

# chapter one

News flash: It's not easy being perfect. It's actually a massively huge burden being the smartest, prettiest, best-dressed, and most popular kid at Lincoln Heights Middle School. But somehow I manage. And it's a good thing I do.

The kids at my school are like sheep. They need someone to follow. Otherwise they'd simply wander around, lost on some disgusting, smelly, old farm, or whatever it is sheep do all day long. Who knows? Who cares? Not me.

My point is this: The vast majority of my classmates crave someone to look up to, someone who is excellent at telling people what to do, how to think, and why their

haircut is hideous. I am that lucky person: Ellie Charles, in charge of, well, pretty much everything that matters here at Lincoln Heights Middle School.

Need a visual? My hair is long and wavy and caramel with naturally golden highlights. My eyes are greenish blue, kind of like an arctic tundra, except icier. I have dimples when I smile, which is most of the time, because, duh, why wouldn't I always smile when I've got so much going for me? My teeth are perfectly straight and white and I never even needed braces. I don't wear glasses, either.

Of course I get straight As but they don't come easily. I work for them and I work hard, studying for a minimum of three straight hours every single night. If my teachers don't give me enough homework, I make up my own: memorizing all the state capitals, or inventing random math problems like 173 times 465 divided by two. The answer is 40,222 and a half. I did that right now, in my head.

I'm like a human calculator except way cuter, and with a much better wardrobe.

You think I'm lying?

Guess what?

I don't care what you think. I've got more important things to worry about.

It's 3:15 and the end-of-the-day bell just rang. The halls are crazy frantic. Kids are yelling and running and practically bouncing off the walls with energy. Tonight is the Winter Holiday Semiformal. This dance is the most important event of the school year, not including graduation, and it's less than four hours away.

As president of the student council, chairperson of the dance committee, and soon-to-be valedictorian, it's my responsibility to make sure everything is perfect. This has got to be the greatest school dance in the history of school dances—not simply at Lincoln Heights Middle School—I mean school dances everywhere, in the whole entire universe, so when you Google *best middle school dance* after tonight, you'll see pictures of my handiwork.

The pressure is on and everything starts now.

I throw open the double doors to the gym and waltz on in.

The entire committee is already there and waiting—fourteen kids, personally selected and trained by yours truly, except not one of them seems to notice my entrance.

Big problem.

I slip into the one empty seat in the circle of chairs, in between two of my besties—Sofia Green and Harper

Delany. Both of them are staring at their phones, zombie-like. They don't even glance in my direction.

I groan loudly. "Ugh, what is that horrible smell? Who farted?" I cup my nose with one hand, and wave my other hand in front of my face.

The random chatter stops. Now everyone's eyes are on me—like they should be.

"You all smell that, don't you?" I ask, surveying the room. Some people nod. Others look confused. Most of them squirm in their chairs, fearfully. Except wait a second . . . not everyone is paying attention. Jeremy Hinkey is still doodling on the cover of his notebook with a black Sharpie, completely ignoring me. I narrow my eyes and point at him. "It was you, wasn't it, Germ-y?"

He looks up, startled. Soon confusion gives way to terror. Much better. "W-w-w-what?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"That smell. You farted—and I'm not talking about some innocent little blip. This was a 'silent-but-deadly' and you look so guilty right now. You may as well save us the time and admit it."

He shakes his head furiously. "No, I didn't fart. I don't even smell anything."

“Well of course you’re going to deny it,” I say, pointing out the obvious. “Because farting in public is disgusting, right?”

“Yeah,” says Jeremy. “But I—”

I cut him off before he can finish. “Thank you for finally speaking the truth, Germ-y. Don’t you feel so much better now?”

Everyone else in the room cracks up, but I raise my hand to silence them. “Excessive flatulence is no laughing matter, people. It’s a serious medical condition. Germ-y, as a concerned citizen and friend, I strongly urge you to call your doctor immediately.”

