

**THE
RUMOR
GAME**

**BY SONA CHARAIPOTRA &
DHONIELLE CLAYTON**

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

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To all the girls who have had things whispered about them.
And to all the girls whose truths remain unheard.

CONTENT WARNINGS: This book explores issues of bullying and cyberbullying, sexual abuse, assault, weight loss, self harm, body image and fatphobia, and racism.

PART ONE



**THE
RUMOR**

rumor ['rū-mər]: *noun*

- 1) a story or statement in general circulation without confirmation of certainty as to facts
- 2) gossip; hearsay
- 3) *archaic*. a continuous, confused noise; clamor; din
- 4) can destroy your life

---Original Message---

From: Online Petition

Attn: Bryn Colburn

Sent: Thursday, October 10, 7:29 A.M.

Subject: Stand with the Student Body, Move Up Special Election!

Attn: Principal Rollins of Foxham Preparatory Academy

REMOVE BRYN COLBURN IMMEDIATELY

By signing this petition, the students of Foxham Preparatory Academy stand in solidarity and implore you and the school faculty to remove senior Bryn Colburn as student body president in order to keep our academic environment safe. She doesn't represent good morals and doesn't have the wherewithal to represent our community. She is unfit to lead us. The special election on November 8 is too far away, and the students deserve to have their voices heard immediately. Remove her and appoint Cora Davidson as interim president until the students cast their ballots.

[Click here to sign our petition](#)



BRYN

***FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11
9:00 P.M.***

THE THING ABOUT THIS YEAR IS THAT I MIGHT DO ANYTHING to get my old life back.

Mom would use her rehab checklist to flag this new attitude as . . . headed for trouble. Maybe. Potentially.

But I think it finally makes me feel like myself again. Determined. Focused. Razor-sharp.

“You sure we should be doing this?” Georgie asks, obsessively flipping down my car’s vanity mirror. Her thick black hair is everywhere: across the car seat headrest, on her shoulders, some of it piled in a loose bun. I don’t understand how she has so much, how it grew out so fast from the kiddie bowl cut she still had at the end of eighth grade when we stopped carpooling. Mine barely grows, and my side ponytail sits on my shoulder like the sad, wet tail of a dog.

When I stop at a red light, I pet my hair, trying not to think about how the doctor said stress has thinned it out around my temples, and how at some point it might actually turn into an accidental mullet. All on its own. Then everyone will think I’m a trashy white girl from

Hicksville, Virginia, while Georgie's a reincarnated Indian goddess.

I should get hair vitamins or something.

"Shouldn't your hands be on the wheel?" she says, her nose crinkling up. I notice she's gotten freckles on her face. I didn't know people with brown skin could get freckles, and I feel stupid at the thought. I've known her so long. Well, not really. She's been my next-door neighbor, forced-carpool-person-type thing forever. I don't actually *know her* know her. But since our fathers started working together this summer, it's been all "Can you hang out with Georgie and make a good impression?" blah, blah. If I'm honest with myself—like the Colburn family therapist wants me to be—then I'd admit I don't have any real friends left and she's the only person I have to hang out with. It's been five terrible, lonely weeks since school started.

I wave my hands higher in the air. "It's fine."

The light turns green. I rev the engine a little just to make her jump. I laugh. She laughs, too, but it's forced.

"This is a bad idea, don't you think?" she asks.

"I can still go places," I remind her, but I catch her eye, her message clear: *But for how much longer?* The whole school has turned against me because of what happened at the end of the summer.

But I have a plan to turn it all around. I have the whole thing mapped out in my notebook. My get-my-life-back-on-track plan.

"I need to talk to him. If I can just get him to hear me out . . ."

"*Him* him?"

"Yeah."

"You could text him."

"I've been doing that for weeks. He leaves me on read." I don't want to say my ex-boyfriend's name out loud yet. "And I'm not a girl who will be ignored." I try to summon the old courage I always had to speak my mind.

She shrugs. “We just shouldn’t be going.”

“Why not? Those are just your fears talking. Have faith.” When your dad is a politician, you get good at convincing people to do things.

I turn right, then left, like my car’s on autopilot. I could drive the whole way to my ex-friend Cora’s house with my eyes closed. I need to talk to her, too, but one person at a time. First, Jase. Second, Cora. Third, Mom.

Georgie winces. “I can think of a hundred different reasons why. Number one: We’re *not* invited.”

I steal another glimpse of her. She’s so beautiful now. A summer away and she doesn’t even feel like that nerd anymore.

“What?” she asks, catching me looking at her.

“Nothing,” I reply.

I wonder if she pities me because I’ve lost all my friends. Or if her dad also pushed her to hang out with me. If it’s mutually beneficial at all.

“We’re almost there, so . . .” I start.

“So we could still turn back.”

She looks at me. Her eyes are bigger and brighter now that she’s learned to line them, now that she’s paying attention to the way she looks, now that she’s become a new version of herself. She’s lost at least forty pounds.

“How did it feel . . . to, like, lose all that weight?” It just comes out all hard, and I wish I’d softened it.

“Fine. The program was mostly running and gymnastics.” She zips the words up in her mouth and volleys between watching my speed on the dashboard and texting on her phone.

I turn onto Cora’s street. “We’re here.”

