

The only thing real about reality TV is the camera.

REALITY

ALI

B
Christine
Marciniak





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Christine Marciniak

ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

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Summary: Fourteen-year-old Ali's father keeps her privacy so secure, none of her boarding school classmates believe her mother is a star with a reality television show until Ali decides to orchestrate her own fame with videos posted on the Internet, which brings complications she did not foresee.

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*For Katie and Stephen - you are
the best reality I could ever hope for.*

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Chapter 1

I formed my hands into a square, fingers pointing to thumbs, framing the Gothic-style dorm in front of me, like directors did in movies. Though, honestly, I've never seen my stepfather do that.

The camera could start with the building then pull out to a wide-angle of the campus buzzing with activity, with girls from places like Cleveland and Zimbabwe carrying everything from lava lamps to Louis Vuitton luggage inside. Then it could zoom in on me, the girl in the Mickey Mouse T-shirt standing in front of the ninth-grade dorm, biting her lower lip, her duffel bag over her shoulder.

OMG, I wore my Mickey Mouse T-shirt. How stupid. Way to not look cool if Mom's camera crew finally arrived. She'd never put me on her show if I couldn't present the right image. It was all about image for Mom.

For me, it was all about getting on her show. I'd have to change once I got settled in my room.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulder and shielded my eyes as I gazed back up at the brick building. Remington Hall—my home for the next ten months.

"Move, Ali!"

Behind me, my brother Mark had stacked two plastic storage bins and carried them both at once. His muscles strained under his polo shirt, his blond hair shone in the sun. What a show-off. Then again, Mom wouldn't be embarrassed to have *him* on her show.

"We don't have to bring everything in at once."

"Just move."

"Maybe we should wait." I scanned the crowd. Mothers tapped their feet impatiently or paced beside SUVs piled high with stuff. Upperclassmen greeted old friends. No one had a TV camera.

Then I saw them—photographers with professional-style cameras. These weren't proud parents taking pictures of the first day of school; these were actual paparazzi. My fingers tingled. If paparazzi were around, could Mom be far behind? Naturally, she'd want to be here herself when her team filmed us at boarding school.

But I didn't see Mom. I didn't see *anyone* I recognized. Yet, the photographers took pictures. *Someone* famous was here, but it wasn't Mom. And it certainly wasn't me.

"Ali, get out of my way, or I'll drop your things on the sidewalk and leave them there."

I got out of his way.

"What room?" he asked as he passed me.

My eyes drifted to the piece of paper clutched in my hand, not that I needed it. I'd memorized my room assignment and roommate's name when they first came last week.

"Three-E with Sanjita Sharma."

"Don't care who your roommate is, I care that I've got to lug this crap up three floors."

I grabbed my last bag and my pillows from the back of Mark's Jeep and followed him. The marble steps had been worn down by more than a hundred years'-worth of girls making this their home. Bees buzzed around the late-blooming yellow roses that climbed up a trellis by the front door.

Inside, girls and their parents crowded around the elevator; Mark headed straight up the staircase. People and crates and suitcases created an obstacle course. I dodged and weaved, but at the base of the stairs, I dodged when I should have weaved and bumped into a girl who walked right in front of me while studying her room assignment. The pillows I carried softened the blow as we bounced off each other.

"Watch where you're going," she snapped.

"Right back at you."

Her eyes widened a bit, and then she smiled.

"Right. Sorry."

Something about her long red hair seemed familiar, but I knew she hadn't gone to Shippen Day School with me.

"Did you go to the Stockenbridge Camp?" I asked.

"What?" She cocked her head and studied me as if I were a bit crazy.

"Sorry," I said, "It's just...Do I know you?"

"No." Her tone left no room for doubt.

"Right, then, my mistake." I took a step toward the stairs.

"No, wait," she called after me. I stopped, one foot on the bottom step. "I'm Lily Franklin. But I don't think we've met before."

“Ali Caldwell,” I held out my hand to shake hers, although the pillows and other bags made that a bit awkward. “You do look familiar.”

“I get that a lot,” she said as a girl who looked exactly like her came up beside her. “Maybe you know my sister?”

There were two of them? I would have remembered identical twins with such bright-red hair. I stuck out my hand to the sister as well.

“Ali.”

“Heather.” She looked at me curiously. “Have we met?” she said, so I probably did know them from somewhere.

“She wanted to know if we went to Camp Scommygroggins.”

“Stockenbridge,” I corrected.

“Sounds fun, but, no,” Heather opened her mouth to say more when Lily pulled on her arm.

“Come on, Dad is waiting by the van. We have to get moved in.”

“I’m sure we’ll see you later,” Heather said as Lily pulled her toward the door.

I rushed up the stairs to the third floor. The common area looked warm and welcoming, with comfortable sofas and a microwave and TV. Three of the six doors fronting it were open, and laughter and voices and the shuffling sound of things being unpacked and organized spilled out. Mark stood in the third room on the left, my boxes at his feet.

“Sorry,” I said, hurrying toward him. “I kind of bumped into someone.”

I stopped—we were not alone. In fact, what I had expected to be a bare, institutional-looking room, like Mark’s had always been when he moved in, was decorated and full of personality.

A colorful rug in bright geometric patterns covered the tan industrial carpeting between the beds. A lamp, a tiny refrigerator and a fuzzy saucer chair made the room seem very homey.

A small woman with thick dark hair in a long braid bent over one bed, straightening a green-pink-and-blue satin comforter. A girl of about twelve sat on the empty bed—my bed, presumably—and bounced a little with excess energy. A slim man with glasses stood to one side, his arms crossed, supervising. And a girl my age stood on her desk chair, putting up an intense-looking field hockey poster.