“But I don’t have a problem,” Jeremy insists. “I didn’t even fart. It wasn’t me.”

I shake my head. “I cannot deal with this now. You are totally distracting everyone and we have a lot to do, so just get out of here.”

Jeremy’s face is bright red. His eyes are glassy and he’s blinking furiously, as if trying to hold back tears. “B-b-b-but you can’t kick me off the committee. I’m helping with the decorations.”

I sigh loudly and dramatically. “No, you *were* helping with the decorations. Now you are free to leave. And don’t bother coming back tonight.”

“Wait, what? You can’t ban me from the dance,” Jeremy replies, standing up.

“Not officially,” I say. “But if I were you, I’d steer clear.”

Jeremy opens his mouth to argue, but no words come out. He’s speechless—finally. And he’s actually crying.

Here’s a secret: I love making people cry.

But I am careful to hide my joy, keeping my expression neutral, even slightly disapproving.

Kids stare in horror and disgust. Emmett and Chiara, who happen to be sitting next to him, actually inch their chairs away, as if being a loser is contagious. And who am I kidding? Of course it is.

When Jeremy finally realizes he’s got zero chance of winning this argument, that things can only get worse for him, he picks up his grubby old backpack, slings it over his shoulder, and bolts out of the gym.

“Don’t let the door hit you on your way out,” I call. Except it’s too late. The door actually does hit Jeremy on his way out. Perfect.

I could take things further, make some sort of mean joke, but there’s no point. I turn to the remaining kids. “Guys, I’m so sorry you had to see and smell that ugliness. I’m sure Jeremy is totally mortified. Poor guy. I’m going to call him later and check up on him, make sure

he comes to the dance tonight. Everyone deserves a second chance. And I do hope he calls his doctor in the meantime.”

“That’s so nice of you,” Sofia says. She reaches out and pats my knee.

Harper pats my other knee.

I nod.

Lily Brenner and Maddie Meyer, my two other best friends, nod along with me.

Actually, the entire room is nodding, possibly out of fear, but I have no problem with that.

“It’s the least I can do,” I tell everyone, with an exaggerated shrug. And it’s true.

Because here’s another secret: Jeremy is innocent. Pretty much everyone is. Yup, that’s right, no one actually farted, at least as far as I can smell. But my plan totally worked.

Now that I have everyone’s attention, I open up my notebook and begin. “Okay, we have three hours to turn this dingy little excuse for a gym into a magical winter wonderland. Everyone turn off your phones, and I mean power *off*. Switching them to silent mode isn’t good enough because I’ll still hear them vibrate, which could not be more annoying, okay? I’ll wait.”

Everyone pulls their phones from their back pockets

and purses and book bags and turns them off. Once they are done I say, "Now let's get to work. Adam Weatherby—what's going on with snacks?"

"Oh, that's me!" Adam stands, not realizing he's got his three-ring binder on his lap. It slips off and snaps open when it hits the ground. Pages scatter. He gasps as he looks at the mess, cheeks burning up in embarrassment.

Totally tragic.

I notice a math test among the mess of papers, a red C+ scrawled across the top. Reaching down, I pick it up with two fingers, crinkle my nose as if it's a rotten banana peel dipped in raw sewage, and hand it over. "Here you go, dude. Sorry you didn't do better."

Somehow Adam turns even redder.

I love it.

A few people giggle. Normally this would be an awesome thing to laugh about, but we don't have enough time. There's too much to do. So I give them my best dagger-eyed stare—silencing everyone.

"Come on, Adam, get it together," I say sharply.

"Sorry." Adam crouches down to sort out the mess he made, but he's taking much too long.

"We're not going to wait all day," I snap.

"Right. Sorry. I'm so sorry, Ellie. I don't know how that happened. I guess I just got nervous because—"

I cut him off. “Stop babbling. There’s no time.” Weakness can be so annoying. I don’t even bother rolling my eyes because he is not worth the effort. “Forget it, Adam. Someone else. Tell me what’s going on.”