Cora’s circular driveway is packed with luxury cars, even some Secret Service vehicles, as if it were a black-tie soiree instead of a high

school party. Her house is impressive. Better than the ones in my neighborhood. It's really old-school, a miniature—but not by much—of a traditional plantation home, with pristine white shutters and a manicured lawn, the tulips color-coded like a scene out of one of those old racist Southern movies. Except the family that lives here is Black. Cora's dad is a Harvard-bred lawyer who works for the president. Cora's twin sister, Millie, is a genius, and already at Harvard, even though she's only seventeen and should be a senior like the rest of us.

I screech the car to a stop.

“Careful,” Georgie says, and I can feel the anxiety creeping up her spine and settling onto her shoulders.

“I thought I saw a cat.”

“Where? I didn't see anything.”

“It's fine, Georgie. Chill. Still getting used to the brakes on the new car, okay?” I turn the engine off and glare at the Nigerian flag plastered on the back window of the SUV in front of us. Abaeze Onyekachi's car. An angry knot hardens in me at the sight of it. Wonder if anyone's slashed his tires before. Wonder if I should be the first to do it.

“Do I look all right?” Georgie asks, flipping down the car's vanity mirror to check her hair and makeup for the seventh time. She's wearing an expensive V-neck tee and strategically ripped-up skinny jeans, and the whole outfit hugs her a little, but in all the right places. I picked it out for her, modeled how to wear it correctly. We spent hours in my pool-house-turned-bedroom going through it all earlier tonight.

“Why are you stressing?” I ask. “I thought you didn't want to come?”

“This is, like, a big deal for me,” she whispers. “It's my first real party.”

I guess it is. I used to see her watching me and my friends from her window as we'd sneak out or have parties in my bedroom. Never once did I think to invite her over. She was that kind of acquaintance you

couldn't take with you anywhere. Someone might say something. But she was perfectly nice. And boring.

"You look great," I say, and mean it.

"You picked everything out," she replies.

"But you're wearing it. Take credit." Always know how to sell yourself. A good politician gets that, too.

We walk around to the back, and bodies are everywhere—all the popular people from Foxham Prep and even some of their personal bodyguards. Our school is a place where kids with important parents go: diplomats, politicians, people who work for the government, celebrities, etc.

Some groups circle a fire pit on an elaborate patio, while others lounge around the heated pool. Heat lamps reach above the water like red-hot fingers. In the distance, a huge bonfire rages. Tiny sparks flicker in the air like fireflies. It's that weird blend of too warm for October during the day, but cool during the night. That's DC for you. Mid-Atlantic weather chaos.

I tug at my hair, braiding and unbraiding it, ignoring the split ends, and thinking about how different fall break was for me at this time last year. I was with Christine, Bian, Cora, Baez, Rico, and the rest of the crew in Ocean City. We laughed. We tanned. We fell asleep outside.

People stop and look up at Georgie and me. Some giggle. Others whisper to each other. Boys from the lacrosse team—some friends with Jase—nudge and point.

Heat gathers in my cheeks. I know I have an ugly batch of hives dotted all over my neck.

Calm down, I tell myself, willing my fear response to chill the hell out.

A few people call out at us. At me, really. Taunts.

Georgie bristles and yanks me forward.

There are three kegs set up in the outdoor kitchen, along with chips, salsa, guacamole, fruit salad, and platters of finger foods. Uninspired fare. Lackluster. That was my role. Cora hasn't found anyone else to help menu plan. Clearly.

I wave at all my hecklers, bowing.

"Why'd you do that?" Georgie whispers hard.

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Ignore them."

"I can't *ignore them*," I say.

If only she knew how true that was. I keep a file on my computer full of screenshots of social media comments and articles written about me after the incident happened. I recorded every word of every comment people made about me. I tracked all the lies, all the rumors. I watched it spiral. I had to know. I had to be prepared.

"Yes, you can. Pretend they aren't talking to you."

"Uh, thanks for the brilliant advice," I snap, then feel a pinch of regret when I see surprise flicker across her face.

"I know plenty about ignoring people, and about being ignored," she says. "Or did you forget?" Her eyes burn into mine.

"I know." I touch her arm. I can't do this alone. "I'm sorry. I just . . . Let's get beers. I need a little liquid courage." I walk out of view of Jase's idiot friends.

"Too many calories. I'm going to go mix something"—she points over past the pool—"at that bar thing over there. Maybe seltzer or a diet soda. Be right back."

"Okay." I push away a twinge of fear as she walks away. I used to be afraid of nothing. I'd march into a party like this one and announce I had arrived, that the most stimulating conversation of the night could begin. But now my nerves feel like I've swallowed an earthquake.

I stare into the house through the windows. Couples find dark

corners to curl up in. A group sits around a table, playing cards. People zip through the back door, wrapped in towels and headed for the pool. Last year, I was the first one over at Cora's house to set up, and the last one to leave the next day. I used to be somebody: someone you wanted to sit with at lunch or hang with in my pool-house bedroom, someone you hoped followed you back on social media.

Now no one talks to me. It's weird how one bad decision can change your entire high school status, your entire family, your entire life. And I need it to go away.

Focus on your list, I tell myself. *Jase first*.

I guzzle the beer in my cup and fill it again. I'm driving, so I know this will be the last one. But right now I need to soften the edges a little.