She jumped down from the chair.

“Sanjita, right?” I said.

She smiled and pushed her glasses up her nose. Her black hair fell straight down her back, but in a natural way, not an I-ironed-the-life-out-of-my-hair way.

“And I guess you must be Ali. I already know this is your brother.”

“Yeah,” Mark said, grinning so his dimples showed. “I got introduced to the whole family while I was waiting for you. This is Mr. and Mrs. Sharma and Tanvi.”

The younger sister waved, staring at Mark with undisguised admiration. Mark waved back.

“Nice meeting you all,” Mark said, “but I’ve got to get myself moved in over at Croyton.”

I followed him to the common room.

“But what about the TV cameras? When do you think they’ll get here? Don’t you think they’ll want to film us settling in?”

Mom’s reality show, *Triple Trouble*, was about her and my stepfather and their five-year old triplets. They’d been doing the show for years, but now that Sophie, Phoebe and Brennan went to kindergarten, part of each show would focus on their school day. I’d suggested to Mom that, as long as they were filming things at school, they could also do a segment on me and Mark at boarding school. True, we were in Pennsylvania, not California, and our dad had never wanted us on the show, but Mom had said it sounded like a good idea.

“Ali,” Mark said, his tone a lot kinder than normal. A pit formed in the middle of my stomach because I knew what was coming. “She’s not sending TV cameras.”

“But she said she would.” Okay, maybe not in so many words, but the intention had been there.

We’d been sitting on her veranda overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She held a glass of white wine, I had a Coke; and when I told her about my idea of a boarding school segment on *Triple Trouble* she said, “That’s an interesting idea. You’d look good on TV.”

“Whatever she said...” Mark leaned against the back of the couch. “...she’s not sending them. Think about it, Ali. They can’t simply show up and start filming. They need permissions and all kind of things.”

“How do you know they didn’t already get that stuff?”

“And...” Mark paused as if to emphasize his last point. “...she’d need Dad’s permission.”

“Dad’s in Japan.” An extended business trip he couldn’t even put off until I got settled at school.

“She’d still need his permission.”

He didn’t have to say that she wasn’t likely to get it.

I blinked hard. I guess I kind of knew all along she wasn’t coming. That no one was coming.

“Then I guess it doesn’t matter that I wore my Mickey Mouse shirt.”

“Doesn’t matter at all,” Mark agreed. He took a half-step toward me then stopped. “Listen, I’ve got to get to Croyton.”

“Right.” I resisted the urge to rush over and hug him. Mark and I aren’t big into hugs.

“I’ll call you in a little while,” he said. “You’ll be fine.”

The elevator opened, and the red-headed girls stepped out. They nodded hello and headed to the room next to mine. Mark didn’t take his eyes off them until the door shut and hid them from sight.

“Hmph,” he said with meaning.

“What?”

“Your neighbor is Hannah Flanagan.”

I glanced at the closed door as if it would provide a clue.

“That’s Lily and Heather Franklin. They’re twins.”

He gave me the kind of look only a big brother can pull off.

“Don’t you know who they are?”

Was that a trick question?

“My new neighbors?”

“*Hannah Flanagan*,” Mark repeated, as if that name should mean something to me.

And then suddenly it did.

“Hannah—” A picture of the little too-cute imp with the curly red hair on the long-running TV show *The Flanagan Family* came into my mind. “But she’s a *kid*.”

“People age even when their show is in reruns,” Mark said.

Of course he was right. The show had been canceled a couple of years ago, but it still ran so often in syndication it was like it never went away. Suddenly, the paparazzi downstairs made a lot of sense.

“Lily and Heather played Hannah Flanagan?” I could now see the precocious pre-teen in the girls who had gone into the room next door. I stared at the closed door. “Do you think they know Mom?”

“Everyone knows Margo Schaefer,” Mark answered.

“I mean do you think they’ve met?”

“Probably.”

Heather and Lily got to be on TV. They’d grown up as America’s sweethearts. They probably went to parties with my mother and all kinds of other famous people. Sophie, Brennan and Phoebe, our step-siblings, were the newest crop of America’s sweethearts. And me and Mark? No one even knew who the heck we were. It was totally not fair.

“Listen, I’ve really got to go,” Mark said. “I’ll call you later.”

He left, and I headed back into my room, where Sanjita and her family were behaving like normal families dropping someone off for the first year of boarding school. They were all there.

*If we were on Mom's show, she'd be here, too.
We'd be like a normal family.
Or at least look like one on TV.*

Chapter 2

“You won’t believe who our neighbors are,” I said, interrupting the happy domestic scene.

“Who?” Sanjita looked up from arranging pens in a mug that said **IF YOU CAN’T PLAY NICE, PLAY FIELD HOCKEY.**

“Lily and Heather Franklin. They’re twins. They played Hannah Flanagan.”

“Who?” Sanjita and Tanvi said together.

“Hannah Flanagan on *The Flanagan Family*? You know—it was on for, like, ten years.”

Sanjita shook her head.

“I don’t watch much TV. I never heard of it.”

Was that even possible?

“Well, they’re really famous,” I said.

“Can’t be that famous if I haven’t heard of them,” Tanvi said dismissively.

“I know that show,” Mrs. Sharma said. “I used to watch it all the time.” Both of her girls stared at her as if she had two heads. “It was on late. After your bedtime.”

