



# Plastic Polly

JENNY LUNDQUIST



ALADDIN MIX

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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Acknowledgments

Sneak Peak of 'Seeing Cinderella'

About Jenny Lundquist

To my parents, Thomas and Pamela Carroll.

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I have never doubted your love.

# Chapter 1

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*True Confession: Every time I hear someone call me Plastic Polly, I imagine myself slowly turning into a life-sized Barbie doll, one phony piece at a time.*

I'M STANDING IN FRONT OF MY EX-BEST FRIEND, ALYSSA Grace. She's on the other side of the salad bar, scooping for a cherry tomato that doesn't want to be caught. Looking at Alyssa, you'd never know how stubborn she is—she's so tiny and slight, her thin white blond hair wisping around her face, that it seems like the slightest brush of wind could knock her over. But Alyssa can hold a grudge as deep and thick as the roots of the oldest maple tree in my backyard.

I haven't spoken to Alyssa in over a year. Not since the first week of seventh grade when she ditched Kelsey and me. We ignore each other in the hallways and at football games and dances. But today I want to tell Alyssa the truth: that I miss her. That having only one best friend—instead of two—has left me feeling lopsided.

My two friends next to me, Melinda Drake and Lindsey McCoy, don't notice I've frozen. They're still chattering about the banners for Groove It Up we posted all over campus this morning.

I spear the cherry tomato with my fork and drop it onto Alyssa's plate. "Here." I flinch because my voice sounds squeaky—the voice I used to have in sixth grade when I got nervous. Not like my voice now—the one I practice every day in the shower.

Alyssa looks up at me, and I hold my breath, wondering if she'll walk away. But instead, she gives me a tentative half grin. I smile back and try to think of something to ask her. If she still takes voice lessons from that old woman who never brushed her teeth—we used to call her Lady Onion Breath. If she still goes to thrift shops. If she still eats chocolate ice cream with crushed-up pretzels.

Before I can say anything, Melinda, who thinks our popularity is a license to be nasty, snaps at Alyssa, "Hey, you with the hideous hair and unibrow. Can you move, already? The rest of us would like some tomatoes too."

Alyssa doesn't look at Melinda, but from the way her knuckles whiten around the salad spoon she's clutching, I know she heard. And whatever chance I had to talk to her slips away.

The half grin on Alyssa's face twists into a sneer. "Hey, Plastic Polly. How's it going? Heading over to Fakeville?"

Several students turn and stare at us, and I feel my face flush. Sure, I know half the school calls me Plastic Polly behind my back. But no one ever says it to my face. And hearing it from Alyssa, it feels worse. Like a sharp stab in the back—especially since it was Alyssa herself who invented the name.

If Alyssa had said it when we were alone, I could have let it go. I could have apologized for what Melinda said, could have asked Alyssa all about her life and hoped she's not still mad at Kelsey and me. But too many people are watching us. And after all, I am a member of the Court. We don't apologize.

I lift my chin and stick a hand on my hip. My other arm drops gracefully to my side and my arm bracelets jangle to my wrist. I look confident. In command.

I know this because it's a move I've practiced a million times in front of the mirror.

In my best haughty voice I say, "Do you mean over there?" I point to the Court—the table where the popular kids sit—and nod. "We're talking about Groove It Up, but if you hate us so much, maybe you shouldn't bother trying out."

The minute the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Groove It Up is a talent show competition between Winston Academy and our rival, American River Middle School. It is *the* social event of the fall, and it's always planned by members of the Court. This year is an even bigger deal than usual, because it's the competition's fortieth anniversary and the winning school will receive two prizes. First, the members of the school's Talent Team will get to perform on *Good Morning, Maple Oaks*. And the entire school will be treated to a private concert by Shattered Stars. They're a really popular band whose members all grew up here in Maple Oaks. They're too famous to play in small towns anymore, but somehow the city council talked them into it.

I posted the sign-up sheet for tryouts this morning before school started. After first period I went to check on it and saw Alyssa's name written at the top. Alyssa has an amazing voice, and when we were in Winston Academy's elementary section—when we were still friends—she would tell Kelsey and me how she couldn't wait to grow up so she could become a famous singer. She must be dying to land a slot on the Talent Team, hoping we'll win and she'll get to be on TV.

Alyssa's face crumples, but then her expression quickly hardens and she raises her voice. "So you're saying the tryouts are rigged? Only the Court suck-ups have a chance."

Now more people are staring at us. "What? No, of course not." Although—and I would never admit this to Alyssa—in a way the auditions *are* rigged. Kelsey, my best friend and this year's PlanMaster, has decided the cheerleaders, who are so good they won the state championship last year, will make up half of our Talent Team. She'll break the girls up to perform in groups of two or three and then bring them all together for our final act. So even though tryouts haven't even happened, half the slots are unofficially taken. Kristy Palmer, captain of the cheerleading squad, has been practicing with her girls for weeks. I told Kelsey that seemed to me like allowing the star player of the baseball team to bat in every inning.

"Polly, Melinda, Lindsey!" Kelsey calls from across the cafeteria. "Get over here!"

Alyssa smirks. "Later, Plastic. Your master is calling you."

I scoop up my cafeteria tray, shoot Alyssa an irritated glance, and follow Melinda and Lindsey over to the Court.

The Court is a long rectangular table in the middle of the cafeteria. Directly above the table is a skylight—so the sun can shine down upon the chosen few of us who are allowed to eat there. Winston tradition dictates that the most popular eighth graders sit at the Court, as well as a few seventh graders who will take our place after we graduate.