"Did you forget that no one likes you anymore?" Chance Olivieri points his camera at me, zooming in and out. It's old, clunky, vintage. "Have anything to say about it? Give me an exclusive and I *might* let you be part of my documentary."

My rival since the third grade. His greasy too-long hair flops over the camera, and his pale cheeks are permanently flushed. Everyone used to call him a clown and make fun of his rosacea.

"You wish. I won't be part of your trash, *and* I won't let you take student body president from me. You'll lose that special election."

"I won't . . . and we both know it. Nobody likes the scorned ex who bullies *and* almost kills the *other* woman. Not a good look. Never gets sympathy. Prepare yourself, sweetie." Chance pushes his camera closer to my face. "Plus, this documentary is going to win a prize one day. I'll be famous. It'll expose the bullshit social hierarchy of high school."

Yes, he's for real.

Chance Olivieri was the one who had the most to say after everything happened, like he reveled in sharing every newspaper headline and TV clip. Even made daily video recaps of what I did and all the bad

press and comments swarming me and my family. My dad says he'll end up as a sleazy tabloid reporter or something one day. Doesn't have the vision to be a real journalist or filmmaker.

I put my hand up to block him. "You've been doing this stupid crap since ninth grade, and you've still got *nothing*. Maybe it's time to give it up and get a life," I spit back. "Or a girlfriend."

"Maybe you should get a boyfriend. Oh, wait, you almost killed the last one."

He blows a kiss at me.

I sneer and turn to walk away. I go past the pool. Everyone stares. Someone splashes at me. The back of my jeans get soaked. I bite my bottom lip. I refuse to cry. There have been too many tears.

Never cry when the cameras are on.

I spot Jase and some friends in the gazebo. The boys all dangle out of it, laughing and roughhousing.

My heart drops into my stomach. I need him to forgive me. I need him to tell people to stop attacking me online over what happened. I need to get all my friends back. He's the one who can make it all go away. I clench my fists and take a deep breath, then walk up.

The guys stop laughing and stare. Jase looks up, surprised. His cold blue gaze still sends a tingle through me. He has blond stubble, an almost beard now, and looks like the South Carolina beach boy he was meant to be. God, he's hot. No wonder I was so *into* him. Too into him.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

They ooh and aah.

I keep my eyes squarely on him, not breaking contact, bracing for him to say no.

"Sure." He flashes a perfect smile, and his friends slap his arm and back.

But I don't care. That tiny word is an unexpected firework. One step forward.

He gets up and walks toward me. But not far enough away from the gazebo. Everyone snickers and listens, eager for a show. My heart beats so hard, I feel like I'm going to vomit it up.

"What's up?" His Southern accent slips out between slurred words.

"I just . . . just wanted to talk to you about what happened. I didn't get a chance to explain."

"Sure."

That word again. For some reason, it unsettles me. I'd been expecting a no, expecting to have to convince him. It knocks me off what I'd practiced when I imagined this moment. "It's . . . It was . . . my parents. That night. I'd found out something big . . . really bad. I wasn't thinking. I was super upset. It all got into my head, so when you didn't answer . . . I thought—I thought—"

Jase put his hand in the air. "It's okay."

My mouth drops open. "Really?" A weight starts to lift from my shoulders, and I'm not sure if it's the beer.

"I know where you're going with all this, and I get it," he replies.

"You do?" My heart lifts for the first time in weeks.

"Of course I do." He takes my hand. The heat of it sends a familiar surge through me. I want his touch back so much. "I know how crazy you are. Like your mom. Isn't she still in rehab? Shouldn't you be, too?" His charming smile darkens. "Like mother, like daughter. You're both nuts."

I stiffen and yank my hand back. Since the end of August, I've been called *crazy* 3,797 times and *nuts* 1,890 on all social media platforms. And who knows how many more times in group chats and private DMs—the ones I've been kicked out of.

Crazy is a terrible word.

Jase laughs, and it creates a ripple. The smirks, the chuckles, the pity, the hate. The guys break into raucous laughter.

“You don’t know the whole story,” I say. “If you would just let me—”

My pulse races, its beat flooding my ears. The pitch and crescendo of the laughter stretch and warp as if I’m trapped in a messed-up fun house where everything bounces back at me. The bodies blur. Party sounds become a nauseous hum. Like everything is underwater.

“I don’t want to talk to you!” he yells. “Don’t give a shit about what you have to say. I’m done with you. Sasha has better tits, anyways.”

All the guys cheer. A knot hardens in my stomach. I clench my teeth.

I hold back rage tears as he fumbles toward the gazebo with his friends. I square my shoulders and walk away. *This was so stupid. It was too soon. I didn’t think it through enough.* The rehearsal in my head, in my bedroom, in my notebook, jumbled. I’d even kept my distance the first several weeks of school to prepare. It all went wrong.

I have to find Georgie. We have to get out of here. I wipe my face.

Chance saunters past again with his camera. “*Tsk, tsk.* Show didn’t go as planned, huh? No one buying your lies? Everyone knows what a bitch you are.” He holds out a piece of paper and shakes it at me. “Want to sign this petition? I’m trying to get you removed as student body president a little early, you see. I’ve already got over fifty signatures.”

“Shut up. Shut up. SHUT UP!”

“Wouldn’t you like that? But nope, I’m good.”

