

first priority and still come through on the second and third. I don't know why Morgan wants my opinion anyway. She is smart. Like, *the way the world works* smart. She is also school smart.

I am neither.

Okay, that's not totally accurate. I am pretty good at all the parts of school that don't have anything to do with learning, studying, or test taking. The less it has to do with any of those things, the better I am at it. I'm not playing dumb like some people I know. *Boo-hoo! I got an A minus in Advanced Quantum Calculus of Geometric Astrophysics!* No. I've got years of not-great report cards to back me up. Some Satisfactories, some Unsatisfactories. Many Needs Improvements. The only Outstandings I ever got were in music classes.

And it's not like I'm *diagnosably* not-great at school either. My mom is in the medical field, so you can bet I've been tested, but I don't have ADHD or dyslexia. I don't have any learning disabilities, although Lauren says not putting anything away means I've got an episode of *Hoarders* in my future. I'm just, like, *normal* not-great at school, which makes my not-great-at-schooling very frustrating for Mom. This year I would like to be better than not-great at school (see priorities number two and number three). But pleasing Morgan (priority number one) takes up a lot of time and energy, and there are only so many hours in the day.

"Maybe we should focus a little less on stardom," I suggest, "and a little more on starting seventh grade."

Morgan lowers her sunglasses. “Seventh grade? Really?”

I clutch the arms of my chair to brace myself for The Eyeroll as epic as the earth’s orbit around the sun. The Eyeroll that can be seen from outer space. The Eyeroll with cosmic consequences.

“Why do you think so small, Ella?”

I think so small because The Eyeroll means I am an insignificant speck in Morgan Middleton’s universe.

Morgan sighs deeply, but The Eyeroll doesn’t come.

“I’m already in with all the most popular eighth-grade girls because of travel soccer. And you’re the younger sister of a Mercer High School soccer star. We’d have nothing to worry about even if our Fotobomb wasn’t blowing up, which it *totally* is.”

“What about me?” Maddy asks. “What do I have going for me?”

“Duh! You’re friends with us!”

Then Morgan ding-dongs her head in the back-and-forth way she does whenever Maddy or I say anything *too* ditzy for the brand. This gesture is playful so it doesn’t have anywhere near the same devastating effect as The Eyeroll. What a relief to finally have a best friend who doesn’t push me to be any smarter than I need to be but also discourages me from acting less smart than I really am. I don’t like questioning Morgan’s expertise, but I still can’t help but ask.

“How can you be so sure?”

Fortunately, Morgan enjoys this opportunity to assert her authority. She sits up tall in her chair, a regal pose for Mercer, New Jersey, royalty.

“Because I am a Middleton,” she says. “And Middletons are winners.”

Morgan’s mother was made the first female partner at her law firm because Middletons are *winners*. Morgan’s father moved up from town councilman to mayor to congressman because Middletons are *winners*. Morgan has been watching her parents win cases and elections her whole life.

“I’m not a Middleton,” I say, pointing out the obvious.

“But you’re a Middleton’s best friend!” Maddy replies eagerly. “Which is the next best thing to being one!”

“Listen to Maddy,” Morgan says. “She’s the *next best next best thing*.”

And when Morgan winks we all know it’s okay to laugh at the joke.

Most almost-thirteen-year-olds would happily settle for being the most popular girls in seventh grade. Until my first time on the receiving end of The Eyeroll, I would’ve happily settled for not being the most *unpopular* girl in seventh grade. But Morgan Middleton isn’t most almost-thirteen-year-olds. And now that I’ve been chosen as her BFF, neither am I. For Morgan & Ella, Mercer Middle School popularity is just a formality to pass through on the way to what Morgan calls “global multiplatform domination.” Morgan calls herself the Girlboss Goddess Next Door, which is pretty funny because nobody lives next door to her. Her family’s estate is the only house on the block, an ivy-covered mansion hidden behind a security wall. This could be off-putting to our fans if Morgan weren’t so humble.

“It’s so important to be humble,” she likes to remind me. “Name another girl who has *so* much and stays *so* humble.”

I can’t. Morgan is the humblest.

At all times, I’m expected to embody the Goofball Goddess role Morgan has assigned to me. I love singing, playing the ukulele, and making videos, but maintaining this image can be very stressful. That’s why Morgan takes all the guesswork out of status-making or -breaking decisions about wardrobe, hair, and makeup.

“It’s time for you to up your nail game, Ella,” Morgan announces.

Playing the ukulele puts a lot of wear and tear on my nails. Any cute polish I put on gets scratched off within minutes of strumming. Chipped polish not only looks bad on camera but can actually have an effect on the sound made by the strings. So far I’ve opted out, hoping Morgan would understand why without my having to explain: Perfect nails cost too much money to maintain.

“My assistant is taking us for mani-pedis the day after tomorrow.”

Izzy used to be Morgan’s nanny. About six months ago Morgan started referring to her as “my assistant.”

“But . . .” I start to protest.

“My treat!” Morgan insists. “We’re a team! What’s good for you is good for me is good for Morgan & Ella!”

And before I can say anything more, Morgan has already moved on to a monologue about a boy she’s had her eye on since

he showed up at the pool a few weeks ago. “The Mystery Hottie” is not here today. His absence, Morgan says, is *tragic*, and Maddy wholeheartedly agrees. I barely remember who they’re talking about, but I go along with the gossip because it’s more fun than being left out of the conversation.

