



# 1

Leonardo da Vinci once said that when you looked at your work in a mirror and saw it reversed, it would look like some other painter's work, and then you'd be a better judge of its faults.

I stood, feet anchored to the ground like they were sprouting roots into the carpet beneath me, and glared at the mirror in front of me. It glared back. Flat, shiny, and unrelenting. So utterly bloody unrelenting that I wanted to toss something at it just to break its icy stare. Shatter it, like it was so fond of shattering me.

When I couldn't take it a second longer, I turned my back on the thing, pulled yet another T-shirt off, and tossed it to the floor. My previous school was easy; I'd wake up each morning and slip on our black and white uniform, no mirror needed. But everything was different now, and it wasn't just the lack of a school

uniform that made it that way. In fact, it couldn't be more different if my mother had decided to uproot the family and move us to one of Jupiter's far-flung moons.

I'm a city girl. Born and bred. And up until seven days ago, we'd lived in a penthouse in one of Johannesburg's cool, newly renovated downtown areas. My school, the Art School, where I was studying fine art, was only a few blocks away. After class, my friends and I would walk the streets lined with coffee shops, art galleries, and vintage clothing and record stores, and hang out in our favorite place, the smoky, laid-back jazz café, Maggie's.

At night, I'd sit at my window and watch the city below spring to life. I loved listening to the frantic symphony of the city. A soundscape of honking taxis, shrieking police sirens, rushing, shouting, pushing people. Everything so alive. Everything pounding, blaring, screaming, and growling at you.

I'd gaze at the brightly colored lights of the Nelson Mandela Bridge that took you right into the thumping heart of the city. Johannesburg. Joburg. Jozi. It's called many things. But my favorite name is its isiZulu one: Egoli, Place of Gold. Which is exactly what it is when the sun dips down and the city lights flicker on, casting that warm, molten glow across the tops and sides of the skyscrapers.

Gold's my favorite color, by the way. But there's no gold here. Looking out of my bedroom window all I could see now was blue, the massive sea stretching to the horizon, reaching up into a never-ending cloudless sky. An infinity of it.

*Blue . . .* it's such a simple color, really. A primary color.

Gold, however, well, that's another story. It's complex. Layered. Much harder to create, and it's also so much more than *just* a color. Gold contains a certain magic, an extravagance, a mystique.

I tried to sigh but the breath got caught in my esophagus. I turned my back on the window now too. I've never liked the sea. Too much water. Too much sand. Besides, I'm not exactly a bikini kinda gal. I haven't been beach-body ready since, well, forever. How ironic then that I've landed here, in the middle of bikini-Barbie, thigh-chafing hell.

*Clifton, Cape Town.* A place where you're either wearing activewear because you've just left your early morning gym sesh—green smoothie in hand—or you're in swimwear 'cause you're headed to the beach, green smoothie in hand. And don't even get me started on what it's like when the sun goes down. Let's just say you won't find a moody jazz club on these streets. It's more upscale eateries, shucked oysters, and cham-bloody-pagne.

Currently, I'm staging a silent protest against my mother for uprooting my life and dragging me here. But what's new? My mother and I have been locked in a kind of protest for the last four years now.

I do, however, understand *why* we came here. I just can't help feeling that I wasn't consulted. Which I wasn't. The closest thing to a consultation came when she'd walked into my bedroom three weeks ago and declared, *We're moving to Cape Town*. She might as well have detonated an atomic bomb—that's how it felt as I sat on my bed and saw my entire life explode into a million pieces.

We came here for my brother, Zac. I'm not blaming him for this, how could I—I love him more than I can probably describe. He's nine. He's also *specially abled*, as my mother prefers to say. She enjoys upbeat euphemisms, but between you and me, he's on the autism spectrum.

Over the last few years, his symptoms had gotten worse, until his school had finally “suggested” that he attend a facility “better aligned

with his unique needs.” (Everyone likes euphemisms, it seems.) So, after a quick google search by my mother, the best assisted learning school in the country was located, and now here we are. Sunny, beachy, activewear central—with *green smoothie in hand*.

“Crap!” I pulled yet another outfit off and tossed it to the floor, adding to the massive patchwork of clothes that lay twisted at my feet. My floor was starting to look like a Hannah Höch artwork, my favorite collage artist, and I swear, if you looked hard enough, you could see a galloping horse desperately trying to break free of the tangled mess.

But nothing I owned seemed right. And you need to wear the right thing on your first day. Something that gives off the vibe that you didn’t try *too* hard, but that you tried *just* hard enough.

“Hurry.” My mother’s voice raced up the stairs and burst into my room like an unwanted guest. I’d already told her she didn’t need to take me to school—I had my own car—but she was insistent. “I’m going to be late for my meeting!” She sounded rushed and angry, which had been her general vibe for a while now, certainly since that fateful day four years ago—the day the doves cried, as I’ve come to call it in my head.

“Late, late, late,” my brother echoed. Zac often repeats words. I try not to swear in front of him, not since the unfortunate *crap, crap, crap* incident.