“No, wait. I’ve got it.” Adam sits back in his chair and holds up a piece of paper, desperate to please. “Because of allergies, food sensitivities, and dietary preferences, Principal Gayle says we have to avoid meat and dairy and nuts and processed sugar and gluten. So that leaves us with raw veggies, sliced fruit, and unsalted popcorn.”

“Which raw veggies?” I ask, raising my left eyebrow.

“Um, carrots, cucumbers, celery, and bell peppers?” he says nervously. Like he isn’t even sure those are actual vegetables. “I bought bell peppers in three different colors—red, yellow, and orange.”

Poor guy is so eager to please he sounds pathetic, desperate. This makes me so very happy.

“And what fruit?” I ask.

“Apples and oranges?” he asks, squirming in his seat.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” I bark.

“Telling you,” he says with a nervous nod. “We’re bringing apples and oranges.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I ask.

Adam has no idea what I’m talking about. I can tell by the panicky stare he is giving me. After fumbling a bit

more with his notebook and crossing and then uncrossing his legs, he says, "Um, pears? I can probably swing some pears, as well."

"That's not what I mean," I say, voice raised, completely out of patience.

"Oh." He pauses for a moment and then says, "Thank you, Ellie. You are doing an amazing job. Seriously. Totally bang-up."

"Bang-up?" I ask.

"Sorry. Not bang-up. That's so, like, ten years ago. I am just super excited to be here on this committee with you. It's been fantastic and I—"

"You forgot beverages," I scream, interrupting because who has time for this nonsense? Not me.

"Beverages?" he asks.

"Yes, you, Adam Smeathersby, are supposed to be in charge of snacks and beverages. It says so right here in my notes. Do you need me to read you my notes, Adam?"

"Oh yeah. I mean no." He takes a deep breath and starts over again. "I mean yes, I'm in charge of beverages. Of course I know that. I'm taking this job very seriously. And I figured because of the no-sugar thing, and our limited budget, all that's left is water."

"Well, obviously. But what kind of water?" I ask.

“What kind?” he asks nervously.

“Do I have to do everything?” I ask. “Wait, don’t even answer that because I know the answer is yes, I do. I mean, come on, Adam. Who doesn’t know that water with lemon is an option? They only serve it in every restaurant in America. Have you ever been to a restaurant, Adam?”

Adam stares at me, silent and dumbfounded. For someone who was already quite pasty, I didn’t think it would be possible for him to turn paler, but he actually does.

“Well, have you?” I shout.

He finally coughs and asks, “Oh, is that a real question? Yes I have. I have been to a restaurant. I’ve been to many restaurants. Did you want me to name them? I’m not sure I remember every single one but I could try. I didn’t realize that I was supposed to—”

“Stop babbling!” I tell him, out of patience.

“Sorry,” he whispers, confused, and now on the verge of tears.

I sigh deeply. “Water with lemon and cucumber slices,” I say. “Nothing says Winter Holiday Semiformal like lemon cucumber water, okay?”

“Sure, okay. Whatever you say, Ellie. Thank you.”

“Moving on to decorations,” I say, consulting my list.  
“Who’s on snow?”

Darcy Peterson raises one hand tentatively, and then puts it down again. She’s biting her bottom lip and she tucks her dark hair behind her ears. Darcy is always tucking her hair behind her ears.

“You with the ripped shirt,” I say, pointing at her.

“Oh,” she says, flustered, looking down at herself, fingering the slight tear in the bottom of her T-shirt. “I didn’t even realize my shirt was ripped.”

“That’s hard to believe,” I mutter under my breath.

Sofia and Harper both hear me and giggle.

Darcy’s eyes go wide. She knows I’m making fun of her. Well, of course she does. She can tell by the laughter. Even though she couldn’t have heard what I said. That means she can’t say anything in her own defense. Cool trick, huh?

I feel that rush of power, of people being afraid of me.