“So *that’s* why there were photographers downstairs,” Sanjita said. “I hope that doesn’t become a problem. I like my privacy.”

In that case, maybe it was for the best Mom hadn’t sent any cameras.

“So,” Mrs. Sharma said, smiling in my direction, “your brother goes to school here, too?”

“He’s a junior,” I said. “This is all old-hat to him.”

“Good, someone who can show us the ropes,” Sanjita said.

“Plus, he’s totally hot!” added her sister.

“Tanvi!” Their mother put her hand to her heart.

I sighed. "My friends always get crushes on him. It's kind of weird."

"I'll do my best not to," Sanjita said.

"How could you not?" Tanvi said with a wistful sigh.

Mr. Sharma cleared his throat.

"Jeeta, do you want us to go with you to get your ID before we check into the hotel?"

Sanjita shook her head and pushed at her glasses again.

"No, I think that's the kind of thing I can do with my roommate."

I grinned. "Absolutely. Though I should probably settle in first."

"We'll be back to take you out to dinner," Mr. Sharma promised.

They left, and Sanjita collapsed on her bed.

"I thought they'd never go." She sat up. "I mean, I love them and all, but it gets crazy. You know how it is with family."

If my mom and dad were in the same room together it would be an entirely different kind of crazy. But I agreed and pulled the top off one of the boxes Mark had parked in the middle of the room. I dug out my sheets and made the bed. I spread the quilt my grandmother had made for me on top.

"So, what do you do for fun?" I asked as I carefully placed my stuffed bear on my pillow, smoothing the ear that ripped when I was five.

"Me?" Sanjita asked, situating herself in her saucer chair. "Field hockey, mostly."

She pushed the glasses up on her nose yet again. I would have taken her for the quiet type who spent all her free time in the library, kind of like me.

"I'm not very good at field hockey," I said and pulled my beat-up copy of *Anne of Green Gables* out of the box. "I'm more of a reader."

"Oh, I read, too, of course," Sanjita said. "But you can't spend all your time sitting and reading. You have to do something active. What sport do you play?"

Sport? I messed around on the tennis court in the backyard. I splashed around in the pool in the summer. I liked skiing in the winter, but there wasn't really a sport I could claim as my own.

"I play pool," I said finally.

Sanjita raised one eyebrow.

"Pool? That's not a sport, it's a game."

My brother had pointed that out on more than one occasion.

"But there *is* skill involved." I put my snow globe of the Eiffel Tower on the shelf over my desk and hung my school uniforms in the closet.

"Yes, there is skill," Sanjita agreed with a complete lack of conviction.

I wasn't about to start an argument on the merits of pool as a sport. Mark had already worn me down on that topic.

"Where should I put these posters?" I held them up—one of waves breaking on a beach, the other of Chet Arnold, star of *Cool School*, with his surfer-boy good looks. Totally the cutest guy on TV, bar none. One of these days maybe Mom would even introduce me to him.

"That is one show I *do* watch," Sanjita said, eyeing the poster. "Put him over the bed—he'll smile down on us while we sleep."

I giggled and agreed.

I hung the other poster over my desk; perhaps it would soothe me while I did homework.

"I guess I'm unpacked," I said with one more look around the room. "Let's go get our IDs."

Sanjita looked up from the student handbook.

"That's all you have? Didn't your packages arrive? I shipped stuff a week ago from Texas so I'd be sure it was here."

"I live right here in Pennsylvania," I said. "I didn't ship anything."

"Then why don't you have much stuff with you?"

"Because of my brother," I said. "He said most people bring a lot more than they need, and it stops them from developing their 'school personality' because it keeps them trapped in their 'home personality.'"

Sanjita shrugged. "I'm not sure I wish to have dual personalities."

I rubbed my chin as I thought that over. She had a point. Maybe I did under-pack.

"If I need more stuff I can always have Mark drive me home. It's less than an hour." I headed toward the door. "Let's go get those IDs."

The door next to ours opened as we stepped into the common area, and the famous twins looked at us and we looked at them. Before I had a chance to introduce Sanjita, she blurted out, "Ali says you guys are famous—is that true?"

My face got hot all the way to my hairline, and I tried not to groan. The twins would think I was a total clod. I started to stammer some kind of lame response, but the one in the white tank top—I couldn't remember if she was Lily or Heather—said, "No. We used to be, but we're not anymore."

The other sighed and held out her hand to Sanjita.

"I'm Heather, this is my sister Lily. We used to be on *The Flanagan Family*."

Sanjita introduced herself and said, "I never watched your show, but my mom said she saw it."

"Seriously?" Lily asked. "You never watched it?"

Sanjita shrugged. "I've never been too into pop culture."

Lily let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness!" She linked arms with Sanjita. "I get so tired of people always thinking they know me because they've seen me on TV."

If my face wasn't red before, it certainly was now. But I'd only asked her if I knew her. It wasn't like I'd tried to be her best friend or anything.

"We're going to get our ID pictures taken," I said. Sometimes the wisest course of action is simply to change the subject. "Want to come?"

"We already got ours," Heather said, "but we'll walk over with you. We need to get our books."

We headed out to the student center, Lily and Sanjita in animated conversation in front of me and Heather.

"Don't mind Lily," Heather said as we walked down the slate sidewalk under the green canopy of elm leaves. "She's got a bug up her butt about not wanting to be famous anymore."

"Really?" I stared at Lily. "Why would anyone not want to be famous?"

Heather smiled.

"Exactly!" She linked arms with me as Lily had done with Sanjita. "It's good to have someone who understands."

