

CHAPTER 1

ROYAL WE

MY FIFTH-GRADE TEACHER ONCE

said that Tara and I were the Royal We. “We didn’t like today’s lunch,” I told her after we had been served sandwiches with meat that had weird jellied circles. It was like someone had tried to turn bologna into a stained-glass window.

“May we please use the bathroom?”

“When do we get to take Lola home for the weekend?”
(Lola was the class guinea pig.)

“It’s always the Royal We with you two, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Mortson.

I hadn’t heard the term *royal we* before, but it made sense, because I always felt a bit grander when Tara was around. Being with Tara was like being in a patch of sunshine. She was the one teachers loved and the one who always got picked early for teams in PE. She was the one who got a

blue ribbon at the science fair. She was the one someone was always saving a seat for in the cafeteria. But she sat with me. And I was the one she gave the other half of the best friends necklace to.

I have contributed to our mutual royalty exactly once, when we tried out for the school Christmas concert as a duet in fourth grade. I felt a little weird, trying out for a Christmas concert as someone who does not celebrate Christmas. We sang “Winter Wonderland,” which does not specifically mention Christmas, so that no one in my family got upset. Tara said we got it because of me. But in everything else, the spotlight was on Tara.

I thought of it this way: In your typical Pac-Man lunch box, Tara was the PB&J, and I was the apple. You needed both to have a complete meal, even if one was the star. Tara was the star of our friendship.

I found out later that the Royal We was something that kings and queens used instead of “I.” Queen Victoria supposedly said, “We are not amused,” after someone told a scandalous story in her presence. Tara and I still say this whenever my brother tells a so-called joke or when my father asks me to take out the garbage. I can do the British accent with just the right amount of snobbiness.

Most of the time, everything’s better with the Royal We.

But being the Royal We hasn’t always worked out. For instance, the Royal We had to stay inside during recess three times in Mrs. Mortson’s class for talking too much.

In October, the Royal We did not win WKRZ concert tickets to see The Police. And only half of the Royal We got designer jeans, because the other half has unreasonable parents who do not see the value of “having someone else’s name embroidered on your hiney.” On top of that, this year, in sixth grade, the Royal We faced our biggest battle yet: The only class we had together was science. Not even lunch. After nearly six months in the sixth grade, no one at Dwight D. Eisenhower Junior High knew the Royal We existed.



“I have the solution,” Tara said. One of the good things about being the Royal We, even if we were invisible, was that Tara could start with a sentence like this, and I’d know if she was talking about the solution to the designer jeans problem (she wasn’t) or the solution to us not spending enough time together (she was).

“Tell,” I said.

“The musical!” she said.

“Are there duets?”

“We’ll probably be in the ensemble, being sixth graders, but it would still be awesome,” said Tara. “Because we would be together.” Then she added, “Unless you get the lead.”

“Like that’s going to happen.”

“It totally could!” That was one thing I loved about Tara: She saw possibilities for me even when I couldn’t.

The day of tryouts, Tara and I both wore purple socks, because those were our lucky socks. We had both picked out our songs and practiced. I had wanted my mom to help me prepare, because she had a good ear, but she was out of town. I was on my own, which mostly meant singing while I was in the shower or walking to school.

“I’m going to be late,” Tara said when we met by my locker at the end of the day. “You have to go without me.”

Tara got kind of quiet and drew a line on the floor with the toe of her sneaker. For a minute, I thought something was wrong. Then she said, “I made the finals of the oratory contest. I have to meet with Mrs. Loft.”

The oratory contest was a really big tradition. I suppose that’s why they called it “oratory” instead of “speech,” because it went back so many years. We all had to give speeches in our English classes, and the top students from each class competed against one another. The teachers picked six

finalists in each grade, who competed for the school championship, and the winner of that went on to compete against other kids in the county.



I'd written my speech on the world's most disastrous Thanksgiving, when my brother nearly choked to death on a piece of turkey. It got some laughs, because he survived, and my English teacher said that she was going to show it to our health teacher, who then talked about the importance of chewing before swallowing. But it was not the kind of speech that teachers liked. They wanted something that talked about how wonderful the world could be if everybody got along.

I gave Tara a hug. "Congratulations! It's an excellency!" That was our word for when something really fantastic happened. I sang it out, the way you'd sing in an opera. "You . . . shall . . . be . . . the . . . best!!!" I got super high at

the last part and held the note. Some teachers stopped and applauded.

“It’s just a speech,” said Tara.

I had heard her speech when she was practicing before school. We didn’t have to memorize our speeches, but Tara had memorized every word of hers, and when she talked, she walked around and used a lot of hand gestures. Her speech was called “Getting the Best from Yourself and Others.”

“Your speech is catnip for teachers,” I said, even though we didn’t have a cat. “But talk fast so you don’t miss tryouts.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll be there.”

Our school musical was going to be a production called *Shake It Up*, which was actually written by our drama teacher. It was set in 1958, the year that Hula-Hoops became popular in the United States. The main character, all-American girl Brenda Sue Parker, wants everyone to love Hula-Hoops because her dad owns the toy store in Pleasant Valley, a charming all-American town. But some of the townspeople think Hula-Hoops are evil because you have to shake your hips to keep them going. Brenda Sue invites world-famous hip shaker Elvis Presley to Pleasant Valley to teach the townspeople a valuable lesson about innovation and self-expression, but it is really Brenda Sue’s love of Hula-Hooping that wins everyone over.

I got the inside information from Hector, who saw *Shake It Up* when the community theater performed it two years

ago. Even if he hadn't seen it, Hector would have talked about it. He'll go with any conversational topic you give him. I've known Hector for a long time because he's my brother's best friend. He's also possibly the only student at Eisenhower Junior High who makes my brother, David, seem normal in comparison. Hector never tried to be cool; when he was excited about something, you knew it.

"Elvis had a song called 'Rock-A-Hula Baby,'" said Hector.

"Elvis died on a toilet," I said. I knew from experience that you have to volley back something to the trivia nerds, or they'll try to take over the whole conversation, and then you're trapped. I knew a lot about Elvis because I had the same birthday as his daughter, Lisa Marie.

"It's a terrible way to go. Get it? *Go*." Hector laughed so hard he made a reverse-snorting sound and people turned around to look at him.

"Speaking of going," I said. "Tryouts are in ten minutes." I was trying to stay calm, but the electric, buzzy feeling in my head was getting stronger.

"You'll be great!" shouted Hector. "Good luck!" Anyone who hadn't turned around for Hector's reverse-snorting was now turning around to see who he was shouting at.

I made a tiny wave, which I hoped Hector would take as both a goodbye gesture and a please-stop-being-embarrassing motion. Instead, he followed me into the auditorium. I wished Tara had been with me instead.