

CHAPTER 1

Lisa struggled with every pump of her mountain bike's pedals as she rushed to school. Her miniskirt rode up uncomfortably. Goose bumps covered her entire body, but she knew she would be sweaty by the time she arrived. In northern California, the mornings were still chilly in May. It would be in the seventies by lunch, but Lisa hadn't counted on riding this morning. Now her denim jacket felt flimsy. She had forgotten that her mom had an early job interview this morning, or else she would have been more careful about catching the bus. Even though she had only three miles to ride, Loyola Middle School felt as far away as the emerald-green coastal mountains that defined the western horizon.

Ugh, I'm not cut out for roughing it, she thought. She had hoped to coast through a normal, boring day to save her excitement for the seventh-grade-class rafting trip tomorrow, but she was not off to a good start.

While she was stopped at a red light, a car pulled up behind her, the heat from its engine breathing on her calves like an angry dog. She lurched forward after the light turned green, and just as she approached the crest of the intersection, her labored pedaling gave way to helpless spinning. Her bike chain had snapped like a piece of hair stretched too far. Loaded down by her backpack, she nearly lost her balance as her bike bounced across two sets of commuter rail tracks and skidded onto the gravel shoulder.

Lisa tugged at her skirt as she wondered whether this day could get any worse. She took off her mushroom-shaped bike helmet and tried to make sense of her hair. A blue station wagon passed her and honked. She thought the driver was just taunting her, but to her surprise, the car pulled over and stopped. She looked in the window and saw Jeff and his dad!

Lisa had decided that Jeff Carmichael was the cutest, nicest boy in her class. He sat in front of her in social studies, and being so close to him for fifty minutes every day drove her crazy. She loved to study the way his sandy blond hair curled over his shirt collar, and she had memorized the constellations of freckles on the back of his neck. Her favorites were the one by his right ear that looked like a house and a winking smiley face that peeked out over his shirt collar. Her friends agreed that he and Lisa were perfect for each other. Jeff was friendly to her but had not really talked to her yet. Now here he was, his dad's car pulling up beside her. She hoped that she didn't look as pathetic as she felt.

Mr. Carmichael rolled down his window and said, "It looks like you could use a ride. I'm driving Jeff to the dentist, but I'd be happy to drop you off at school on the way."

This was her opportunity to get closer to Jeff. She might even have to forgive her mother for making her ride to school.

"Hi, Jeff. Thanks, that would be great!" she gushed.

Mr. Carmichael got out to put her bike in the back of the car while she slid into the back seat diagonally behind Jeff.

"How's it going?" he asked, sweeping his eyes across her. She felt like she'd been hit by lightning.

"Good," she stalled as she prayed for her wits to return. "Thanks for stopping. This isn't a great day to ride to school. Do you think it will be this cold on the rafting trip?"

"I don't know. I guess that's why they have bonfires," he replied.

Her vision of cozying up with Jeff next to a blazing campfire was more than Lisa could handle.

Jeff's dad plopped down in the driver's seat and broke the mood. Lisa didn't hold it against him though since he was nice enough to stop and pick her up. Besides, having him there took off the pressure to keep up the conversation the whole way. Lisa studied Jeff's profile during the rest of the trip, getting a glimpse of the little freckle face winking at her. She tried to act casual and pay attention to Mr. Carmichael's pleasant chatter.

"Should be some adventure this weekend for you. They've never had such an ambitious seventh-grade trip before."

Before Lisa knew it, they were at school. "Jeff, why don't you help Lisa with her bike?" his dad suggested.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Carmichael," said Lisa, bounding out the door to meet Jeff behind the car.

Lisa was entranced as she watched Jeff easily swing her bike over the car's tailgate. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see two of her friends striding purposefully in her direction. Rayna was a tall girl who was head Junior Varsity cheerleader this year, as well as the leader of their social group. Emily, also a cheerleader, bounced along beside her, as cute as ever. Lisa's mind raced as she debated whether it was better to have these popular girls see her with Jeff or better to have this moment with Jeff alone. As the girls approached, it became clear Lisa was going to have to include them.

"Well, looks like you got lucky this morning, Lisa," said Rayna, grinning slyly.

"Shut up," Lisa hissed under her breath. "Yeah, Jeff's dad was really nice to give me a ride, wasn't he?" she said loudly enough for Jeff to hear.