She spent the rest of the walk telling me stories about times she'd snuck up on paparazzi instead of the other way around.

"You have to have fun in life, you know?"

I couldn't have agreed more.

Once at the student center, Sanjita and I got in line for ID pictures while Heather and Lily headed off to the bookstore. In front of us, a lanky guy with floppy brown hair scanned the area with a video camera. The camera swept past us then doubled back.

"So, who are you?" he asked. "Be recorded for posterity."

I stood a little straighter and tilted my head the way I'd seen Mom do when a camera was trained on her.

"I'm Ali." I made sure I enunciated and smiled, but not too big a smile. Too big a smile made you look like an idiot. "This is Sanjita. And who are you?"

"Liam. Tell me something interesting about yourselves."

"Is this some kind of a pick-up line?" Sanjita asked.

"It's working," Liam said, a grin spreading across his face. "You're talking to me."

He had a point.

"So, do you videotape everything?" I asked.

"I'm documenting my boarding school experience to put on the web."

This was fantastic! I forgot about looking cool on camera as my eyes opened wider and my mouth dropped open.

“A boarding school reality show!”

“No.” Liam rolled his eyes and stuck his camera in his pocket. “Not some goofy reality show.” He made it almost sound like a bad word. “I’m making a documentary.”

I grabbed his arm. I had to be a part of this.

“Can we be in it?”

He looked at my hand on his arm, and I removed it.

“Everyone can, that’s the whole idea,” he said.

“Yes!”

“Not me,” Sanjita said, sticking her hands in her pockets and taking a step back, almost bumping into the person behind her in line.

“It’ll be fun,” I said.

“How do you know it will be fun?” Liam asked, tapping his foot. “It’s *my* documentary.”

I cocked my head and narrowed my eyes.

“Don’t you want it to be fun?”

“I don’t want my project hijacked by some *Gossip Girl* wannabe.”

“Next!” The woman at the desk called, and the kid in front of Liam went up to have his picture taken.

“I’m no *Gossip Girl* wannabe.” How dare he? “I have ideas. And I know something about the business.”

That last part might be a bit of a stretch, but I was sure I had picked up things from Mom and Dennis simply by being around them, kind of like osmosis.

Liam shrugged in a way that could have meant anything. Then he went to have his ID picture taken. After he got his ID, he left, not even waiting for us.

“What do we need next?” Sanjita asked me once we had IDs in hand. “Schedule?”

I scanned the building. There were clusters of students by the snack bar and the arcade and lining up in the bookstore, but I couldn’t see which direction the boy with the camera had gone.

“I don’t see him.”

“Who?” Sanjita asked. “That boy? We don’t need him. Where do we go for schedules?”

But I did need him. His idea was perfect. A show about school. Mom would see me in it and know she needed to put me on her show. I needed to find him again.

Sanjita looked at me, waiting for an answer.

“Oh, yes. Schedule. Upstairs, I think.”

And that’s where we found Liam, standing on line for his schedule. We got behind him.

“You didn’t wait for us,” I said.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to.”

“I want to talk to you more about your documentary idea.”

“What’s there to talk about? I have the idea and the camera. I don’t think I need you to make my idea work.”

“Next!” a woman called, and Liam left me standing there as he went to get his schedule. Once again, he left without waiting for us.

“What is it with him? It’s like he doesn’t want us to be on his show.” I said to Sanjita after we had our schedules.

“I don’t think he does,” she said. “Should we hit the bookstore next?”

“Ooh, good idea. Maybe he’s in the bookstore, too.” I led the way back downstairs.

“Why do you want to be in his documentary so much? Documentaries are usually boring.”

I turned around and stood in front of her on the stairs.

“But I could make it *not* boring. If he would listen to me. It could be like a reality show. Only about boarding school.”

“And would someone get kicked out of the dorm?” Sanjita walked around me and continued down the stairs.

“No!” I hurried to catch up with her. “It would be a peek inside our lives. To see what it’s really like.”

“We don’t even *know* what it’s like yet.”

“But we’ll find out.” I followed her into the bookstore. “And we can share our discoveries with the audience.”

“Not me.” Sanjita scanned the shelves for the books she needed.

“Why not?”

“I sound silly on video,” she said as she picked up a geometry book.

“*Everyone* thinks they sound silly.” I grabbed one for myself.

“If I do something embarrassing it could end up as some YouTube video that people all over the world watch and laugh at. I don’t want that.”

“But that’s part of the fun—getting people all over to know who you are.”

Sanjita moved to a display of pens.

“It’s not for me.”

I looked up and saw Liam on the other side of the store.

“There he is. I’ll be right back.”

“Leave him alone,” Sanjita said.

“I can’t miss out on this opportunity.” I hurried across to where Liam looked through a rack of sweatshirts with the Bryant Academy logo on them.

“I’m glad I found you again,” I said.

He actually groaned.

“Do you ever give up?”

I grinned at him.

“No.” I fingered a white sweatshirt. “Hear me out.”

“I don’t like reality shows. They’re all stupid.”

“I’m not talking about someone eating bugs or anything. I’m talking more like one of those family kind of shows.”

“What? Like that stupid *Triple Trouble* with Margo Schaefer and her annoying triplets? I don’t think so.”

He walked away, leaving me standing there, my face burning, among the sweatshirts. Annoying triplets? Yeah, I kind of had to give him that one. But the *show* wasn’t stupid. And we could do something that awesome here, if he gave me the chance.

Chapter 3

Sanjita and I left the bookstore laden with books and supplies.

“My parents will be here soon to take me out to dinner,” she said. “Do you want to come with us?”