Not for the first time this summer, I find myself asking the following question: If I weren’t half of Morgan & Ella, what would I be doing right now?

You’d be splashing around the pool with those little girls you call “fans.”

Oh no. It’s The Best Friend in My Head.

You’d stay in the water until your lips turned blue and your fingers went pruny. And when you finally got out, you’d spread your towel under the leafy maple tree and swap old copies of the Dragonologist Chronicles . . .

That’s what I did last summer. And the summer before that and before that. Baby stuff was fine back in elementary school. But we’re older now, about to start middle school and . . .

Those summers are gone.

Yes. Those summers are gone. Morgan chose me and I chose her in return.

Over Sophie.

Over me, says The Best Friend in My Head.

This time I don’t argue back.

Yes, I silently reply. *Over you.*



DISASTER

LESS THAN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, MORGAN is stomping across my bedroom, trampling right over the laundry—dirty, clean, doesn't matter now—in her platform flip-flops.

“This is a disaster, Ella!”

Like everything she's passionate about, Morgan is totally committed to pacing and can't be bothered to kick away clothes to clear a path. It's totally my fault for scattering stuff all over the floor in the first place. But since my sister left for college a few weeks ago, I'm taking full advantage of having a bedroom to myself. For the first time in my life, I can be as messy as I want to be.

“I cannot believe you lost your phone!”

After all the work we've put in this summer. All the practicing and planning, studying and strategizing. How could I be so

careless so close to the start of seventh grade at Mercer Middle School? How could I jeopardize the future of Morgan & Ella's global multiplatform domination?

"When you didn't reply to my Morning Must-Dos, I thought, okay, Ella can't text back because she couldn't wait another day to fix those janky nails!"

Morgan wiggles silver glitter fingertips at me. I sit on my hands, too guilty to even look at my naked nails.

Morgan spins, begins another lap.

"But when I factored in drying time and you still hadn't responded to my texts, I started to get worried. Like, seriously worried."

If we were at her house, Morgan would have enough square mileage to really work up an anxious sweat. But the bedroom I shared with my sister is smaller than Morgan's walk-in closet. She barely goes three paces before she has to double back over my dirty laundry.

"I started to think that maybe you had *died*, Ella." Morgan goes still, presses a hand to her heart. "Like, seriously dead, died."

I have this superannoying nervous habit of bursting into inappropriate giggles at Morgan's most serious moments. I press my lips together to stop it from happening again.

"I had your memorial ready to launch across all the socials," Morgan continues. "Ella Jane Plaza: My BFF As Only I Knew Her."

Sneaky laughter snurples through my nose.

SNNNNNNNOOOOOORRRRRRT.

Morgan has warned me that snorting like a hog will make all the boys think I'm more piggy than pretty. This, she has said, would be a tragic waste of cuteness. Fortunately, she's too caught up in my near-death experience to get upset about that right now.

"It was beautiful. All of Morgan & Ella's most loved and linked moments." Morgan sighs. "Our winning medley of Riley Quick songs at the Jersey Fresh Talent Showcase. Our stirring rendition of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the BlueClaws baseball game. Our first video to break ten thousand views!"

She stops reminiscing about my online funeral and picks up a crumpled Dragonologist Chronicles T-shirt at her feet. She pinches it like it's a sack of actual dragon poop.

"Ummm?"

"I wear it to sleep!"

"What happened to the cute PJs I gave you?" she asks. "With the ice-cream cones and kittens?"

I'm lactose intolerant and allergic to cats. Those pajamas are a tribute to farts and sneezes, but she doesn't care. Cuteness > Everything Else.

"They're around here somewhere."

I optimistically turn over the nearest pillow, hoping by some miracle to find the pajamas and my phone. I am—unsurprisingly—disappointed.

"Never, ever, *ever* show up to school wearing that shirt."

"I promise!"

I will never wear it again. Not even to sleep. That shirt is deader to me than (SPOILER ALERT!!!) FlutterFyre in book six.

“I’m worried that you’re slipping back into bad fashion habits,” Morgan says. “Make it part of your routine to ask yourself: *Does this outfit honor the Goofball Goddess within?*”

I have no clue what honors the Goofball Goddess within. Only Morgan knows, which makes sense because she’s the Girlboss Goddess. This is why I need the Morning Must-Dos to guide me through my days.

Morgan answers her own question by flinging the offending shirt into the corner. It hits the bookshelf holding the entire Dragonologist Chronicles series including all the companion maps and guidebooks. I haven’t browsed those books or any others in . . . well . . . a while.

It drove Lauren nuts that my half of the bookshelf was taken over by a library of barely-used cosmetics and off-trend accessories. In less than a year, I’ve put together an impressive beautification collection: gloppy pots of lip gloss and half-cracked cakes of bronzer, broken choker necklaces, beardless bracelets, and earrings missing their matches. My sister’s hair is *always* in a ponytail. Her idea of a bold lip is cherry-flavored ChapStick. So it’s no surprise she thinks mastering winged eyeliner is a waste of my time. Cramming for exams and kicking a soccer ball are important to Lauren’s future. Morgan insists that experimenting with different looks is just as important to mine.

I mean *ours*.