Lisa was trying to figure out how to get rid of Rayna when she saw someone else quickly approaching. She saw a flash of bright orange and recognized the crooked-L-shaped belt that the safety patrol leaders wore. It was Molly Hamfeld, the geekiest girl in the seventh grade. Lisa couldn't stand her. Molly had moved from Michigan to California at the beginning of the school year. Molly didn't have any of the right clothes. She always wore torn jeans and old, faded T-shirts—not vintage, just gross. She never

bothered to do anything with her stringy blonde hair, but just let it hang limply at her shoulders. On a good day, she pulled her hair into a ponytail that hung out the hole in the back of a baseball cap. At lunch, she played soccer with the boys instead of sitting with the girls. It didn't even seem to bother Molly that most of the girls shunned her. To make matters worse, over Christmas break, Jeff's dad had married Molly's mom, so now they were stepbrother and stepsister. The fact that Molly lived in the same house with Jeff proved to Lisa that there was no justice in the world.

"Hey, Jeff, is your dad going to give us a ride home today?" Molly interrupted in her flat Midwestern accent, without even looking at Lisa.

"Yeah, meet us here after school."

"Okay, see ya," and she was off again.

Lisa felt sorry for Jeff. "It's hard to believe someone like her is your sister. I'm sure no one holds it against you, though."

Jeff recoiled. "Yeah, well, she is my stepsister. She's not that bad. I don't see why you guys have to give her such a hard time," he replied, eyeing Rayna and Emily, who were still hovering nearby.

Lisa was horrified. "Listen, Jeff, I just wanted you to know that we don't mind . . ." she trailed off lamely.

Jeff broke in, "Here's your bike. I'll see you later."

Before Lisa could reply, he got back into the car. Oblivious to the conflict, Jeff's dad waved as he pulled away.

"Smooth move, Lisa," chided Rayna.

"God, I can't stand her," said Lisa. "She probably hates to see me and Jeff together." To Lisa, Molly always seemed to have a smug look on her face, and now was no exception as she waved her arms and blew her whistle to guide kids across the street to the elementary school next door. "She thinks she's so cool when she's just a stinking safety patrol. What a scut."

"You should have known you couldn't score points with Jeff by bringing down his sister," Rayna said. "Come on, forget about it. Let's go in."

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Lisa fumed as she passed by Molly on the way into school. Without even trying, Molly had ruined her one perfect moment with Jeff. Lisa knew she had to turn things around by the time they left on the trip tomorrow but didn't have the slightest idea how.

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It was only eight thirty in the morning, and Lisa's day had already had two lows and one momentous high. She could hardly be happy about the ride with Jeff now that he was mad at her. To make things worse, since Jeff was at the dentist, Lisa had to endure Mr. Hall's first-period social studies class without the familiar view of Jeff's freckles. As Mr. Hall droned on about the American Revolution, Lisa drew wispy pencil designs on her folder and calculated the number of minutes left in the school day. Three hundred forty-four minutes seemed like an awfully long time to stew about Jeff. She vowed to try to put this morning's incident out of her mind, but she knew it wouldn't be easy.

Second period wasn't any better—it was gym class. Lisa changed into her hideous gym uniform, a one-piece disaster with horizontal blue and white pinstripes. Whether you were round or stick-figured, it made no difference; the polyester either stretched or sagged in just the wrong places. After changing, Lisa walked into the bathroom to pee before class began. She saw Rayna enter the stall next to hers.

"How do they come up with these ideas to torture us all day?" Lisa called over the wall. "They are either boring us to death or making us run around a stupid track in the freezing cold."

"Well, kid, we only have five more years, and then we're free," came the reply.

Lisa hated it when Rayna called her “kid,” but she didn’t say anything. They both finished up and met to go out to the track together.

“Let’s get this over with,” said Rayna as she ran her fingers through her hair in front of the mirror.

The skill the girls had mastered most adeptly in gym class was finding the exact jogging pace that was just fast enough to fend off the wrath of Mrs. Steele, their hyperexcitable gym teacher. Even at this calculated, slow pace, a half hour later they were all streaked with sweat. Mrs. Steele blew her whistle, releasing them to the locker room. They had ten minutes to try to undo the damage before moving on to their next class.

Most of the girls had barely gotten their clothes on and hadn’t started to work on their makeup and hair when Mrs. Steele’s booming voice called out, “Girls, I need to see you all, right now.” A few cries of protest rang out, but the class reluctantly gathered outside the teacher’s office.

Mrs. Steele softened her voice to the point where it no longer echoed off the cinder block walls. “Girls, something unfortunate happened this morning. Someone, I don’t know who, left their used sanitary pad stuck to the back of the door of one of the bathroom stalls. Needless to say, this is not acceptable behavior. You shouldn’t feel embarrassed to throw away your pads, even if someone sees you carrying it to the garbage can. If you see someone throwing one away, don’t laugh, just say to them, “Thank you, Carol, thank you.” Mrs. Steele acted this last phrase out in a singsong voice, choosing a popular eighth grader to use as an example. Carol scowled at being dragged into this discussion. “Having your period is a natural thing for young women, something we all go through,” continued the teacher. “So let’s all act like mature women and not be ashamed of a normal part of life. Okay?”