I forced myself to face the mirror again. On some days, I can look at myself for longer than a few seconds; today was *not* one of those days. My pale, flabby thighs that touched, my stomach that oozed over the top of my very unsexy panties, and worse, my “hellos and good-byes”—those flappy bits of fat on your arms that jiggle when you wave at people. I try not to wave.

“Aaargh.” I covered my face and turned away from the evil

thing again. I've long suspected that mirrors were invented by some gorgeous, stick-thin, yet completely sinister, creature for the sole purpose of tormenting girls like me.

I reached for the nearest outfit I could find: my most comfortable pair of worn jeans and a cute, vintage, button-up blouse I'd found at a little secondhand shop with the boys—my BFFs—Andile and Guy. At art school there were four distinct groups: art kids, drama kids, music kids, and dance kids. For some reason, I'd made friends with the ballet guys pretty early on. We'd just found each other, like attracting magnets, and since then we'd moved around school like a little impenetrable team. I missed them so much . . . and we'd been separated for only seven days.

I tugged my jeans on. They felt a little tighter than usual, probably from all the stress eating I'd been doing lately: *carbs really are from the devil* (perhaps also invented by the same person who gave us mirrors?). I pulled them up, trying to cover the muffin top, but not pulling them so high that I was now sporting a gigantic camel toe. The black, collared blouse also felt like it was straining across my bust. I adjusted my bra, trying to flatten the ladies, but clearly they were also protesting today, because they weren't going anywhere.

And then there was my hair, the massive mop of curls that I'd long given up on trying to wrangle with a straightener.

I slipped a pair of comfy, old sneakers on and gave myself an extra spray of deo; it was hot today, and the last thing I needed was to be the smelly girl too.

I inspected myself. I looked fine. *Sort of.* I looked like me, like I always did. But today I wasn't so sure how well Me was going to go down at my new school.

Bay Water High, where surfing and bodyboarding were

extracurricular activities because the school backed onto the beach. I'd gone to the school's Facebook page a few days ago and scoured their photos, hoping to find someone, *anyone*, who looked vaguely like me. But nothing.

Because it seemed that being gorgeous and thigh-gap thin were prerequisites for being a student at BWH. I was *not* gorgeous. My hair was red and frizzy. My skin erred on the pasty, pale side, with a smattering of cellulite for added texture, and the only gap I had was the one between my front teeth.

*She's just big boned*, I'd once overheard my mom say to another mother. *It's probably puppy fat, she'll grow out of it*, the other mother had offered up with a look that resembled pity, as if thinking, *Thank heavens she's not mine*. But I was seventeen now, turning eighteen in two months, and I wasn't growing out of it. If anything, I was growing into it more than ever. My phone gave a sudden beep and I looked down at it. A message from my dad lit up the screen and my stomach dropped.

DAD: Good luck on your first day. Thinking of you!

I stared at the message and then left my dad on Read.

“Loooooriiii!” My mother’s shrill voice came at me again, like a sharp-beaked bird dive-bombing you because you’d stumbled upon its nest.

Oh, that’s the other thing you should know about me—my name is Lori Patty Palmer. Of course, when the elementary school bullies got wind of my middle name, which I got courtesy of my great aunt Patty, they had a field day with it.

*Move out the way, here comes Lori Fatty Palmer.* I could still hear their taunts. My old therapist, Dr. Finkelstein—whose name I always thought conjured up images of impassioned, academic debates in smoky, wood-paneled rooms—said that much of my

anxiety stems from the bullying. From the time I'd had food thrown in my face, the time someone wrote "Kill yourself fat bitch" on my locker, and of course, there was the pool . . .

I took a deep breath; just thinking about the pool was making my insides quiver. I'd been so relieved when all of that was over and I'd gone to art school, but now, today, I felt like that person all over again.

*Lori Fatty Palmer.*

I inhaled deeply and then tried to breathe out all the negativity, like that meditation app I'd downloaded told me to. Breathe in positivity, breath out negativity. *Or was it the other way around?*

Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as I thought. Maybe I was just projecting my own fears and anxieties onto the situation. Maybe I would love it at BWH. Maybe everything would be okay. *Maybe.*

I took another deep breath and the buttons on my blouse strained. (Note to self, no deep breathing today for fear that buttons might pop open.) I walked out of my room, grabbing my pill as I went and throwing it back with a sip of now-cold coffee. I grimaced at the taste. Prozac. I've never gotten used to that melt-in-your-mouth, spearmint flavor even though I've been taking it for years. Why even bother with a flavor? It's not like the taste can disguise what it really is.

# 2

I arrived at BWH and surveyed my surroundings.

Gorgeous girls with oversized beverages in hand walked past me, sucking on long straws. These were probably the same girls who made those blue, smoothie bowls for breakfast with those cute, star-shaped cutouts of dragon fruit.

Boys with rippling muscles also walked past, oversized beverages in one hand, protein bars in the other. And they all seemed so perky. Smiles, bright eyes, and bushy tails, and I wasn't even inside the building yet. I was walking past a row of perfectly polished SUVs that had uniformly ramped the pavement to drop off the kids. Moms in activewear, gossiping to each other in hushed tones. Dads in suits, looking busy and talking on their phones as they climbed out of their overcompensating midlife crisis Maseratis—*Kinda like my own dad, I guess.* I'd made my mother

drop me off a block away from school. I didn't need her causing a spectacle, adding to the overall nail-biting stress of this day.