“I’m just looking for Georgie—and then trust me—I’ll be out of here.”

“She went in the house with Baez,” he reported. “Even *she’s* done with you.”

My anger flashes hot. I shove him into the pool with his camera. He makes a huge splash.

That shuts him up good.

Bryn Colburn

Net loss of followers:

-3,528

Group chats:

0



Friday 9:34 PM

Bryn:

Where are you?

You said you were just getting seltzer.

Are you ignoring me?
Things went bad. I tried to talk to him.

I feel weird. I wanna go.

Friday 9:45 PM

Georgie:

I'm in line for the bathroom.
Spilled my drink.

Gimme a minute.

Friday 9:46 PM

Bryn:

I'll be in the car. Hurry up.



GEORGIE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11
9:43 P.M.

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M HERE. IN CORA'S HOUSE. NEARLY IN Cora's bedroom. With Cora's boyfriend.

"There's a bathroom at the end of the hall. In Cora's room." A shirtless Abaeze Onyekachi leads me down a long hallway. Abaeze Onyekachi, the most popular boy in school, is helping me. Abaeze Onyekachi is breathing within a three-foot radius of me.

Baez, the guy everyone wants.

I'm sweating despite the AC blasting, and I'm shivering despite the sweat. My stomach is a mess of knots, and my brain is going like ten thousand miles a minute. Does not compute. About to explode. I've never been to an actual high school party—except for one with all Desi kids, but those don't really count, right? All the Indian kids get dragged to these family things with their parents. That's not a real party in my book, anyway.

My mum would be freaking out if she knew I was here. *I'm* sort of freaking out that I am here.

But brand-new me goes to parties. With Bryn's help. And it feels

really good. At least I look like I've got it together. Like I've done this a million times.

Except, you know, for all the sticky pink punch that's soaking through my new designer T-shirt, pooling right around where my belly used to be.

"You should be able to get cleaned up," he says with a smile. A very bright one.

Like every other person in school, I've always had a crush. Sort of. But he and Cora are practically married. The high school type of married. Been together forever. And even if I thought I had a shot, which I decidedly don't, you never go after someone's boyfriend. That's the rule for people who get to date. Or so I've heard.

His cologne leaves a trail, all musky and warm.

We've had at least two classes together every year since I moved here, and that's the thing about Baez. While everyone else just dismissed me as the big brown girl, he was always nice. Even when he didn't have to be. He understood what it was like to come to this country and start school not knowing anyone. His dad is a Nigerian diplomat, appointed here when Baez was twelve. Just before I got here. So he gets it. Not that we were, like, friends or anything. But still. He was assigned to be my student ambassador during my first month of school.

He glances back at me a few times, staring like I'm a stranger and not the girl who he's been in school with since seventh grade. It kind of makes me wonder if he thinks I'm a fangirl or something. I guess I am sort of a stranger now. I'm definitely not the old Georgie anymore.

OLD GEORGIE:

Height: 5'4"

Weight: Blocked out the numbers. Trust me. You would, too.

if you had a mum who made you weigh in three times a day.

Pimpled, round face made even more attractive by a proper bowl cut.

Signature scent: sweat and baby powder, butter naan, and a top note of peanut M&M's from my secret lockbox.

Binge-eater.

T-shirts three sizes too large.

Straight-A student.

Nice to everyone.

Never been kissed.

From a famous family in India. And a total nobody here.

An immigrant.

Social media followers: ZERO.

Sometimes it still shocks me how much of me I lost this year. Feels like I lost a whole other person with the weight.

NEW GEORGIE:

Height: 5' 6"

Weight: The number Mum always wanted.

Smooth brown skin, thanks to the dermatologist. (But still too brown, according to Dadi.)

Long dark hair that flows past the strap of my new, smaller bra.

Cheekbones!

New signature scent: peaches and mint shampoo.

V-neck T-shirts, dangling jewelry.

Gym four times a week with Mum's trainer. New love of gymnastics. I can do a split!

No more binge-eating.

Straight-A student.

Princeton-bound.

A real first kiss.

Future girlfriend to somebody.

I almost stumble as I follow Baez down the hall.

Focus. Get out of your head.

The only conversation between Baez and me is the squishy noise our shoes make. Feels weird wearing them through the house, especially upstairs. And I wish I had the courage to make small talk. I've never been good at that. It comes out all tangled and "unintelligible," Mum says. She always reminds me that there's an art to gupshup, and I don't have the proper chitchat skills. Yet. I have a new body. Now I need the new personality to match.

Relax, I instruct myself. Breathe.

I have to say something. I *need* to say something. So I can be normal. "Too bad there's no wet T-shirt contest tonight," I say, like this is a teen movie and someone like me could ever be the star.

My stomach flips. I probably said the exact wrong thing, judging from the shocked look on Baez's face. But now he's taking in the way the wet pink splotches make my already-maybe-a-little-too-snug shirt stick to me. Heat crawls up my throat, settles in my cheeks. I've never had attention like this. I sort of like it. "Maybe I would have won."

I can't seem to keep my mouth from saying things my head hates me for.

Old Georgie would never have said anything to him at all. Let alone flirt. Let alone end up at this party in the first place, wearing a shirt this tight.

"Uh, yeah." He starts walking again. *What was I thinking?*

"Here it is." He opens a door for me and quickly follows me inside.

