes.

I love sitting next to Mom at the kitchen table, especially when there's a pot of spaghetti sauce and meatballs simmering on the stove. My mom makes the best spaghetti with garlic bread. I could live on spaghetti and garlic bread. I also love that she does things like tie-dye T-shirts for every student in her class in case they don't have money for new school clothes. I help her tie-dye every August before school starts. We do orange and black for Halloween and go with red for Valentine's Day. She also keeps a big cupboard of supplies for any kid who cannot afford stuff. My mom can be so cool sometimes.

But back to the rules. My problems started because this *same mother* said no to social media. In eighth grade, my brain can apparently handle it, but not now. I guess my job in seventh grade is to protect my mind. And I'd be busy with all my classes and my elective. The "elective" is basically your fun class.

Which leads me to Rule Number Two: Choose the Right Elective.

I signed up for the wrong elective class. I blame this on my phone situation because Margo and Kee decided on Snapchat to pick the Fashion Design elective. And then they DM'd everyone's Instagram to share the news. So most girls chose that class.

Me? I signed up for Nature Club.



Apparently, not cool.

Nobody told me about how every girl would want to design clothes and jewelry in seventh grade. Except Kee, who doesn't wear jewelry. She's not like that. She's always in workout clothes, but she wears the right brands. But Kee signed up for Fashion Design just to be with Margo and avoid Nature Club or the school newspaper. And, as far as fashion goes, Kee wears everything cool and sporty—the new Nike sneakers and lululemon shorts.

Which leads me to Rule Number Three: Wear the Right Brands. I don't even know what they are—besides Margo's Gucci belt and Kee's Nikes and shorts—and even then, what's cool changes and stuff. Besides, my parents couldn't afford all that. I passed a few girls in the hall who looked like eighth graders, and one had the same belt as Margo. Another girl had on black boots, too. I felt comfortable in my jean shorts and T-shirt, but I guess I looked boring or poor or whatever. Who cares? I don't want to think about this anymore.