

THE NEW GIRL

THE NEW GIRL MOVED IN NEXT DOOR WHILE WE WERE ON VACATION.

Mom is making me introduce myself.

“She’s from Virginia and doesn’t know anyone,” Mom says. “I bet she’s bored and lonely.”

I’ve lived in New Jersey my whole life. I know everyone. It’s the last week of summer vacation and I’m as bored and lonely as anyone could be.

Mom’s family visited the same beach house when she was my age. We inherited it after my grandparents retired to Florida three years ago. Dad says we should get as much use out of it now as we possibly can before it’s totally underwater with the rest of the Jersey Shore. It’s not big or fancy, but it’s right across the street from a bird sanctuary, one block from the ocean, and three doors down from the summer home of international pop star Riley Quick.

I’m not making this up.

When I made the mistake of sharing this information with Morgan Middleton last year, she snorted and rolled her eyes and told everyone I was a liar. Even my former best friend, Ella—who just a few months earlier had happily posed for photos in front of Riley Quick’s house—agreed that I’d made it all up just to get attention.

But it’s true. Mostly true. Riley Quick *did* spend her summers at a beach house three doors down from mine. And everyone in Pebble Harbor still calls it Riley Quick’s House. Unfortunately I was never in town at the same time as Riley Quick. She stopped vacationing there the year I was born because she got too rich and famous for the Jersey Shore. This is just my kind of bad luck.

I think it might be worth mentioning it to the New Girl, though.

The New Girl looks like the beachy, ponytailed type interested in Riley Quick, summers at the shore, or both. She’s dressed in denim shorts and layered tank tops like all the other girls do between June and August. The New Girl has knotted her pink and purple tanks at the hip. This isn’t how girls around here wear them. Maybe that’s the style in Virginia? I don’t wear tank tops because I’m pale skinned like my Celtic, foggy bog-dwelling ancestors. My parents won’t let me leave the house until I put on a long-sleeved, UVA- and UVB-blocking button-down that is more high-tech than trendy.

I can’t see the New Girl’s face. She’s walking on her hands across the grass, just casually making her way from one side of the lawn to the other, as if using her arms as legs is the easiest way to

get around. I wait to say “hey” because I don’t want to startle her and take the blame for making her crash. I silently watch her for a few more seconds before she flips forward and lands on her feet.

“Hey!” she says, beating me to it.

Her face is red. All the blood must have rushed to her head when she was upside down. This can put a dangerous strain on the heart. The New Girl doesn’t seem at all concerned about this and I remind myself it’s not my job to get worried for her. The New Girl’s face is swiftly changing back to the same sun-kissed color as the rest of her body. Her arms and legs are tanned, her honey-brown hair is scattered with golden highlights. Her parents must not encourage her to apply and reapply sunscreen, the safest kind that’s made with titanium dioxide and thicker than paste. If she does wear sunscreen, it probably contains dangerous chemicals covered up with a coconut scent. This carefree attitude about safe sun protection will give Dad another reason to disapprove of the New Girl’s family.

The New Girl is studying me with a familiar curious look. As usual, my mind is working faster than my mouth and she’s waiting for me to speak up.

“Hey!”

It seems like the safest thing to say.