My parents weren’t even in the same state as me, and hers were treating her to dinner.

“I don’t want to impose,” I said.

“No, really, it would be fine,” she assured me.

But I shook my head.

“No, that should be family time. It will be awhile before you see them again.”

Sanjita didn’t insist any further. I don’t think she really wanted me along, but it was nice of her to ask. I’d track down Heather and Lily and do something with them.

My phone rang; I juggled my bags until I could get it out of my pocket. It was Mark.

“Just calling to check in. You managing?” he asked.

“But of course,” I said. I scanned the student center and saw him, over by the pool tables. “Hey! Are you playing pool without me?”

He looked around and waved.

“I do lots of things without you, kiddo.”

“I’ll be right there.” I hung up. “My brother is over there,” I said to Sanjita. “I’m going to go play pool with him. Have a good time at dinner.”

She headed out the door, and I pointed myself in the direction of the pool tables. Mark wasn’t there alone. The other guy lined up a shot and missed. He stood up, and my heart caught in my throat. His light-brown, almost blond, hair fell across his eyes in a way that made him look like he

should be on the cover of *Teen Scene* or something. Extra-long lashes made his hazel eyes stand out. He was several inches taller than me and lean and muscular. I was totally in love.

“Hey, Ali,” Mark said.

“Hi, Mark,” I said, but I didn’t take my eyes off of Cute Guy. “Who’s your friend?”

Now Cute Guy smiled at me. He had a smile that could melt ice cream.

“I’m James,” he said, leaning on his pool cue. “And I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of meeting before.”

“No, I’m new,” I said, “and I don’t know too many people here yet. Just my brother, of course. I hope you didn’t think he was my boyfriend or anything.” *I should stop talking now.* “I don’t have a boyfriend yet. I barely met anyone here. Just some girls.” Why was my brain not sending my mouth the right signals to stop talking? “No one who would be a good boyfriend. Except you, of course.”

OMG. I slapped my hand to my mouth. I couldn’t look at him. Instead, I focused firmly on the felt of the pool table. Thank goodness Mom hadn’t bothered to send any cameras today.

Mark moved to directly in front of me.

“He’s too old for you.”

My eyes shot up to his face. He was completely serious. And a complete idiot.

“What is he—sixteen, like you?”

“I’m only fifteen,” James said from the other side of the table.

“See. Not too old for me. I’m almost fifteen.”

“In nine months.”

I shrugged. Whatever. Close enough. I smiled at James, hoping he could overlook my clod of a big brother.

“So, how do you two know each other?”

“We play soccer together.” James returned my smile. “Hey, Caldwell, you never told me your little sister was so hot.”

I ducked my head so my hair might hide how red my face was certainly turning.

Mark swung around and glared at him.

“No hitting on my little sister.”

James smiled, and my heart absolutely melted. He had to be my high school boyfriend. He was almost as cute as Chet Arnold.

I jabbed my finger into Mark’s chest.

“Listen, big brother, we may go to the same school, but you better stay out of my love life.”

He smiled that slow smile that made my friends go crazy and shook his head.

“No way, kiddo. I take my responsibilities as big brother seriously.” James racked up the balls on the table.

“How about a game of Cutthroat—then your sister can play, too.” I smiled at him, having to peer around Mark to do so.

“My name is Ali.”

“I like it,” he said. “It suits you.”

Mark glowered but didn’t argue. Instead, he got ready to make the break.

“You should let Ali break,” James said.

How sweet. A cavalier. High school was going to be awesome. I could feel it.

“No,” Mark practically growled. “Ali will go last.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” James said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I like going last.”

Mark made a good break but didn’t sink any balls. James went next, and the cue ball whiffed past everything. I chalked up the cue Mark had handed me and studied the lay of the table. Finally, I picked a shot.

I sank three balls before I missed.

“You’re a shark!” James said, his mouth hanging open.

I couldn’t resist the urge to blow on my fingers and rub them against my collar. Now would have been a good time for cameras. If I could direct and orchestrate my own show, I’d be golden.

“I like the game. And it’s all about math and physics. Objects have to react in a certain way to a force and...”

“Yeah, Ali, whatever,” Mark said. “Step aside.”

James didn’t seem to be in any hurry to take his turn.

“Will you teach me?” he said.

My mouth dropped open, and my cheeks burned.

“Um. Yeah. I can do that. Sure.”

Mark leaned on his cue, looking at us with narrowed eyes.

“You don’t need my little sister to teach you pool.”

“I don’t think she minds,” James said.

A smile spread across my face.

“I don’t mind.” I could start the lessons right now.

I scanned the table, looking for a good shot to suggest to James. Music spilled over from the arcade games, making it hard to concentrate. The two-ball was in the best position, but before I could suggest it, a shadow fell across the table. Heather and Lily stood there looking utterly adorable.

James stopped studying the balls and studied the girls instead.

“The Flanagans!” he said; his whole face lit up as he smiled. “You’re Hannah Flanagan.” His forehead wrinkled slightly. “Well, one of you is.”

I only knew who was who because Lily still wore her white tank top and Heather had on a cropped T-shirt.

“I’m Lily Franklin,” Lily said, giving a smile that revealed a dimple on the left side of her mouth, “not Hannah Flanagan.”

“And I’m Heather.” She shot her sister a look. “But we did play Hannah Flanagan.” Heather had a dimple on the right side of her mouth. “Did you watch the show?”

“Sure,” James answered. “Didn’t everyone?”