I pulled the finger from my lips, thrust my head into the air, and tried to look as unfazed as humanly possible. Cool, calm, confident. Breathing in negativity, breathing out positivity, looking for silver linings . . . *or something like that*. I made my way past the cars and found myself at the school entrance, and just as I'd suspected, the cool kids were all standing outside waiting, talking, laughing. Have you noticed how they always seem to move in packs? Like little meerkats. Hyenas. Swarms of bees. I lowered my head again and resisted the urge to bite my cuticle.

A steep flight of stairs rose up in front of me, and I sighed. My body and stairs aren't exactly friends, and the last thing I needed was to be out of breath when I reached the top. That would draw even more attention to me, and I hated attention. At that moment, a girl and a guy walked past me, arm in arm, laughing, looking like a pair of Insta models and taking the stairs two at a time: #couplegoals.

Despite my previous silver lining-laced thoughts, I was beginning to get the distinct impression that I wasn't going to like it here, nor was I going to fit in. I hoped this was going to be worth it. But judging by my brother's first day at school yesterday, it was unlikely. As my mom and I had been leaving the school, he'd burst out of the classroom, thrown himself onto the gate, and tried to climb over it while screaming at the top of his lungs. Let's hope day two would be better.

I made it to the top of the stairs, impressed that my breathing hadn't even kicked up a notch—probably due to all the nervous adrenaline surging through my veins.

“Hey!” someone called, but I didn’t look up. Surely they weren’t talking to me?

But when a foot entered my field of vision, and a body blocked my path to the entrance, I was forced to look up.

Small, cut-off denim shorts. White crop top, exposed flat stomach. Dewy complexion, impossibly long, blond hair. Conditioner-commercial hair.

“Hey, are you the new girl?” conditioner commercial asked, her blue eyes and hair actually glinting in the morning light.

“Uh . . . yes. Lori,” I stuttered, averting my gaze.

“Hi! I’m Amber Long-Innes, and this is Teagan.” She sounded so perky, as if she was high on the sunbeams themselves. I looked from her to Teagan, who in contrast to Amber was olive-skinned and dark-eyed, with the poutiest lips I’d ever seen. Then her lips parted, and she smiled at me. I was almost knocked off my feet, it was so big and luminous.

*Okay, okay.* I have a confession to make. A big one. As much as I like to mentally slag off girls like this, silently judge and mock, I’m jealous as hell of them. *There, I said it!* Not to mention truly and utterly intimidated. My acerbic, inner sarcasm is just a defense for my outward fears and insecurities. Dr. Finkelstein once explained that defense mechanisms were essential to survival, that many creatures had them. Well, at least I wasn’t a Malaysian exploding ant.

“I’m president of the BWH SRC,” Amber chirped.

“SRC?” I was unfamiliar with this acronym.

“Student Representative Council,” she cooed.

“And I’m VP,” Teagan added.

“My portfolio is HOSS,” Amber continued, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her perfectly shaped ear. She reminded

me of Goldilocks, except you could see she didn't eat bowls of porridge.

"And mine's PPC," Teagan jumped in. They talked as if they'd rehearsed this speech many times before, expertly jumping from line to line, like actors on a stage.

"HOSS and PPC?" I asked, when it looked like they'd finally finished the scene.

"Head of School Spirit and Primary Peer Counselor," Amber qualified.

I'd suspected this school was overflowing with teen spirit. Still, I hadn't expected "Spirit" to be an actual thing. The only teen spirit I had was that old Nirvana vinyl that I'd found in a vintage store in Joburg.

"It's our job to show new students around and introduce them to the school."

"Introduce?" I looked into Amber's ridiculously clear blue eyes as panic slid a cold finger down my spine. I tried to push the panic down. I've learned that showing the enemy how you *really* feel is not a good idea. They can, and will, prey on it.

But then Teagan did something unexpected; she pulled me into a hug. "Welcome to BWH, Lori."

"Uh . . . thanks!" I was surprised by what seemed like a genuine show of friendliness. Maybe I'd judged everyone here too soon? *Maybe.*

"Great! We'll do the introduction in assembly first period," Amber said casually, and then they both turned, flipped their hair at the same time (had they rehearsed this move too?), and walked away. I stood there, unable to move, as if the rubber soles of my shoes had melted into the hot concrete. Which was conceivable, since it was scorching today.

“Aren’t you coming?” Amber turned, tilting her head and looking at me from a different angle. I wondered if she was thinking, *Nah, still fat from this angle*. I sucked my stomach in quickly in an attempt to appear more streamlined.

“Uh . . . I . . .” Dammit. I exhaled when I realized that the stomach-sucking had caused my voice to rise two unnatural-sounding octaves. “Suuuure.” I tried to sound casual even though every cell, nerve, fiber, and muscle in my body wanted to turn around and *run, run, run!*

# 3

I was seated in the front row of the lecture hall. Amber and Teagan had placed me there and told me to stay. *I didn't want to stay.* And I certainly didn't want to be introduced to the entire school. The repetitive motion of picking at my cuticles was somewhat comforting, but it wasn't enough to quell the anxiety, especially when a bell rang and people began streaming into the auditorium.