The massive bathroom has three entrances. One leads to the hallway, and the others to bedrooms. A marble-topped vanity with double sinks, ornate silver-framed mirrors. Casual, expensive, and elegant, but lived-in. Totally Cora. Totally the perfect Davidson family.

But it feels like the same old Georgie looks back at me: skin the color of chai boiled over, eyes tired but alert, those formerly bushy eyebrows worked into an impossibly fine arch by Mum's stylist.

We don't fit. Baez and I. Not like him and Cora.

Sometimes I wish I could find someone like him. Someone who matches me, inside and out. Someone who knows what I'm thinking before I say it and believes that roaming around the bookstore for an hour and then sharing a pizza is the perfect date, too. Someone who wants to kiss me. Maybe.

What if I was with him? I almost laugh at the thought. Guys like him don't date girls like me. Even if my parents magically decided to let me date, they'd never approve of Baez. Desi people aren't supposed to be with non-Desi people, according to Auntie rules. Closed-minded. And yeah, racist.

“You look different from last year,” Baez says, the words slurring together.

“Yeah, I lost a small person,” I joke, and it unexpectedly stings a little. He doesn’t laugh.

I’m failing at this new-personality thing. And making myself feel shitty at the same time. Dr. Cat said it’s internalized fatphobia to think about myself like that, but it’s hard to turn it off in my head. Especially when it swarms all around me.

“I went to weight loss camp.” Heat climbs up my back. I haven’t really talked to anyone about it much. Or at all.

“My sister went to one two summers ago.” His eyes are on me in the mirror.

“Did she lose what she wanted to?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t want her to go. I’ve heard bad things about those places.”

He’s not wrong. Weight loss camps are definitely controversial. And definitely terrible if you think about it. But it’s not like I had a choice. To my parents, appearances are everything. So they decided it was time I “do something” about my weight. And . . . other things. When you’re a Desi kid—Desi girl, specifically—you do what you’re told. You act right, dress right, get good grades. Go to an Ivy, marry someone *appropriate*. Whether you want to or not. “My mum made me go. Plus, Indian food isn’t exactly diet-friendly. But always binge-worthy, which was my problem.”

“Nigerian isn’t diet-friendly either.” He laughs. “But it’s good.”

My cheeks flush again. “I’ve been to your family’s restaurant a few times with my mom and dad. It’s great.”

“Eh, too much of anything and you can get sick of it.”

Don’t I know it. Ever since I came back, my mother’s been making me eat the same three “healthful” meals on rotation. “What I wouldn’t do for a samosa,” I say, grinning.

He smiles back, eyes crinkling. “Yeah, I get to go in on game days, but otherwise, no samosas for me either.” Baez heads toward the linen closet and hands me a small towel. “I’ll wait for you outside so you don’t get lost getting back to the party.”

“Uh, okay,” I stammer, then close the door. I feel stupid. I didn’t even say thank you.

I quickly take off my shirt and wash out the pink streak, watching the color run in the sink. I’ll need bleach. I look around at all the expensive soaps and products. This bathroom is straight out of all the magazines I devoured when I first got to the United States. The ones I thought would teach me how to be American. The right clothes, the right hair, the right products, the right way to decorate your bedroom, the right energy.

A soft knock on the door startles me. “You okay in there?”

“Yeah, almost done,” I call out too loud, terrified he might come in, even though he’s given me no reason to be scared.

I yank the damp shirt back over my head and try to tousle my hair so it looks better.

He knocks again.

I pout my lips like the girls in magazines, then open the door.

“You good?” His eyes wander to my shirt, still damp.

“I tried, but couldn’t get the stain out,” I say, following his gaze.

“Lemme get Cora’s hair dryer.” He pushes past me into the bathroom and rummages in a cabinet under one of the sinks.

“Here it is,” he says, pointing it at me like a gun. Then he hands it over. “Wanna try this? I can wait outside.”

“Sure.” I close the door behind me.

I plug in the dryer and blast the air onto the wet spot. After a minute, it’s almost invisible. I take one last look at myself and open the door again. “That’s better,” I say to Baez, who’s peering down at his phone.

“Good food photos!” he says, flashing my own sad social media feed back at me. “Especially that bucket of crabs at Larry’s in Ocean City. Did you manage the whole thing?” His grin goes even wider when I nod. “That’s how it’s done.”

My phone pings with a follow notification.

That makes me smile, too. And it makes me realize with a pang: *If I do kiss someone, I want to be the kind of girl who gets to kiss a guy like him.*

---ENCRYPTED MESSAGE----

From: Dr. Catherine Hopkins

Attn: Jashan “Georgie” Khalra

Sent: Friday, October 11, 10:12 P.M.

Subject: Check-in/Hello!

Dear Georgie,

I hope this email finds you well. It's been six weeks since your Greensprings Weight-Loss Program ended, and this email signals the start of our outpatient services. The support of Greensprings is available to you long after you've left us and is part of the package selected by your parents. The endeavor of readjusting to life at home brings new challenges, and we have resources set up to help you.