“The show is over,” Lily said, her voice sweet but her tone firm, as if she had said this a few too many times. “Does one of you know where we can find the infirmary?” She held up an inhaler. “I’m supposed to check in there about this.”

James stood up straighter and laid his pool cue across the table.

“I’ll show you. I’m James Reinhold.” Suddenly, he had an arm around each of them. “I’m in my second year, so I can answer any questions you might have. Anything at all.” He walked off with them without even bothering to turn around and say good-bye.

Mark waited until they were out of earshot before saying, “I guess he won’t be needing lessons after all.”

My stomach squeezed into a tight ball.

“Oh, shut up.” I took my turn and missed. I let out a sigh and tapped the cue on the floor. “I’m going to be famous someday.”

“Not for playing pool, you’re not.” Mark said as he lined up his next shot.

“No, not for that,” I agreed.

He sank a ball and took another turn. I tapped my foot while I waited. He missed and stood up.

“Okay, so what are you going to be famous for?”

“What?”

“You could be the weird lady who lives with a hundred-and-ten cats,” Mark said. “Or discover the cure for cancer. How do you want to be famous?”

“I want to be on TV, like Mom. I want to be on talk shows with her like the triplets are. I want to be on magazine covers with her. I want everyone to know who I am and to drop whatever they’re doing to hang out with me.”

“Seems like more trouble than it’s worth.” Mark re-chalked his cue. “Everyone watching your every move to see if you do something stupid. No privacy.” He grimaced.

“But Mom does it. I could be like Mom.”

“Why would you want to?”

I turned my back to him and studied the pool table for the next good shot.

“So she’ll notice me,” I mumbled.

Mark gently rested his hand on my shoulder for a second, but I didn’t turn to look at him.

“Let’s finish this game,” I said.

I won, of course, and Mark walked me back to Remington Hall. Sanjita was still out to dinner with her parents, so I had the room to myself. But I wasn’t sure what to do. I could mess around online. Or...

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I could text Mom. Find out for certain if a camera crew would be here or not. Maybe they did need to go through some final red tape, and they’d be here tomorrow. Or I could call her even, let her know I’d gotten to school safely. She’d probably want to know that. Especially now with Dad in Japan and no one local to keep tabs on us.

My finger hesitated over the keys. She really didn’t like to be disturbed on-set. Maybe it wasn’t a good time to call. Then again, I was her daughter, her oldest daughter. She should be happy to hear from me.

I made the call.

She answered on the second ring, sounding distracted.

“Is something wrong, Ali? Because I’m very busy.”

“No, everything’s fine. I wanted you to know I got to school all right.”

“I had no doubt you would.”

“And I was wondering...” I traced my fingers over the stitches on the quilt.

But she wasn’t listening to me at all.

“I’ll be right there,” she said to someone else. “Ali, I have to go. I’ll see you at Thanksgiving.” She sighed. “Though that might be a problem. They’re planning on filming a Christmas special here that week. Do you think you can make other plans?”

That was her week with us. One of two. She didn’t want us there?

“Never mind,” she said quickly, “I’ll speak to your father about it. Now, what was it you called about?”

I couldn’t ask her now. If she didn’t even want us on her Christmas special then clearly they weren’t sending cameras to the campus.

“That was all,” I said.

“Okay, then. Have a good school year,” she said and hung up.

For a moment, I listened to the silence on the other end of the line. Finally, I put the phone down. Through the tall French windows a colorful variety of people wandered back and forth past the the old ivy-covered build-

ings. It was the perfect setting for a reality show. Kids—on their own, living together, never able to get away from all the drama. I sighed and rested my chin on my hand. It would have been great.

A couple of doors slammed, and the elevator dinged. Dinnertime. I headed out.

Most people walked with their roommates, talking and laughing. I held my head high. There was nothing wrong with going down to dinner by myself, especially on the first day. But once I had my tray loaded up with chicken Parmesan and pasta and Caesar salad with extra croutons, I searched for a familiar face.

I spotted Liam, scanning the room with his video camera, sitting at a table by the window. I headed straight for him, put my tray across from his and sat down.

“With the lighting in here, your video will look all grainy.”

He put the camera down and glared at me.

“Don’t you think I know how to operate my own camera?”

“Sure,” I said and broke my roll open so I could spread butter inside. “But it’s too dark. You’ll get a lot of shadows. And it will be grainy.”

He looked up at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

“There’s plenty of light.”

I shrugged—I couldn’t *make* him take my advice. But I’d seen how the sets of my mom’s movies were often lit to be brighter than outdoors. Anything less, a light guy had once told me, and it doesn’t work.

Liam took a bite of his chicken, chewed and swallowed, then said, “So, where’s the other one?”

Other one? Did he think I was one of the twins?

“The girl you were with in the student center,” he prompted.

“Oh! Sanjita. My roommate. She went out to dinner with her parents.”

He nodded. “That’s where my roommate is, too. I could have gone with him, but I wanted to try to get some good footage tonight.”

People clustered at tables, the smell of chicken and cheese and marinara sauce wafting around them. Laughter rose and fell, and the conversation was a dull indistinguishable roar.

“It’s a good idea,” I said.

“What is?” Liam asked, shoving a piece of bread in his mouth.

“A documentary about boarding school. There’s so much possibility for tension and drama. It’s all right here. Different kids away from home, thrown together twenty-four-seven. It’s the kind of thing that would make it big on regular TV.”

He put his bread down a little too hard on his plate and splattered marinara sauce.

“I told you—I’m not interested in some *Gossip Girl* wannabe hijacking my film.”