My eyes swept the crowd, hoping to find at least one of *my kind*, but the more I looked, the more I realized that no one here was like me. I was officially the biggest person at school.

*Big.* It's a euphemism, isn't it? I should just call it what it is—I was the fattest person at school. This wasn't a foreign concept to me; I was usually the fattest person everywhere I went. Except for that time my mother enrolled me in Weight Watchers. I'd felt bad

for feeling so damn overjoyed when I'd discovered a girl my age who was actually fatter than me.

"But you have such a pretty face . . ." If I had a rand for every time someone said that to me, I'd be rich. But it's not like I want to be like this and haven't tried to lose it—trust me, I have. I'm not one of those body positive people who embraces their curves. Sometimes I look at their Instagram accounts and envy them so much it hurts. The way they flaunt their bodies and look so damn good doing it. I could never be like that.

I turned my attention back to the hall. Everyone was seated now, including Amber and Teagan, who were perched on the edge of their chairs with their knees together. A red-hot bolt of envy made me clench my jaw when I realized I could see all the way through their nontouching thighs to the floor below.

The general chatter around me finally stopped as the principal walked onto the stage and took up position behind the podium. Even the principal here, Mr. Du Preez, was good-looking—a George Clooney type with perfect gray hair, wrinkles that made him look distinguished, and a killer white smile.

I was too beside myself with nerves, too busy obsessing about what Amber and Teagan were about to do, to listen to him. Mr. Du Preez continued talking and I tried to grab on to some of his words, but they blurred together into gibberish. And then he stopped, and someone else walked onto the stage.

*A man.* Muscular and wearing head-to-toe Adidas, he stood there for a few moments before he thrust his hand into the air.

"Go Dolphins!" he yelled.

Chaos broke out around me. Everyone jumped out of their chairs, and like those mind-controlled people from cults who drank the Kool-Aid, they, too, raised their fists in the air and

shouted, “We are the Dolphins, and no one could be prouder and if you cannot hear us, we’ll shout a little louder!”

What the blessed-be-the-fruit hell was going on here?

“Woo-hoo!” The man, who I was now assuming was the sports coach, clapped his hands together and gave a loud whistle. “Just a few sports announcements for the week. As you all know, the BWH Dolphins *crushed* the Sun Valley Seals at the water polo match last week.”

“Crushed!! Crushed!! Crushed!!” everyone echoed.

“All thanks to our star center, Jake Jones-Evans!” The coach gave a totally lame salute and I paused. I wanted to take a second and allow this moment to sink in. This was the kind of place that had actual sports stars, who were *not* fictional characters in American teen movies. This was the kind of place that *crushed* and had teams named after marine animals and sang war cries in assembly. We didn’t even *have* sports at art school! A freezing Jupertonian moon might actually be preferable to this place. At least it would have been more familiar.

“Stand up, Jake!” the man shouted, and this time, I turned to look. I had to see this Jake, who had another double-barrel surname. This jock of jock legends who crushed mere mortals with his thumb and was probably . . .

*H . . . ooo . . . ttt!*

My mouth fell open. He was leaning against the wall, not seated like everyone else, arms folded, legs crossed, oozing this kind of nonchalance that was strangely attractive. He was so *not* my type—*allow me to make this very clear*. And yet, he was stupidly good-looking. The kind of good-looking that should not be allowed to exist in nature. It was almost unnatural. As if he was the product of some secret CRISPR experiment. All

the good genes in the world had been spliced together to form . . . *him*.

A shaft of light streamed through a window, illuminating just one side of his face, and plunging the other side into a dramatic shadow. Usually this kind of play of light and shadow, called chiaroscuro, has to be painstakingly created with the deft strokes of an artist's paintbrush, but his was totally natural.

But then Jake fist-pumped the air a few times (which quickly made him a lot less attractive to me).

"I don't think I have to remind you that it's regional finals next Friday!" the sports coach said. "We'll be playing the Blue Bay Marlins"—(what the hell was with all these animal names)—"and as you know, it's compulsory to support the team!"

Compulsory?! To support the water polo team?! The mind *boggled*.

"Also, some great phys ed news—now that the new shark nets are up, surfing can start again."

A massive cheer rose up from the crowd and reverberated around the room, building and amplifying. *What the hell?* There were just so many things wrong with that statement I didn't even know where to begin. Sharks, surfing, bathing suits . . . *on the beach!* The last time I'd worn a bathing suit in front of my classmates it had ended very badly. I really, *really* hoped surfing wasn't also compulsory. The thought made my heart bang against my rib cage so hard that it felt like it was attempting an escape. I tried to take a deep breath but my lungs weren't pulling enough air into them and suddenly, *I'm drowning again*. The sports coach left the stage and two more gorgeous girls walked up carrying a velvet-draped stand.