Here’s something I learned a long time ago: The more horrible I am, the more people fear me, and the more people fear me, the more they respect me. And here at Lincoln Heights Middle School, they don’t simply respect me, they actually kind of worship me. It’s an infectious, beautiful kind of power.

“What were you saying?” I ask sharply, getting back to business.

Darcy smiles, unsure. “I have a ton of cotton balls that I’ve been gluing together. I’m thinking we can put them around the edges of the gym and they’ll look like snow cover.”

“I like it,” I say.

“And I’ve been making origami snowflakes with this beautiful silver and blue sparkly paper. And then I found a whole slew of Styrofoam balls that we can string from the ceiling. Like snowballs, in a few different sizes. I’ve already threaded them together with invisible wire,” she says. “I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s great,” I say. “Good job.”

Just then, Lily raises her hand. “We’ve also got white twinkle lights we’re going to string up everywhere. It’ll be fantastic.”

I nod. “And what about the walls?” I ask, looking toward the cluster of theater geeks.

There are five of them, all dressed in black and various shades of gray, like a uniform. They are skinny, gawky kids with pimples and braces. Two of them are girls in leggings and baggy sweaters: Dezi Arnold and Reese McGuire. The other three are boys in skinny jeans

and flannels: Jack Gonzales, Ryan Slater, and Charlie Nguyen.

“Okay, Dezi. Talk to me. What have you got?”

Dezi clears her throat and stands, pulling Jack along with her—probably for moral support because she’s too chicken to face me alone. Even though she is nervous, she also seems just about ready to burst with enthusiasm. “You wanted winter wonderland, yes?” she asks. “So we got a gigantic roll of craft paper and made mountains and a forest and, well, take a look.”

Suddenly Ryan and Charlie get up and unroll a gigantic scroll. It’s six feet tall and super wide—practically large enough to cover an entire wall of the gym. The whole scene is breathtaking. I can tell they worked hard on this, painting snow-covered mountains studded with green, spiky pine trees. Fluffy white clouds float overhead against a sparkling blue sky. There are a few snowman families scattered throughout, all of them with orange carrot noses, twigs for limbs, top hats, and bright scarves tied around their little snowmen necks in green, orange, yellow, purple, and blue. Red bobsleds dot the landscape, racing down hills with smiling children inside. The detail astounds me. This mural is so much better than I thought it would be. These kids have real talent.

Not that I'm going to tell them. I stand up and move closer so I can get a better look. Also, so I can see them tremble and sweat. They are scared of my reaction, even though any idiot can tell this work is brilliant.

There is no question. I love it. But obviously I keep this fact to myself. In fact, I don't even let on that I approve of the thing.

"This is just one wall," I say, frowning.

"Yes, we have three more," Jack tells me.

I nod, keeping my face completely impartial. "Okay, this one is fine. It can stay," I tell them.

Ryan and Charlie exhale loudly. The guys were so nervous they were both holding their breath.

It's inspiring, generating this kind of fear. It gives me fuel, like food or oxygen. Sometimes I think I need it more than water.

"Okay, so let's see the others," I say.

They carefully roll up the first scroll and then swap it out for the next one, and then the next. All three of them are similar and beautiful—each a distinct winter wonderland I wish I could step into, even more magical than I could've imagined. It's going to transform the entire gym. These theater geeks really did amazing work.

"How long did this take you?" I wonder.

"About a month of working on it after school," says Reese. "And late nights."

"Weekends, too," Charlie adds.

"Yesterday, I pretty much flunked a major history test, I think, but it was totally worth it," Jack says.

The others laugh. I can't tell if he's joking or not and I don't really care.

"Okay, let's see the fourth one," I say gruffly, so they don't forget who is in charge.

"We saved the best for last," Reese says, grinning like mad. She holds one end, while Jack pulls on the other, unraveling the scroll. And I can immediately tell what they are talking about. This last scene is different from the others. It's much more detailed. Sure, it's got the same mountains and trees, blue sky and clouds, but it's also got deer, and a family of bears in the background, and rabbits leaping across a snowy, sunlit field. It actually looks like a gigantic professional painting someone would see in a museum.