“So you said.” Maybe I should pick up my tray now and leave. But that would be giving up, and Mom never gave up. Why should I? I put down my knife and fork and leaned toward him. “I have a plan.”

Liam sighed. He reminded me of my big brother when he sighed like that.

“I’m sure you do,” Liam shifted in his seat. “But this is *my* project.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Your project.” I waved away his objections. “Every documentary needs a focus, though, right? Even the ones on lions in the Serengeti focus on a particular lion family or whatever.”

“What’s your point?”

“What’s *your* focus?”

“I don’t know. School stuff,” he said. “Why, what do you think my focus should be?”

I smiled my most winning smile.

“Me.”

Chapter 4

“Will I have to talk?” Sanjita asked.

“Not if you don’t want to,” I answered.

She glowed from our hour of intramural field hockey. I, on the other hand, was merely tired and sweaty. I hate field hockey, but I’d made a deal with her—I’d play an intramural game, and she’d play pool with me for Liam’s first video.

“Can he not film my face?”

“I’m sure,” I said.

I wished I’d built in time to take a shower between playing hockey and being filmed. As it was, Liam would be waiting for us, and I couldn’t risk him leaving. He wasn’t completely sold on the idea of doing his documentary as a “day-in-the-life-of” featuring me.

All he needed was a little bit of success. If we got good footage, and he got good ratings—or whatever you called it for internet videos—he’d want more. That’s how Mom always worked.

Once in the student center, I headed straight for the vending machine and bought a bottle of water. Sufficiently rehydrated, I looked around for Liam. He sat on one of the blue industrial sofas watching me. I smiled and waved.

“You’re late,” he said as I got closer.

“Only a few minutes. Are you ready?”

“I don’t think this will work.”

“Way to have a positive attitude,” I said. “Let’s go play some pool.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Sanjita sighed.

I let her break, and when my turn came, I sank four balls before I missed. I straightened up and saw her staring at me open-mouthed. Behind the camera, Liam grinned.

Before Sanjita could take her turn, James and the twins walked up. There should be a law against a guy looking that cute. He smiled at me, and my knees almost buckled.

“She’s a pool shark,” he said, putting two fingers on the felt top of the table.

“Why is everyone always so surprised that I’m good at pool?” It wasn’t that I didn’t like surprising people, but did they always have to be so shocked?

“Because you’re so darn cute,” James said. “You don’t fit the image.”

He called me cute. I wanted to run and leap and fly like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer when the little doe called him cute. But Jim’s arm around Lily—or was it Heather?—kept me grounded. I made sure to smile brightly—I don’t give up easily.

“That’s me, always breaking out of stereotypes.” I leaned on my pool cue, grateful that I had something to stabilize me. “Do you still want lessons?”

“Sure. You can teach Lily and Heather, too.”

I blinked once, twice, but didn’t let my smile fade. That was not what I’d had in mind.

“Sounds good.”

“What’s with video guy?” Lily-or-Heather asked. I really needed to figure out how to tell them apart—other than the dimple thing. I mean, they weren’t always smiling.

“I’m making a documentary about boarding school life,” Liam answered, not putting the camera down.

“A documentary?” She put her hand in front of her mouth as if stifling a yawn. “Bo-oring! You need to do short and snippy. Something for the YouTube generation.”

“Who *are* you?” Liam asked, finally coming out from behind his camera.

“Heather Franklin.”

She held out a hand, and he shook it.

“Liam Waters.”

“I grew up on camera,” Heather said. “I know a thing or two about the process.”

“We’re doing a ‘day-in-the-life-of.’” I said.

“Could work,” she acknowledged with a thoughtful nod. “If the person you’re following is interesting enough.” Her attention was still all on Liam. “Who *are* you following?”

“Me!” I said, my eyes narrowed, daring her to say I wasn’t interesting enough.

James stepped back from the table.

“Don’t let us interrupt you.”

I couldn’t let him leave. I needed time with him to win him back from Heather-and-Lily.

“I can give you a lesson after I finish this game.”

“And then we’d get to be part of this documentary?” James asked.

“Not me,” Lily said. She was the one James had his arm around. “I’m through with cameras.”

“Have it your way,” Heather said with a shrug.

Sanjita took her turn and missed. I concentrated on lining up my next move.

“This isn’t very interesting,” Heather said as I took my shot, causing me to miss. “Not good footage. There’s no conflict. No reason to care about the characters.”

I stood up and leaned on my pool cue.

“It’s a ‘day-in-the-life.’ Plus, he’ll edit it later.”

“Would *you* watch a video of two people playing pool?”

“There was a whole movie about people playing pool. With what’s-his-name—Paul Newman.”

“Yeah, and Tom Cruise. But there was a story to it. A reason to care who won,” Heather said. “What’s the story here? Why should I care who wins or loses?”

Liam put his camera down.

“So, what do you suggest?”

“Turn the camera back on,” she said.

Liam did as she said, and Sanjita played her turn as if nothing was wrong. Heather tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled at the camera as if she were telling a secret to her best friend.

“I can’t play pool at all. At all!” She pointed toward the pool table, and Liam followed her finger with the camera. “Ali is a shark,” she said, while I stood there like an idiot, leaning on my pool cue watching her. “She’s going to teach me how to play.”

She indicated for the camera to follow her finger again. This time she pointed to James.

“So that I can play against this total hottie without embarrassing myself. Do you think she can do it?” She winked at the camera.

She had taken over my show. She’d made herself the star and me a bit player. How had this happened? And more important, how could I fix it?

She turned to me.