"Hi, everyone," one of them gushed, and smiled. Again, it was massive. *Did they all go to the same dentist here at BWH?*

“I know you’re dying to know what the theme of this year’s summer dance is going to be.”

Another cheer rose up from the crowd. This couldn’t get any worse if it tried. Not only had I arrived at this strange, alien place, but I’d arrived at this strange alien place in the middle of dance season, which was possibly the worst time of the year for girls like me.

“So, without further ado, the theme is . . .” She paused, and a collective inhalation was taken by every single person in the room—except me. The only inhalation I would ever be taking when it came to the dance was the massive in-breath I’d need in order to squeeze myself into a dress. If I was going. Which I wouldn’t be.

“The theme . . . is . . .” She dragged the words out, building a tension in the air that was palpable. *“Royal Wedding?”* She whisked the cloth off the stand to reveal a kissing photo of Kate and William. The whole hall burst into applause. “So, guys, think morning suits, ballgowns, and tiaras.”

Amber walked onto the stage, clutching her hand to her heart as if genuinely touched by the brilliance of this magical, amazing idea. *Where on earth was I?*

“I think I can safely say, on behalf of everyone here at BWH, that you guys, Katlego and Nina-M and everyone else on the dance committee, have totally outdone yourselves,” Amber said, and they all fell into a group hug.

I blinked, trying to make sense of everything. I felt so uncomfortable that I wanted to crawl out of my skin, and then, when it couldn’t possibly get any worse, Amber turned and looked straight at me.

Her lip-glossed lips were moving but I couldn’t hear any

words. My brain buzzed and raced a million miles an hour, and my ears filled with a static that drowned out everything around me. *Throat expanding, hands clammy . . .* I couldn't move.

"Lori! Don't you want to come up here and introduce yourself?" She flashed me a massive smile.

My head started shaking all by itself. I wasn't even aware of the shake until I noticed the shapes of the world blurring in front of me.

"I know everyone is dying to meet you!" she said, but I was still frozen to my seat.

"Lori!" This time I could see her smile was forced, and when I still didn't move, she shook her head and marched off the stage. I breathed a massive sign of relief—not so massive as to pop my buttons, though. But then, to my horror, she veered toward me with the most determined-looking face I'd ever seen before. And before I could register what was happening, I was on my feet, being dragged to the stage, her hand digging into mine. My head spun, my lips and fingers tingled, cold sweat prickled on my forehead, and that was when I knew I was in the grip of full-blown panic. My inner mantra kicked in. It was something that Dr. Finkelstein had taught me, phrases I needed to repeat in order to ground myself.

*My name is Lori Patty Palmer.*

*I'm seventeen years old.*

*My birthday is on the fourteenth of November, and I live at 101 The Exchange Street—wait! I didn't live there anymore. Wait! What the hell was my new address?*

"Wait!" I didn't realize I'd opened my mouth and said it until I heard Amber gasp.

"Wait, what?" She stopped pulling me.

“Wa . . . uh . . . uh . . .” My tongue tripped over the words as I tried to break free of her grip, but for someone with such delicate-looking wrists, she was surprisingly strong.

“You’re embarrassing me,” she hissed through a clenched jaw. “I get extra credits for this.”

My heartbeat felt like it was getting more and more irregular. My breathing more labored. I put my free hand on my diaphragm, *In for three, hold for four, out for three. In for three, hold for four, out for three . . .* but it wasn’t working. *Please, please, please,* don’t let this happen. Not here. Not now.

And then . . . a bloody miracle!

“Fire alarm!” someone screamed as the sound of an alarm ripped through the room and everyone scrambled to their feet again. I seized the opportunity and pulled my hand away from Amber’s. But I pulled so hard and fast, using all my weight, that Amber tumbled to the floor.

“Sorry.” I stepped forward apologetically, only to be met with an angry glare. I tried to dissipate the tension with a smile, but it didn’t work. And then her eyes trailed down to her hand. I followed them and saw three snapped, false nail tips lying on the floor next to her.

“Crap,” I whispered when her eyes came back up to mine. I could see what she was thinking. She made no attempt to hide it. *Great, day one and I’d already pissed off a girl like her.*

# 4

On a scale of *worst first days ever*, I would say that my first day at BWH was right up there with the best of them. After the fire alarm, the day had kind of deteriorated. The fire alarm had actually been a false alarm. Don't get me wrong, I was ever so grateful it had gone off when it had, but what followed was almost equally awful. The entire school was made to stand in the blazing sun at the bottom of the field, while Tasandra (yes, that was her name—with a *T*) and other members of the evacuation squad ran around clearing each room, one by one. For most students, this didn't seem to be a problem. In fact, they seemed to be having the time of their lives. A few now-shirtless guys were playing an impromptu game of rugby. Some of the girls, Amber and her gang, were lying in the sun, skirts hiked up catching a tan. *Me?* I was wearing black and sweating like a pig. I could feel the moisture gathering in all

my folds: stomach folds, neck fold, and worst of all, big under-boob fold. I was hot, and wet, and uncomfortable, and I wished I'd put on more deodorant.