"What's this?" I ask, pointing to the animals.

"Oh, we added some woodland creatures. I thought it would be fun," says Reese with a shrug.

"You thought it would be fun?" I ask, both eyebrows raised.

She gulps. “Yup.”

“You’re right. It looks nice.” I move forward, take a closer look. That’s when I notice a few red birds circling one of the pine trees. “I’ve just got one question: Why birds? Because birds don’t belong in a winter scene—most of them fly south for the winter, like old people,” I say.

“Not every bird,” says Jack. “I did some research on this because I wasn’t sure about it, either. But it turns out there’s the red-winged crossbill, and the northern goshawk, and snow geese, all of which are depicted here in their natural habitat, so—”

I yawn, loudly and exaggerated, and wave one hand in front of his face. “Yeah, that’s enough of that, bird boy. The woodland creatures are one thing. I mean, sure I wish you’d checked with me, but I appreciate the surprise. Birds, though? Sure, some of them stick around. I know that, because I’m not stupid. But that doesn’t mean we have to include them in a mural. Because it’s still a total disconnect. They simply don’t fit into our theme.”

“Sure they do,” says Jack, standing up straighter. “As I said before, they are winter birds. It’s a thing.”

I don’t know where he gets the confidence and I don’t like it, so I laugh in his face. “I’m not interested in the

facts, nature boy. My point is, no one thinks winter wonderland and birds. The two concepts don't even belong in the same sentence, let alone on the same wall. It's totally going to ruin the entire thing. We can't use it."

"But we have to," says Reese.

"I'll be the judge of that," I reply, squinting closely at the final scroll. "And that snowman in the background? The one between the bear and that deer? He looks a little chubby."

Jack lets out a big laugh.

I whip my head around and glare at him. "What's so funny?" I ask sharply.

"Oh, sorry. I thought you were joking. You know. About the snowman being chubby."

"I would never joke about something like that," I reply. "Obesity is a serious problem in this country. Don't you people read the newspaper?"

No one answers or argues with me. Well, of course they don't. They're too scared.

Reese and Jack are still holding up the scroll in front of me. I take hold of the top edge so I can get a closer look.

"Careful, you'll wrinkle it," says Reese.

I look at her and smile.

She grins back, all friendly. Too friendly, considering

that we are not, in fact, friends. She hardly knows me. And she's lucky I let her be on this committee.

Come to think of it, why did I let her join?

Her bad attitude is almost as offensive as her bad skin. Pimples cover her forehead, nose, and cheeks. Why didn't I notice that earlier?

"You're just messing with us, right, Ellie? I mean, you wouldn't make us waste this whole thing . . .," she says. "We've worked so hard."

"Maybe we can paint over the birds," Jack offers helpfully, pathetically.

"But why should we have to?" asks Reese, standing up a little straighter, her voice getting slightly louder. "We spent so much time making them and they look really good. Plus, they belong in this landscape. Jack did the research. I know that you are in charge, Ellie, but there are fourteen other people on this committee."

"Thirteen, now that Jeremy 'Fartburger' had to go," I remind her.

Reese sighs and runs her fingers through her hair. "Fine. Thirteen. My point is, if most of us think it looks good, then we should keep it. Shouldn't we take a vote or something? I mean, why do you get to decide everything?"

Huh. People rarely stand up for themselves around

me, and to be challenged by Reese—a total nerd? It's so unexpected and kind of refreshing.

Kind of.

I don't say anything in response. Not at first. Instead, I put my other hand on the scroll.

Reese's smile starts to waver and she glances from my face to my hands.

Everyone is watching us, waiting for my next move.

The paper feels so flimsy. I'm suddenly overcome by an urge to destroy it.