I'll be introducing you to my colleague Dr. Divya Malhotra. She will schedule in-person sessions with you, picking up where we left off. In the meantime, please be sure to use your food and exercise diary daily. I've sent you three gymnastic programs in your area to look into, since you took such a liking to it. I'd also like you to work with Dr. Malhotra on exploring your family's emigration to this country and to refocus your attention on why you left India. Please try to spend some time journaling on this particular topic, as we at Greensprings believe that addressing the root cause of your behaviors will significantly improve your progress.

Best wishes for the rest of the weekend.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cat

Dr. Catherine Hopkins, MD, LPC

Greensprings Wellness Camp and Fitness Center

“Not a Fat Camp, a Change-Your-Life Camp!”

Georgie Khalra

Followers:

35

Group chats:

0





CORA

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11
9:55 P.M.**

A GOOD PARTY IS ALMOST AS GOOD AS A PERFECT KISS. It should have a lot of smiles and laughter. The energy of it overwhelming, leaving a buzz through you. And most of all, it should make you feel like you'll never be alone ever again.

Those are the only kind of parties I throw, and everyone wants an invitation. But not everyone will get one.

I'm the type of girl that gets to choose you.

I walk from room to room, then do a loop outside, watching how much fun everyone is having. I add more sliced peaches and vodka to the punch. I look around, basking in this. I need to take it in. A habit I picked up from my momma, that pride. The only thing we have in common.

Senior year.

This is it.

I need to make every moment, every party, count.

Everyone will remember me.

I check the hashtag I made everyone use—#CovetingCoraFOX, my

signature, of course—and it's filled with only the best photos. Everyone who's stuck at home—or better yet, not invited—will be ridiculously jealous.

Shouting pulls me outside. Chance Olivieri is almost naked, sitting on a pool chair, wringing his wet clothes out and cursing about his camera.

“What happened?” I hand him a towel.

“Bryn.”

Rage shoots through me as I scan the yard. “Where?”

How dare she show up here—at my house—after everything? She wasn't always this dumb. Used to be one of the smartest people I knew. Anger bubbles up in my stomach. We had big plans and she ruined it, and I don't even understand what happened. Over the summer, she changed—went from driven and compassionate to suddenly obsessed with her boyfriend, Jase. From my wickedly smart best friend to a lovesick stalker who couldn't do anything but run after him. Now the cheerleading team is down two people, Baez still gets killer headaches from the concussion, and there's a messy special election, which means I may not get to keep my spot as student body vice president. Another thing Momma will hold against me if I don't get into Harvard and join my genius twin sister.

All because of her.

“Cora! Cora!” Adele stumbles up to the pool. She's small and blond and pixie-haired, with these big green eyes that always make me think she's a fairy or something. The opposite of me. Her freckly white cheeks are bright red, like she's been scalded.

“What?” I touch her shoulder. She's definitely had a lot to drink.

She grabs my hand and yanks me back into the house. “I—I . . . have to tell you something.” The words sputter out, her eyes bulging.

“What is it? You okay?” My heart does a tiny flip.

“It’s bad.”

“Out with it.”

“Your boyfriend . . .”

“What?”

“Baez is . . .”

“Baez is what?” I search her face for the answer.

“He’s hooking up with Georgie right now. Upstairs.”

“Puh-lease!” I roll my eyes. “He would never. We’re, like, super good. And I don’t know any Georgies.”

“Jashan. Khalra. Or whatever. You know that Indian girl? She’s in AP Calc with us. Sits up front. Super nerd. Quiet. She used to be really fat but isn’t anymore. I heard her mom made her go to a camp or something.”

“Don’t say *fat*,” I correct her.

“It’s been reclaimed,” she argues.

“But not by your skinny ass.”

“Whatever, just listen.” Adele takes my hand and leads me to the back staircase. “Everyone’s talking about it. I even saw them go upstairs.” Her eyes cut up to the ceiling.

“Impossible. Everyone knows—especially Baez—that *nobody* is allowed upstairs.” I kiss her cheek. “Relax! It’s cool. People are ridiculous.” But as I make my way up the staircase, I feel her eyes on my back, heavy like a weight.

As I reach the top, I hear voices, then drunken laughter. “Who’s up here?”

Baez steps out of my room. “Ahhh, babe.”

I smile as he closes the distance between us in three big strides, spins me in a circle, and starts to nuzzle my neck.

I can’t help it; a peal of laughter bubbles out of me. “What’s going on?” I ask, and give him a little kiss. “No one’s supposed to be up here.”

Then I see her. A girl standing awkwardly outside my room. Jashan.

Georgie, I guess. She looks different. Not the shy, overweight Indian girl who always needed her eyebrows plucked and her mustache waxed. I feel like a terrible person because that's the first thing I remember about her.

"She needed to use the bathroom," he says, pulling my hips toward his even as I lean away to look at Georgie. "Spilled a drink on her shirt."

I want to say: *And I should care why?*

If my sister, Millie, was here, she would've blocked anyone from coming upstairs. She doesn't "do" parties, but never snitches, and always enforces my rules if anyone wanders. Because she and her boyfriend, Graham, usually hide out up here. But she's busy. At Harvard.

"Um, I'm sorry, the downstairs line was endless," Georgie says, trying not to stare as Baez nibbles at my ear. "And I needed a hair dryer."

I look her up and down. She could be a model. Hourglass figure. The kind guys like. Which no one should care about, but they do. People might just think she's hotter than me. Exotic, or whatever. Which explains why people are gossiping downstairs. People love it when pretty girls tear each other down.