“Go on, take your turn, let everyone see how good you are.”

“Right.”

Like a sheep, I did what she wanted, finishing the game against Sanjita. There had to be a way for me to reclaim the spotlight. I could teach her improperly. I could embarrass her while she tried to learn. No, that would make me look like a jerk.

Heather held out her hand for Sanjita’s cue, and she gave it to her. James looked on, his arm still draped over Lily’s shoulder.

“I thought I was teaching *you*,” I said to him.

“It will be more interesting to see you try to teach Heather.”

“I know!” Heather said, her eyes lighting up, “Ali can coach both of us while we play each other.”

“Perfect!” James said and reached for my cue.

I had totally lost control of this situation. But maybe they knew what was best. I mean, Heather had spent her life on TV. Maybe my way *was* boring. I licked my lips and took a deep breath.

“Okay,” I said. “Who’s going first?”

“Make sure you get my good side,” James said to Liam before leaning over the table, ready to make the break. But his form was bad.

“No,” I said. “You need to put your hand like this.” I showed him and moved his hand into the proper position. His skin was so warm. I didn’t want to take my hand away, but I did so he could make the shot.

He sank one ball on the break and as soon as it went in Lily cheered.

“That was great, James.”

He took another shot, and the cue ball didn’t hit anything at all. He didn’t seem to care as he stepped back so Heather could have her turn. I watched her set up and moved in to correct her form, but she was stiff and unresponsive.

“Maybe James should show me—he learned the lesson so well from you.”

I blinked at her for a second. But James was more than happy to get close to Heather and correct her form. His hand lingered on hers a lot longer than necessary.

She sent the cue ball careening across the table, but it didn’t hit any other balls. He lined up his next shot and took it—a bad shot, as it turned out—before I had a chance to correct him. Then Heather turned to him for advice. What was I even doing here? James had taken over the personal instruction.

Sanjita got a soda and came back to stand next to me, watching James and Heather play.

“Are Lily and Heather that much more interesting than I am?” I asked her.

“Eh,” Sanjita said, rather noncommittally. “They’re kind of exotic and flashy.”

“And I’m...?”

“Not.” She took a long drink of her soda. “I thought this video was supposed to be about you.”

“I lost control.”

“So, get it back.”

I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath. I didn’t know quite what I planned to do or say, but I had to do or say something.

I walked up to the pool table and laid two fingers on it like James had earlier.

“So, what does this prove, exactly?” I asked. “It’s like the blind leading the blind.”

Heather and James both stopped and stared at me.

“Neither of you has the slightest idea how to play,” I said, looking from one to the other, then sending one pointed look at the camera.

They continued to stare.

“No form. No style.” I shook my head and took the cue from Heather. “You can’t blindly hit the ball in any old direction and hope it hits something. You need to aim, to strategize.” I looked straight at the camera. “The thing to remember about pool is that it’s all about the angles. It’s physics and geometry.”

“Sounds like a math lesson.” Heather put her hand in front of her mouth as if stifling a yawn. “I thought this was supposed to be a game.”

James watched, leaning on his pool cue. He might not be mine, yet, but I didn’t intend to simply take myself out of the running.

“*Life’s* a game, isn’t it?” I asked, turning to her. “After all, it’s all about how it’s played.” I held her eyes, and she stared right back at me. I wasn’t sure what kind of game we were playing, but I knew I wasn’t giving up without a fight.

And then she smiled—somehow, I’d won the battle.

“Well played,” she said. “So, are you going to show me how to make this shot or not?”

“First, this isn’t the shot you want to make. You have a better chance with the nine ball.” I swung around to go to the other side of the table.

“Ali!”

The shout of warning came as I collided with a huge guy carrying a tray of food. With a crash, soda and onion rings covered me, the floor and the senior I’d walked into.

“Dude!” the guy said, examining the mess. “You okay?”

All activity in the student center stopped so everyone could watch the two of us in the middle of our mess. Liam’s camera focused on us. My face flamed. Leave it to me to take my moment in the spotlight and turn it into an *America’s Funniest Home Videos* bit.

Lily handed me napkins, and I started to wipe off some of the sticky residue.

“I’m fine,” I assured the guy whose food I had spilled. “And very sorry. I’ll buy you new food.”

He waved away the suggestion.

“No worries.”

“I think you can turn off the camera now,” Lily told Liam.

“Will you put this on YouTube?” the senior asked. “Cool.”

Wait. What did those viral videos and *AFV* videos have in common? They were funny. And this might be messy, but it was funny, too.

“No!” I held up a hand to stop him as I tried to wipe soda off my legs. “Day in the life, right? Why stop?” A laugh bubbled up inside me.

“You wear your food so well,” Heather said, clearly laughing with me, not at me.

“Thank you!” I executed a mock bow. “It’s what all the fashionable freshmen are wearing this year.”

“I don’t know. I think you need more accessories,” Heather said and hung an onion ring from my ear.

I laughed even harder.

“Oh, yes. That is clearly the touch I needed.”

A janitor showed up with a bucket and mop. The big dude went back to buy more food.

“I’m going to shower now,” I said. Liam still pointed his camera at me. I waved my finger in front of the lens. “Day in the life or not—you are not following me there.”

“Fine,” he said. “We’ll leave that part up to the imagination of our viewers.”

“The imagination will be working overtime on that one,” James said. My face burned, but I laughed again.

“You’re all crazy.”

“But you got video the YouTube generation will eat up,” Heather pointed out.

“It wouldn’t have been my first choice,” I replied as I headed toward the door. “But I guess it will do.”

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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