The group reluctantly murmured “Okay” in reply.

Mrs. Steele dismissed them and stepped into her office, shutting the door. Lisa shifted uncomfortably. She knew that Rayna had been the last

one in the bathroom that morning. She couldn't believe that Rayna would do something so gross.

Molly was in the corner, still wearing her gym uniform. Rayna turned to Carol and said, "I'll bet Molly did it—who else could be that disgusting?"

Carol approached Molly. Drawing up to her full height—six inches taller than Molly—she said, "Was it you, Hamburger? If so, I'm going to kick your butt. What do you think, girls, should we strip her and see if she's wearing a pad?"

Carol's cruelty shocked Lisa, but she remained silent.

Rayna stepped in, "Then again, take one look at her. With that scrawny body there's no way she even has her period. She just wishes she was a real woman like the rest of us."

Molly just stood there, showing no emotion on her face. She looked up at Carol. "Are you through?"

"If Steele wasn't behind that door we'd rip that uniform off your sorry-assed body. Get out of here, Hamburger, and keep your ugly face out of my way," said Carol, pushing roughly past Molly as she sauntered back toward the changing room.

Molly stared at Lisa. "Nice friends," she snarled.

"At least I have friends," replied Lisa.

"You can keep them," said Molly, walking away.

The rest of the day crawled by uneventfully. Through wood shop, French, English, pre-algebra, and science, Lisa tried to pay attention to class to get her mind off all her troubles. Madame Peel actually complimented her listening, saying, "Lise, tu attends tres bien aujourd'hui."

Lisa steered clear of Molly and Jeff. She hoped that being away on the trip would help them forget what had happened at school.

At lunch Lisa's friends had great fun rehashing the gym story for the members of the group who had not witnessed it. Lisa was a little uncomfortable when Rayna told her version so enthusiastically. As it was repeated,

though, the dramatized story about Mrs. Steele's lecture and Carol's encounter with Molly became so funny that Lisa almost forgot that Rayna had really left the pad on the door. Lisa didn't tell the story herself because she didn't want Jeff to hear that she'd been the one gossiping, but she laughed along with the group. Lisa figured that since Molly didn't even act like she cared what they thought, why shouldn't they laugh?

At the end of the day, Lisa was relieved to stack her books in her locker, knowing that for once she wouldn't have to take them home for the weekend. Her day wasn't over yet, though. Cheerleading practice was usually Lisa's favorite part of the day, but with the anticipation of the raft trip, coupled with Rayna's controversy, Lisa felt her feet drag as she made her way back to the locker room to change into her uniform. The hallway leading to the gym took Lisa by the school's main entrance. Through the large glass doors, Lisa saw Molly standing guard at her safety patrol post as she had done that morning. Lisa watched the scene unnoticed as Molly tried to manage the unruly middle schoolers stampeding like wild ponies that had knocked down the corral fence.

From her vantage point behind the glass, Lisa looked out at Molly, and a sick feeling rose in her stomach. Any feelings of sympathy she might have had transformed into anger as she remembered how Molly had turned Jeff against her. *She brings this on herself. If she wasn't so stuck up about everything maybe she'd have some friends. Or at least get left alone.*

Lisa was the last squad member to arrive for practice. She hurriedly pulled on her gold sweater with the royal blue "LW" patch and her blue skirt with gold pleats. She ran to the gym with her shoes in her hand, hoping that team captain Rayna wouldn't notice that she was late.

The other seven girls were just starting to warm up with their opening exercise, a rhythmic clapping chant they performed while standing in a tight circle facing each other.

Lisa slipped into the circle and avoided looking at Rayna as Rayna began the chant:

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“Loyola Wildcats, let’s go!”

The group responded in unison:

L (clap, clap) OY-O (clap, clap) LA, slowly at first, then faster,

L-OY-O-LA,

And louder, L-OY-O-LA, until clapping stung their hands and cheering hurt their ears. After a stressful day, it was just the release Lisa needed.

Rayna yelled, “Who are you?”

Everyone responded, “Wildcats!”

“Who are you?”

“Wildcats!”

Then all together, “Go, Wildcats!”

Rayna signaled the group to have a seat on the bleachers, “Okay girls, I’m running practice today. Coach Lewis couldn’t be here, so Coach Curtis will be supervising.” Coach Curtis, the boys’ gym teacher, raised his hand in acknowledgement, but didn’t look up from his clipboard as he walked toward his glass-walled office.