"Nice shirt." I don't ask her where she got it. That would be too friendly.

"Thanks," she replies, too confident. Much more than I remember.

"I hate people being upstairs," I say. "That's one of my party rules. On every invite."

"Oh, okay, sorry. I didn't know." She blushes, and stumbles down the stairs.

I want to say: *That's because I didn't invite you. . . .*

But Baez is being so sweet, I bite my tongue. "Bye-bye." I wave her away, watching her disappear back into the party. "People said y'all were upstairs hooking up because *everyone* knows my rules. No one's allowed up here. You know that, Baez."

He pulls me closer. "I know, babe. But some drunk guy from another

school was being gross in the bathroom line, so I thought you'd be okay with it. Brought her up here to clean up. She's really shy."

I decide to give him a little attitude. "And how would you know?"

He kisses me. "You're really beautiful."

His compliment sends goose bumps over my skin. I bite his bare shoulder. His skin reminds me of the dark crust on Momma's corn bread. Deep brown. He looks back at me with big eyes.

I pull Baez to the nearest room. Millie's. The walls are still papered in stripes, the telescope pointing out the window. I wonder if I could see all the way to Cambridge, Massachusetts, from here. Check on her. On her vanity is a picture of the two of us. There's a red lipstick stain on it, and I know Momma has been in here, kissing the photograph like she does when she's missing Millie. Momma had us in matching dresses—mine peach and hers pink—and no one could tell us apart. Two little brown faces. Two button chins. A smattering of freckles on our noses. Identical twins born less than an hour apart, and now one is a genius who skipped grades and went to Harvard a whole year early. And the other is left behind. Our lives couldn't be more different.

She'd be pissed if she knew I was in her room. Especially with Baez.

I plop onto her bed and stare up. She still has our little-girl canopies draped above hers. She's taped words onto the fabric—*Harvard, Lawyer, United Nations*. Her goals.

My life as a six-word memoir (my new obsession, courtesy of Mrs. Perkovich, my English teacher): *I'm a badass, too, basically Beyoncé*.

"She's gonna be pissed that we're in here." Baez points up at her goals and smiles.

I roll my eyes. She might be smarter, but I'm captain of the cheer squad for the second year in a row. Student body vice president, voted

in by a sweeping margin. I throw the best parties and have a house full of people who both adore me and are terrified not to be my friend. My boyfriend is the hottest guy at Foxham Prep. I'm good with people. That It factor, my ex JuJu calls it.

I kiss Baez again, and he pauses. "You okay?" I ask.

"Headache," he replies, rubbing his temple.

"You had beer, didn't you?"

He shrugs.

"It triggers migraines, love," I remind him. "All that gluten."

"I know, I know."

They've gotten worse since the car accident and the concussion.

"Lay here for a while. I'll grab some aspirin."

I head back downstairs. The party is growing by the minute, swelling from just the senior class to what feels like half the whole school. I don't even know some of the people. Juniors. A few sophomores. Some from other DC and Maryland private schools. Some with important parents I've met at all the galas and fundraisers I've been dragged to my whole life. Some I don't want in my house.

My heart thuds along with the music.

Second six-word memoir: *This party was a terrible idea.*

"All right, guys, party's over," I shout.

I smile as people respond to me. Their eyes brighten, and they follow my directions. I'm like the song everybody knows the melody to, the one whose chorus no one can un-remember.

Everyone loves me.

They start leaving.

I start cleaning up. The crowd thins out in the backyard and inside the house.

Adele stumbles down the stairs, drunk and happy. Her new

girlfriend, Leilani, is by her side, and she's got this dumb, shit-eating grin on her face.

"Your place is so amazing, Cora," Leilani says, words running into one another like a train wreck. "I am so totally obsessed with your bedroom. I love that your mom still uses wallpaper. It's, like, so old-school and charm—"

"Adele, no one was supposed to be upstairs," I tell her again, but it's still not sinking in. It never sinks in. I should've locked the bedroom doors.

"Oh, relax, Cor. It was just me and Lei up there. I looked in all the rooms like you asked, and I was checking on that thing. You know."

"You cuss him out?" Leilani asks.

"Nothing happened," I say. "People say dumb shit. He's drunk and snoring. Migraine."

"You're hotter than her," Adele says.

"Oh, I *know*," I reply.

"So bring your hot ass with us. After-party at Jase's. You gonna wake Baez?" Adele asks. "Or staying here?"

"I've got to clean up before my parents get back tomorrow," I say, hoping, praying, that they'll offer to stick around and help. Knowing they won't. Only Bryn used to do that. I ignore the pinch. It's the first party I've thrown without her. And moments like this, when I feel alone in the crowd, when I feel abandoned even among friends, make me miss her the most. But I guess I didn't know her that well after all. "My mom—"

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Adele says. "I'll text you if anything interesting happens." She grabs Leilani's hand, and they're out the door.

Millie's boyfriend, Graham Williams, strides up. He's light brown, tall, and lanky. Should play basketball, but he's a clumsy mess. "You

good?” he asks, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “I could stay and help you clean.”

I smile at him. He started dating my sister last year when she finally realized it was okay to have a boyfriend. That it didn’t have to derail your focus. He’s been coming around a lot lately—for dinners or to just hang out in the den, like soaking up her presence. Anything to be close to Millie with her so far away now.