After being finally allowed back into school, the next unpleasant thing happened. And it happened in isiZulu class. I'd quickly discovered that the only available seat in class was in front of Tasandra, Teagan, and Thembi (now known as the Three Ts in my head), and behind water polo Jake and his two friends. And this, I soon learned, was a special kind of hell. Because every five minutes I was tapped on the shoulder and given a note to pass. This went on for the entire class, and by the end of it, I was sure I had whiplash and seriously wished that Mrs. Ndlovo hadn't forced us to put our phones in a box at the start of class. Old-school messaging was hard work; a carrier pigeon would have been preferable.

But this still wasn't the worst part of the whole experience. During one of the routine passes, I stretched my arm too far, too hard, and heard a familiar noise. I looked down just in time to see one of my shirt buttons bounce on the floor and then skid under a desk. After this unfortunate mishap, I was forced to figure out a way of hiding my bra, which was now on full display. And it wasn't a pretty bra either, *oh no*. It was one of those double strength sports bras with extra wire and thick straps that desperately attempts, yet dismally fails, to defy the inevitable pull of gravity. So, for the rest of the day I had to walk around awkwardly clutching a book to my chest. Which might not have been so bad if I hadn't then proceeded to do ten thousand steps with Teagan, who insisted on showing me around the entire school: ". . . toilets, janitors' closet, you can make out there . . . storeroom, you can also make out there . . . gym, science lab,

bleachers, also make out, but be careful—last month Amber and Jake were caught by the hockey coach. But Jake's not really into Amber anymore because she kind of went ballistic when she caught him DMing Nina-M, 'only as friends!' She threw some dramatic air quotes around, and I wasn't sure I got their meaning. *Were they just friends, weren't they just friends?* The social structure of this habitat was so foreign to me, I wished this was a National Geographic documentary and David Attenborough was narrating the ins and outs of it all, so I could better understand it. "I think Jake made out with her because she's number one on the Hot List, though . . ." she said. "He kind of makes his way down the list. Mind you, Amber is the one who publishes the list on our WhatsApp group, so she could have put herself at one, since no one knows who makes the list every year." The Hot List, I discovered, was a list that came out once a year, rating all the girls from hot to not. Thank goodness I wasn't going to be around next year.

The tour, and Teagan's enthusiasm, seemed never ending, and it was boiling, especially with a book pressed to my chest. "And that's Vuyo, you probably *recognize* him, he's TikTok famous, the video of him flying down the stairs in a shopping cart and then wiping out got one million views, so cool . . . and that's Nina-M I was telling you about, she thinks she's this big beauty blogger because Kylie Jenner liked one of her posts or something, but really, she's not." I looked over at Nina-M; she was lying on the grass pouting at a selfie stick. I was getting a real education from Teagan all right. But it had nothing to do with the geography of the school and everything to do with getting a better glimpse into the characters that I was now forced to cohabit with.

And it was for all these above reasons that I now found myself

sitting on our cool kitchen floor after school, listening to my favorite artist, Grimes, while eating ice cream straight out of the tub with the biggest spoon I could find.

“Hey, Captain Zac Sparrow.” My brother, Zac, walked into the kitchen, and I smiled up at him. I still called him Captain Sparrow sometimes, a throwback to his pirate obsession phase. Kids on the spectrum tend to develop obsessions with things. But as quickly as they develop, they suddenly change. One day it’s pirates, and the next . . . *who knows*.

“Want some?” I passed him the spoon and patted the floor next to me. Zac is probably the only person in the world who isn’t going to judge me for eating ice cream on the floor, unlike my mother, who scrutinizes every morsel I put into my mouth. She rarely says anything, though, which makes it worse in a way.

Zac took the spoon from me and immediately scooped up some vanilla ice cream. We only have vanilla in the house because Zac only eats white foods: plain yogurt, pasta, potatoes—not the healthiest diet. We make sure to give him a vanilla “milkshake” everyday, which is really a vitamin-enriched drink, because he refuses to eat anything with colors. He says he can feel the colors fighting each other in his stomach. This idea that colors could possibly be alive and interacting with each other has always intrigued me. In art there’s a concept called simultaneous contrast; it refers to the way that two different colors affect each other when placed side by side. It’s an illusion where one color can change how we perceive the other one. But I’ve often wondered if it isn’t an illusion for Zac, whether he is somehow capable of experiencing things in life that no one else can.

“How was your day?” I asked.

“I built a mousetrap that I think can actually catch mice when I put cheese in it to lure them in but I don’t know what kind of

cheese they like yet and I only like the white cheese but maybe they like the yellow cheese or the one with holes but I don't know where to get that cheese from so I'm going to experiment with the white cheese first."

"That sounds cool. What are you going to do with the mice you catch?"

"I was thinking I could train them like they train those dogs at the airport that sniff the luggage for drugs and stuff on the conveyer belt but I wouldn't train them to sniff I would train them to be undercover spies like they have in the CIA."

"Spies. Wow." I smiled. I loved the way my brother's brain worked. While other kids were playing with toys or kicking balls around, he was engineering intricate traps, building solar-powered devices, and making electrical currents from potatoes and lemons. He's a total genius in so many ways, but ask him to do something simple like brush his teeth and it falls apart; the toothpaste tastes too strong, the water is too wet, the bristles are too hard.