Rayna continued, “Since we seventh graders have the trip tomorrow, this will be a short practice. We’re going to concentrate on two things, the pyramid and the wildcat leap.”

A groan came from the group. Emily said, “Rayna, those are our two worst tricks!”

“I know, but we need to make them our two best tricks, so that’s why we’re working on them. We’ll never make it to Varsity next year if we can’t do a pyramid, and no other JV team has anything like the wildcat leap, so once we get those down, we’ll definitely be the best JV squad in the district.” The group still looked lethargic, so Rayna yelled, “Okay, up, where’s your pride?”

The challenge got the cheerleaders to their feet. Emily, the pyramid captain, commanded, “Pyramid, fall in!”

Lisa hated being in the pyramid. They could form it pretty well as long as everyone kneeled, but Rayna insisted on standing up on the top level,

which always caused the formation to collapse. Today was no better than usual. They were fine with the short dance routine that led up to the formation with three sixth-grade girls on the bottom layer, Emily and Lisa on the middle layer, then Rayna boosted on top. Rayna's pointy knee dug into Lisa's spine, but the pyramid held steady until Rayna stood up. Lisa felt the burn of Rayna's left sneaker inching across her back, trying to find a stable position. The formation swayed as Rayna tried to steady herself. Then the pyramid toppled over to one side. The five girls on the bottom rolled out of each other's way as the structure fell apart. Rayna stood up to face them.

"You are the worst base I've ever seen!" yelled Rayna. "I'm never going to be able to stand up if you don't hold steady!"

The group was silent.

"Emily, what do you have to say?"

Reluctantly, Emily said, "Rayna, I don't think the base is the problem."

Bristling at the implication that it was her fault, Rayna said, "Oh really, then what is the problem? How am I supposed to stand up when I don't have a base?"

"Well, you're so tall that it's hard for you to get your balance. Maybe we should try it with someone who is shorter but still strong, like Lisa."

Oh no, thought Lisa, please don't pit me against Rayna.

"Listen," growled Rayna, "I've pulled this team together. The school didn't even want to have JV cheerleading this year, but I told Coach I'd help run it and make sure we'd be a quality squad. None of you would even be cheerleaders without me. I've earned the right to stand on top of the pyramid, and it's your job to make that work." She turned to Lisa, "As for you, let's see you get that wildcat leap going. It's the sorriest excuse for a failed trick I've ever seen."

Oh great, thought Lisa, Rayna thinks I'm trying to take her place. Now Lisa really had to make the wildcat leap happen. It was a trick she had

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invented, and it would be really cool if they could get it down, but they were having problems with the execution. Emily played the part of the wildcat, prowling through the jungle. Lisa sat on Rayna's shoulders and cheered while Emily did a tumbling routine, ending up next to Lisa and Rayna. The wildcat was supposed to swing through the jungle, and Lisa's arms provided the vine. Lisa's job was to swing Emily high enough so that she could fly through the air to two other girls waiting to catch her.

Lisa's problem was that it was awkward to sit on Rayna's shoulders and also support Emily's swinging weight. As they tried the routine over and over, Emily couldn't get enough momentum to fly into the air. The girls were tired and annoyed: Emily, who landed on her butt more than once; Rayna, who had to carry Lisa the whole time they practiced the trick; and Lisa, who felt like her arms were getting pulled out of their sockets.

Rayna finally said, "Let's break. Lisa, we should be able to do this. You are strong enough. It's just not coming together."

Lisa was done for the day. "Look, it's a stupid trick. It's never going to work. Just forget it."

"With that attitude, you'll never make Varsity. But we are all tired, let's wind down."

After a closing cheer that was decidedly less enthusiastic than the opener had been, the squad members prepared to head home after a long day.

Rayna said, "Lisa and Emily, maybe there will be some vines to practice on in the forest this weekend. I'll see you tomorrow."

Lisa could never be sure whether Rayna was taunting her or trying to be supportive. She hoped it was the latter and said, "See you, girl. It will be fun."

Lisa secured her bike in the indoor bike room. It would be safe there until she returned to school. She just couldn't stand the thought of riding it again today. She could take the late activities bus home.

Lisa let out a sigh as she plopped down onto the green vinyl seat. The bus was only a quarter full, so she sat with her back to the window and

stretched out her legs. This had been such a long day. Lisa couldn't believe that she would be back on another school bus in just twelve hours, ready to start the raft adventure. Rayna, Jeff, and Molly would all be there. Would things get even more complicated this weekend? Lisa had enough to worry about already. As the bus pulled away she resolved to think only about the trip ahead and to put today behind her.