“I’m okay. Baez’s going to help.”

“Where is he?”

“Headache.”

“Oh, those still?”

“Yeah.”

Jase grabs Graham, locking an arm around his neck. “Yo, yoooo.” His words are all slurred and his white face red. “Where’s our boy?”

“Asleep.”

“Wake him up.” Jase grins. “He can rally. More beer. After-party at my house.”

“That’s what triggered the migraine in the first place,” I snap, rolling my eyes.

“Let’s go.” Graham tugs Jase. “Tell him I’ll text him.”

“Awesome party, Cora,” a stranger says on their way out. Most people are setting down their cups and heading out. Some wait in a line to get to the powder room. I cringe, thinking about how I’ll have to clean the bathroom, too. Maybe Baez will do it.

“Thanks,” I say.

Then the house is empty. I spend hours fishing cups from the pool and hot tub, taking the trash out to the curb, vacuuming.

My head’s a mess of should-haves, would-haves. Why did I even throw this party?

A whisper in my head answers me: *Because you were mad about how quickly your parents run to Millie's rescue.*

I stand up straight. *I'm fine.*

I have to be.

The thing is . . . you can't ever let yourself lose control. Because then you could really lose everything.

Saturday 12:02 AM

Bryn:

Sorry I was quiet on the way home.
It was just . . . a lot.

Georgie:

You want to talk about it?

Bryn:

No. You can probably imagine how
bad it was . . .

Saturday 12:23 AM

Bryn:

I saw someone online say you guys were
hooking up. You and Baez. That true?

Georgie:

No. He's just super nice. Which is still so
surprising. Like, he doesn't have to be.

Saturday 12:32 AM

Bryn:

He hates me. Always has. 😞

Georgie:

Why?

Bryn:

 So did you love it?

Georgie:

What?

Bryn:

My old life.

Georgie:

The party was fine.

Bryn:

It was great, and you know it.

Georgie:

Okay, yeah, it was amazing.
I still don't know if I belong or whatever.

Bryn:

You have to make people believe you belong.



FilmmakerChance

Saturday, October 12, 1:54 a.m.

♡ 300 💬 53

Look at what we have here! Who's that sneaking up the off-limits stairs with none other than All-Star Baez? Why, it's former fatty turned beauty GEORGIE K. Get you some, GIRL! Rock that Bollywood bod. You earned that shit!

Hit me with your theories. What happened here?

KatNotKateLee: WHAT NOW?

52 mins ♡ 13

BrynChildDC: Get it, G!

48 mins

SykeWard: Did you guys see Bryn Colburn make an appearance?

2 mins ♡ 62

ABadassMelody: I saw it all go down, if you know what I mean. She went upstairs with him. She was so hype about it. Why would he take her upstairs where no one's allowed unless there was some action?

40 mins ♡ 137

AhMADManKhan: Whatchu saying, **ABadassMelody**? My boy's rep is at stake here.

32 mins ♡ 117

FilmmakerChance: Shut the fuck up, **BrynChildDC**, and go away. Nobody wants you around.

31 mins ♡ 450

ABadassMelody: You calling me a liar, Ahmad?

28 mins  150

JaseThaGod202: New babe alert.

26 mins  62

MerBear426: Watch out, Georgie. They'll do the same to you that they did to me last year.

26 mins  62

JaseThaGod202: You deserved that shit, **MerBear426**.

16 mins  362

AdeleBelleParis1231: Take this shit down, Chance.

26 mins  120

PrincessChristine4578: That girl is NOTHING compared to Cora.

24 mins  160

SykeWard: Leilani said that when she went upstairs after Georgie left, she totally saw Kleenex in the bathroom wastebasket with lipstick all over it, and it wasn't Cora's.

24 mins  60

KayBae215: I heard that, too. **SykeWard**.

2 mins  160

CallMeYourDaddyDavid: Girl fight! Girl fight!

20 mins  200

JessiBessyBoo: I thought **BrynChildDC** got sent to rehab?

14 mins  122

AJRiveriaTodelo301: Who's Georgie?

3 mins  10

Comments Loading

Sunday 2:38 PM

Georgie:

Can I come over?
There's weird shit about me online.

Bryn:

Oh, yeah. I saw. Am tracking it.
You've tripled your followers.

Georgie:

What do you mean you're tracking it?
B, this is bad, right?

Bryn:

I keep my eyes on everything. Ever
since Jase. I mean, it's just gossip.

Like, nothing happened, right?

Georgie:

Of course not. He literally showed me the
bathroom and stood outside waiting for me.

Why are they saying all this stuff?

Bryn:

Why does anyone say anything about
anybody? Cause they're jealous.

You got hot over the summer, Georgie.

Bryn:

It'll blow over. Not like with me.

Chance made a video of Jase reaming me at the party. So that's fun. 🤔

So who's obsessed with who?

Georgie:

Whom.

Bryn:

At least people know who you are now. 😞

Sunday 6:02 PM

Georgie:



BAEZ AND GEORGIE
WERE COZYING UP
SOLO AT CORA'S
PARTY.

BAEZ AND GEORGIE
DEFINITELY MADE OUT
UPSTAIRS IN CORA'S
BEDROOM.