Ripping it in half would be cruel, a truly terrible act. But then again, maybe these theater geeks deserve it. After all, they didn't ask me if they could include woodland creatures in the scene. And birds? How dumb. We're in eighth grade, not preschool. I could say as much, but actions speak louder than words . . .

As I contemplate what to do, I feel a gentle tug at the paper. Reese is trying to take it away from me, but subtly, as if I'm not even going to notice.

As if . . .

I pull in the opposite direction, softly at first. But then she tightens her grip, so I yank on it hard and it tears, making an angry ripping noise that reverberates throughout the gym.

Someone gasps.

Reese cries, "No!"

And it's too much for me, her being so precious about her work, about this slight tear at the top of the scroll. It's easily repairable, and even if we left it—no one would notice. I mean, who does she think she is? Michelangelo? Frida Kahlo? Van Gogh? This is nothing, certainly not enough to teach her a lesson. She wants to complain? I'll give her something to complain about.

I pull at it again, harder this time, so that the paper tears all the way. Now Reese is left holding one half of the scene and I have the other. It's terrible. Truly awful, and exactly what I needed to do.

I look to Reese, challenging her. She is stunned and speechless. Her pale-blue eyes are wide and filling up with tears.

"It's okay," I hear Jack whisper. He puts a hand on her shoulder. "We can still tape it. No one will notice."

"You think?" I ask, as I take my half and tear it again, and again, and again, until it's merely a bunch of tiny pieces. Next, I throw it up over my head like confetti.

"Oops!" I say. "Well, at least we have more snow."

Sofia laughs, but it sounds forced. I shoot her an evil look—make a mental note to deal with her later.

Meanwhile, everyone else is silent, too stunned to make a sound.

Except for Reese, who is suddenly red-faced and fuming. "How could you?" she sputters, fists clenched at her sides.

Before I can answer her, someone's phone starts to ring.

Unacceptable!

"Who left their cell phone on during my meeting?" I yell, spinning around.

No one says anything. I look toward the noise and realize the ring tone sounds familiar. Oh wow, it's coming from my purse. "Hah, that's me," I say. "Get to work, everyone. String those lights. Hang the murals. Put out the snow. Find something cool for the fourth wall. And someone grab the disco ball from the supply closet. I'll be back soon."

I grab my bag and step outside so I can answer my phone. The number on the screen is one I know, and it makes me happy.

"Hey, Daddy. What's up?" I ask, once I'm in the hallway.

"Ellie, babe. How are you?"

I sigh and reply, "Fine. Tired. Running this dance has been exhausting. You wouldn't believe the incompetence I have to deal with."

My father chuckles and says, "That's the Ellie I know and love. I'm sure you will pull it off beautifully."

"Well, I have no choice now, do I? Who else is smart enough to be in charge of this whole thing?"

"No one, babe," my father assures me.

"It's just so stressful, and everyone is super annoying. I can't wait until this whole thing is over with and I'm in Hawaii," I tell him.

"You won't have to wait for long. I'm sending a car to pick you up at your mom's house at five a.m. tomorrow."

"A limo?" I ask.

My dad chuckles instead of answering.

I frown, not that he can see me. "I'm not joking," I tell him.

"Oh, Ellie. You're too much."

"I think I'm just enough," I reply. "It's bad enough that you are making me fly coach."

"Thirteen-year-olds don't need to fly first class, Ellie. If your life is too easy now, you'll have nothing to look forward to. No reason to work hard. And speaking of . . . how is school? Still at the top of your class?" he asks.

"Of course," I tell him.

"Well, good," my dad replies. "I can't wait for you to get to Maui. You are going to love it."

"You got me my own private suite, right?" I ask. "And it's overlooking the ocean?"

My dad laughs again. "Of course, sweetheart. This is a special occasion."

"You mean us finally spending Christmas together after so long?"

"Sure, that, and I also have another big surprise for you."

"Wait, what?" I ask. "What is it? You know I hate surprises."

"You're gonna love this one," my dad says. "You did clear this trip with your mother, correct?"