"Maybe I could take the mice to my new school, and they could spy on the people there?" I offered thoughtfully and then watched him for a while, trying to gauge what kind of a mood he was in. It was always hard to interpret his moods. While the angry moods were easy to read, the subtler emotions in between were trickier. But his shoulders were relaxed, he wasn't flapping or clicking his fingers, he was eating, so I broached the subject tentatively. "How was school today? Did you try to escape again?"

"It was better," he mumbled. "Escaping was not necessary." He shoved another spoonful into his mouth and I smiled to myself with relief.

“Maybe I could make microscopic cameras that we could strap onto the mice’s heads that no one can see and they can film everything that happens at your school and then we could download it onto my computer and watch it like a movie and make popcorn,” he said through a mouthful of ice cream.

I laughed. I wanted to pull him into a hug, or kiss him on the cheek, but didn’t. He’s not great with touching; you can only touch him if he initiates it. Sometimes I crave any kind of physical contact with him.

“Ice cream in the afternoon!” We both looked up as my mother swanned in. “Not very nutritious,” she added. “Besides, milk is not actually good for us. It’s basically antibiotic-laden pus. You should google it.”

“Really?” I tried to hide the sarcasm in my voice, but wasn’t sure it was working. By her own admission, she’d gleaned this little nugget of info from Google. She’d probably also dipped her toe into the pool of fake Facebook junk that swirled around us on a daily basis. The kind that had people believing that the earth was flat, and that humans were being secretly microchipped by aliens. My mother buys into all of it. She never used to, but in the evenings when she’s all alone, you can find her frantically googling and watching YouTube videos about how the world government is made up of reptilians. I’m always amazed by her propensity to believe in the utterly unbelievable. Dr. Finkelstein said she’s probably unable to sit alone at night with her feelings, so grabs hold of any distraction she can find. Well, I could think of at least ten other, healthier distractions she could choose.

“It’s not like there’s much in the fridge,” I offered up flatly.

“It’s not like I’ve had any time to go shopping!” She sounded snappy now, and I decided to back off. No use in pointing out that

the fridge was mostly empty and the house was still largely unfurnished since the second furniture delivery truck hadn't arrived yet. It felt like we were living in a vast, hollow cavern; squatting in emptiness, waiting for our lives to begin. Our lives, which only a few days ago had been packed up into boxes, labeled, and loaded.

She sighed loudly. She did this a lot and it always made a flicker of guilt break through the general anger I felt toward her. "I'll try to go to the shops tomorrow. I wanted to get Zac settled first, and I have all these new business meetings."

"Sure," I muttered quietly, almost to myself. I didn't really believe her. I'd probably be the one buying the groceries, phoning the logistics company to track down our furniture, and filling out all of Zac's forms for his new OT and speech therapists.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

"Mmmm, I'll have to look at my busy diary and get back to you." I shoved an extra-large spoon into my mouth, pus or no pus.

"Lori Palmer. No need for that tone!" She put her hand on her hip and raised her eyebrows at me. They barely peeped over the rims of her big, designer sunglasses.

"Lori Palmer," Zac repeated. He usually repeats words when he gets overwhelmed, when things around him aren't completely calm, and suddenly, I felt bad for being sarcastic. Not because it was directed at my mom, but because it had unsettled Zac.

"Why? Would you like me to do something?" I asked as sweetly as possible.

"I've got that shoot here today. We're shooting an ad for my business. It will only take about an hour." She pulled her glasses off and looked at me.

"Mom! What's . . . why . . . what have you done?"

"Just had a little thread lift around my eyes." She reached up

and touched them gently. They were a completely different shape than what they'd been this morning. "But don't worry, the doctor assured me the redness would be gone in an hour. Besides, it's nothing my bangs can't cover." She fluffed her bangs and put her sunglasses back on, and her newly taut eyes disappeared.

I tried not to shake my head disapprovingly. But honestly, I still wasn't used to this new version of my mother. The woman who came home with a new face every so often. About a year ago she'd come home with lips that were twice their normal size, and then a little while after that, a forehead that no longer moved. It reminded me of a sculpture—flat, smooth, unmovable marble. I'd overheard her on the phone telling one of her friends that she wanted the forehead of a twenty-seven-year-old. Funny, that was the exact same age as my father's girlfriend, Maddy.

"Maybe you and Zac could go out and have a *real* snack somewhere?" She passed me her credit card; it was a dismissive gesture. The kind that told me she didn't want us here lest we interfere with the stupendously important ad for her real estate company, Palm Luxury Realty.

She'd gotten half of my father's money in their long, messy divorce, and ever since then, she'd rebranded herself as the queen of luxury real estate and cosmetic enhancement.

"Thanks, Lori. I owe you one."

*One?* In my opinion, she owed me more than one. She owed me a couple of thousand, one for every single day since *that day*. The day the doves cried.

I stood up and gestured for Zac to follow, just as my phone beeped.

DAD: How was your first day?

I put it back into my pocket without answering. I was angry with him too.

# 5

By the time I got to school for day two at BWH, I was late. Not because I'd overslept or forgotten to set my alarm, but because it had taken an eternity to get Zac to agree to go to school. I ended up stepping in after watching my mother negotiate unsuccessfully with him for half an hour, getting more and more worked up as she went. In the end, I promised that if he went to school, when we got home we could go to the beach and build a giant sandcastle with five turrets, secret passages for all the mouse spies, as well as a deep moat to keep enemies out. I also promised I would take him to school, despite the fact I was due in class in ten minutes.

At least my mother had done one thing right when she'd rented the monstrosity we now called home: the house was exactly four blocks from my new school and five from my brother's.

But that was its only redeeming feature. Not to sound like an art snob here, but this house was an affront to just about every single one of my aesthetic sensibilities, with its shiny, silver colonnade entrance, blue mirrored glass frontage, and the large lion sculptures with wings that flanked the biggest front door known to humankind. I couldn't help but wonder how we'd gone from cool, downtown industrial to . . . *this*? Whatever *this* was trying so hard to be. I guess it made sense that my mother would have chosen a house like this. Over the top, shiny facade. Screaming to be seen by everyone who drove past.

It was hot again today. The weather in Cape Town was different from Joburg. The air here was thick and sticky, like stepping into a steam room, whereas home was dry. You could move through the heat freely at home, but here it felt like it clung to you, weighing you down as the day went by.

I'd anticipated the heat today, though, and was wearing much cooler clothes and extra deodorant. I'd put on my favorite T-shirt, the one with the Andy Warhol pop art soup can print. This was my go-to shirt, and slipping it on felt like chatting to an old friend. You know why I love this shirt so much? Because it takes something so ordinary—a can of Campbell's soup—and elevates it to art. I've often wondered if Warhol was able to see things in everyday objects that no one else could see. Could he look below the surface of something and find the thing inside it that made it beautiful and special?

I finally skidded into a parking place at school thirty minutes late for class. And when I made my way up the long stairs and into the building, and managed to find the right classroom, I was utterly traumatized to discover that I was sitting next to Amber, in the front row.

*I hate the front row.* I feel like I'm being watched when I sit there, which of course, I am. The anxiety of all those eyes boring holes into your back felt overwhelming, and with Amber next to me, these feelings were only intensified. So much so that when I pulled my water bottle out to quench my dry, nervous mouth, my hands were shaking so much that I spilled water on her book, ruining the work she'd done, while also wetting her skirt. By some cruel twist of fate, it seemed I was destined to go through life at BWH continuously pissing off the likes of Amber—the one girl at school you didn't want to piss off.

And like my first day at BWH, this day also just deteriorated. Because I soon discovered that wearing a soup can on my clothing had *not* been a good idea. This became evident when the Three Ts cornered me in the bathroom.

“Do you, like, really, really like, like, *soup*, like, a lot?” Teagan asked.

I wanted to open my mouth and shout, *Do you, like, really, really like, like, saying like, like, a lot? Like?* But didn't.

“Isn't it, like, too hot, like, for soup, like?” Teagan asked. (Okay, so I'm lying about all the *likes*. They weren't really saying them, but I was imagining them in my head.)

“Yeah, I'd understand it if it was a smoothie or something,” the one called Tasandra added thoughtfully.

“*Oh em gee*, that's such a good idea!” Teagan clasped her hands enthusiastically. “We should get shirts made with our favorite smoothies on them, and then we wouldn't need to open our mouths to order them, we could just point at our shirts.”

*What. The. Hell!* Had I heard that correctly? I stared in shock, watching Tasandra and Teagan as they looked like they were really considering this as a legitimate new way of ordering their

favorite blended drinks. And then something strange happened. Thembi, the tall, golden-brown goddess, tilted her head to the side and looked at my shirt again.

“Isn’t that by a famous artist?” she asked.

“Andy Warhol,” I replied quietly.

“He did those pictures of Marilyn Monroe and the cows. I saw them when I was in New York.”

“You saw original Andy Warhols?”

“Yeah, they’re cool,” she said and then turned around. This seemed to be the cue for the other Ts to follow. I stared after them as they walked toward the door.

That hadn’t really happened, had it? Because surely someone like her hadn’t just called my shirt cool? The other two Ts had no idea who Andy Warhol was, and to be honest, a little flicker of artistic superiority had rushed through me, but Thembi . . . she seemed different somehow. There was something about her I couldn’t put my finger on. I caught one last glimpse of her arm as she closed the door behind her. The warm light from the passage beyond the bathroom seemed to accentuate the gold of her skin for a second. I mentally made a note to try to re-create that color; *how much gold would I need to add to brown to get that?*

“Teagan has a point, you know?” I heard a flush and looked up as Amber walked out of one of the stalls. Her long blond hair had been fastened on top of her head in a messy bun. The kind that you knew she’d spent hours perfecting in front of the mirror. Just the right amount of mess for Insta-worthy, curated casualness. I’d spent such a long time wishing that girls like Amber would like me. That they would open their arms and invite me into their inner girly sanctums. We would all do our hair and makeup together. Gossip about the guys and get ready to go out to parties.