Ugh. I can't believe my dad is asking me this now, when there's so much going on. My parents split up years ago and I almost always spend Christmas with my mom. Usually my dad is too busy with work stuff. He actually never takes vacations. Except this year is different. This year my dad invited me to Maui and there's no way I'm not going. The only catch is, he insisted that I be the one to break the news to my mom. They don't speak anymore. And I fully intended to tell her . . . eventually.

"Ellie?" my dad asks. "You still there?"

I glance back toward the gym, take a deep breath, and then lie. "Of course I told her."

"How'd she take the news?" he asks.

"Do you actually care?" I reply.

"Ellie, that's not fair," my dad says. "Your mother and I have our issues, but she's still your mom, and she deserves to be treated with—"

I sigh, cutting him off. "She's fine and I've got to go."

"Okay. Can't wait to see you tomorrow."

"Yup, me too. Bye," I say, and hang up.

I peek into the gym. Everyone is bustling around, working together, getting stuff done. One of the murals is already up on the wall. Darcy and Jack and Adam are stringing snowballs from the basketball hoops. Maddie and Harper are putting up the snowflakes. Everyone has done an amazing amount of work in the time I've been gone. I'm impressed. I think about joining them, pitching in to help make everything go faster . . .

And then I realize that I still have to do my nails.

I just got this new polish called Winter's Chill, the shade of which will match my dress perfectly. It only takes a few minutes to do my fingers, but I need to wait a lot longer to make sure they are dry. So I head to the football field and power walk around the track a few times. It's chilly but I can take it.

As I exercise, I work on composing a note to my mom

in my head. I think brief and to the point is key. Something like, *Hi, Mom. Flying to Maui to see Dad. Merry Christmas. See you next week!*

Actually, I don't even need to put that in a note. I'll simply sneak out of the house before dawn and then text her from the airport. My mom will understand. I hardly ever get to see my dad. He travels a lot for work and his schedule is too unpredictable. It's been almost a year since we've spent time together, and he only invited me to Maui two weeks ago. How could I say no? I can't. This is a wonderful opportunity for me. I've never been to Hawaii, and my mom would never take me to a fancy resort, even if she could afford to. It's simply not her style. And sure, with me gone, she'll have to spend Christmas alone, but what's the big deal? It's only one stupid holiday.

I blow on my nails and test the polish, gently brushing my thumb along my pinky—all dry.

By the time I get back to the gym, the entire room has been transformed.

The twinkle lights run from each corner of the room and meet at the middle. The mounds of cotton balls are bunched together in a way that looks surprisingly like snow. The three murals I approved of are up and looking magnificent. On the fourth wall, they've hung the half of

the scroll that Reese was able to save, except they painted over those stupid birds. Much better. They even scrounged together enough of Darcy's snow to cover the remaining part of the wall, so it looks kind of like a three-dimensional sledding hill.

"We're running out of time, people," I announce, checking my watch.

"We're almost done," Jack tells me, wiping some sweat off his forehead.

Behind him, Maddie and Lily are lugging the gigantic disco ball to the center of the room, where the big ladder is already set up.

Dezi follows them with a spool of invisible wire.

Jack starts climbing the ladder.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He looks at me with panic in his eyes.

"Um, I thought I was doing what you wanted me to do," he says.

"No way, you've already screwed up the scenery. This disco ball is the centerpiece of the whole entire room. It ties everything together and *I'm* going to hang it up," I say, pushing him out of the way.

I cannot believe he is trying to do this last thing, steal the spotlight from me. It's completely unacceptable.

I grab the spool of wire with one hand, and carefully tuck the disco ball under my arm. It's not that heavy, but it's big and hard to manage. I awkwardly reach for the ladder with my free hand and start to climb. As I take my first step, I realize it's actually kind of rickety. "Someone hold this!" I shout.

Sofia and Reese run over and station themselves under me, each holding on to one side of the ladder.

"That's better," I say. "Now, don't let go."

I climb another step and then another. The higher I go, the more nervous I am. I've never been excited about heights, but I'm not going to let anyone know. Fear is a sign of weakness and I am anything but weak.

I can handle this—it's only a disco ball. And once it's hung, the room will be perfect.

Taking a deep breath, I climb another rung.

"Be careful," Maddie calls up to me. I know she means well, but she sounds like a total nag. Could she actually know I'm afraid? Annoying.

"I'm fine," I bark down to her. "This is not a big deal."

I am feeling the opposite but hope no one can tell.

When I finally reach the top of the ladder I loop the wire around the middle of the beam and then tie on the disco ball.

There. Done. The ball is composed of hundreds of little square mirrors and as it spins, I see my image in miniature reflected back to me a hundred times. It's gorgeous. I'm gorgeous. But wait a second . . . Something is off.

"Is this thing centered?" I call down to the crowd below.

No one answers. I look at the ground, which seems so far away, and why isn't anyone paying any attention to me? "Hey, dummies. I asked you a question," I shout.

A few people glance up at me: Maddie, Jack, Lily.

"Is it centered?" I call again, hardly believing how far away everyone looks from here. I hope no one notices the tremble in my voice. Who knew the gym ceiling was this high?

Jack shades his eyes with one hand and squints at me. "I can't really tell from where I'm standing," he says.

Ridiculous. I can't believe I have to do everything around here. I lean back a couple of inches, trying to get a better look because these marshmallows-for-brains kids can't tell me anything. And just as I suspect, it's slightly off.

I nudge the ball to the left barely an inch. The ball sways a bit and then steadies itself and now it seems perfect.

I'm about to make my way down the ladder when I notice something odd. The face in all those mirrors? It's not mine anymore. Instead I've been replaced by some other girl. She's got dark hair, bright blue eyes, and pale, freckly skin.

She's eerily familiar and yet, I can't place her.

Of course, the more I stare the more I start to get this strange, unsettling sensation that I've seen her somewhere before. That in fact I know her well . . .

Then very suddenly, I startle and step back.

And that's when I remember I'm standing on a ladder.

I mean, I *was* standing on a ladder.

Everything that happens next seems to happen in slow motion.

It's the scariest sensation—kind of like being on a roller coaster that's flown off its track. You know things are going to be bad . . . it's simply a question of when, and to what degree.

For a few moments I seem to float in the air, breathless. And then I'm plunging down, down, down . . . speeding toward the gym floor.

I close my eyes.

I brace myself.

I crash-land.

Pain shoots through my entire body. As my head hits the floor I actually feel my brain rattle. I am . . . terrified, but more than that . . . furious.

And somehow this eclipses my pain, and actually energizes me.

I cannot believe they let me fall. My committee is full of morons. I can't decide who I'm going to scream at first, but I know it's going to be ugly. I ball up my fists and open up my eyes and spring to my feet.

"What is wrong with you people?" I shout. "Who let me fall? You guys are idiots and I hate you all!"

I scream and rant and pace back and forth, but, oddly, everyone ignores me. It's like they don't even hear me. Like they can't even see me.

That's when I realize that every single one of them is huddled around the spot where I fell.

"What is going on?" I shout, marching back over. I stop short a few feet away. Suddenly I feel cold, an intense chill that radiates out, through my limbs from my chest. It's because I see something in front of me.

Something crazy that makes no sense whatsoever.

It's a body.

Inching closer, I realize it's not simply any old body.

It's *my* body. Even though I'm standing up, somehow I'm also still lying there on the gym floor, just a little to the left of center court. My eyes are closed. I'm on my back. Legs and arms askew, body motionless. Nails still perfect.

Except, I'm also standing here outside of my dance committee's huddle.

I am standing up and I feel fine, which makes no sense at all, because I happen to be staring at my own body on the ground.

It's like I'm two people now.

But how can that be?

Unless . . .

Wait a second . . .

Have I died?