Normally I get a small thrill as I approach the Court. I know it's not cool to admit this, but I adore feeling everyone's eyes on me as I saunter over to my usual spot. Outwardly I pretend to be bored, like it's no big deal. But inside I'm *loving* it. Especially when I catch people like Jenna Huff—who used to laugh at me and make fun of my squeaky voice when we were in Winston's elementary section—watching me.

It makes me feel like, *Ha! Look who's laughing now!*

~~Today, though, I can't bring myself to sit down right away. I take a detour to the~~ condiment area, where I fill up tiny plastic cups with my four favorite salad dressings. I like to drench pieces of lettuce in the dressing. I call it salad fondue. Out of the corner of my eye I watch Alyssa. I'm hoping she comes over. Maybe then I can apologize.

"Hey, Polly." I look up and see Kate Newport, a girl who likes to hang around Kelsey and me, hoping we'll invite her to the Court. She's wearing a white tank top and a pink flippy skirt. It looks *exactly* like the outfit I wore to the pep rally a few weeks ago, when Kelsey announced she'd selected me as her Vice PlanMaster.

"Like my outfit?" Kate says.

"Um, sure. That's a super cute . . . necklace you're wearing." And it is. It's a small pink-and-white rhinestone medallion on a silver chain.

Kate smiles like she just won the lottery. "Really? If you like it, you can have it." In a flash the silver chain is dangling from Kate's finger, the medallion ticktocking above my salad.

"No, Kate, really. That's sweet, but I don't want your jewelry. Put it back on." I push the necklace toward her just before it dips into my salad dressing. "Please."

"Okay, but here's a bracelet. It'll look good with the ones you're already wearing." Kate thrusts a silver bangle at me. "Friends share, right?"

"Um, sure." I stick the bracelet onto my wrist. "I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"Oh, no. Keep it. It's yours," Kate says, and practically skips away.

Here's the thing about being popular: Sometimes popularity is like your own personal good luck charm, a talisman that bestows favor, whether it's a bracelet, fifty holiday grams from people you barely know, or guaranteed invites to all the middle school events.

I glance over at Alyssa again. She's finished up at the salad bar and starts over to the condiment table. When she sees me, she changes direction and plunks down at an empty table just behind the Court. I sigh and look away.

But here's the other thing about popularity: It doesn't come cheap. Sometimes it makes you choose one best friend over another. And you can never admit to anyone that sometimes you wonder if you made the wrong choice. Because if you admitted that they'd just laugh and say, "You're popular. What problems could *you* possibly have?" So instead, you keep your mouth shut, stick a fake smile on your face, and pretend you don't have any. Problems, that is.

It's just easier that way.

"Polly!" Kelsey hollers. "Are you keeping vigil over there, or what? I have an important question to ask you!"

With one last look at Alyssa, I turn away and head to the Court.

And stick a fake smile on my face.

## Chapter 2

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*True Confession: No one at school ever told me I was pretty until after I became popular.*

"FINALLY," KELSEY SAYS WHEN I TAKE MY USUAL SEAT at her right side. As the most popular eighth grader at Winston Academy, Kelsey sits at the head of the Court. "I need you to settle a disagreement between Melinda and me."

Everyone sitting at the Court—which today includes a few football players, Kristy Palmer and a couple of other cheerleaders, and Kelsey's soccer teammates—turns to stare at me.

"Okay. What is it this time?" Lately Melinda has been saying we should have certain rules at the Court, like Monday you have to wear pink, or Friday is jeans day, but Kelsey—who never wants to be like anyone else—thinks it's a stupid idea. And when it comes to clothes, neither of us trusts Melinda. She's great at selecting an insult but less accomplished when it comes to fashion. Today Melinda's wearing a bright yellow sundress with brown polka dots, and frankly she looks like a talking banana.

Kelsey flips her long hair, which is as black and sleek as a panther's mane, over one shoulder and says, "Melinda thinks we should all wear the same costume to Kristy's Halloween party, but I say no way. What do you say?"

"Come on," Melinda begins. "The party isn't for a few weeks, and—"

"I already bought a costume," I say, cutting her off. "And there's no way I'm taking it back." I'd take Kelsey's side even if I hadn't already bought a costume. When you've been best friends since kindergarten, that's just what you do.

Kelsey grins triumphantly. "See? Two against one. Too bad, Melinda."

Melinda stabs at her salad and grumbles. "It's not fair. Just because you have a best friend who—"

"What was that?" Kelsey cocks an ear.

Melinda looks up and suddenly seems to realize everyone is looking at her. "Nothing."

Melinda changes the subject and begins talking about a reality show she saw on TV last night, but I don't pay attention. I'm looking over her shoulder, at Alyssa. In the window behind her several red and gold leaves from the maple trees drift slowly to the ground like lazy sailboats. I remember how Alyssa's dad used to pay me and Kelsey and Alyssa a penny for every leaf we picked up in their front yard. Kelsey and Alyssa always fought over the red ones.

"Earth to Polly," Kelsey says. "What's with you today? You seem distracted. And you took forever at the salad bar."

"Some girl was giving Polly a hard time." Melinda points her fork at me. "And Polly was just taking it." Melinda's voice is disapproving, like she's tattling on a small child who's just done something very naughty. Sometimes I catch her staring at me with a puzzled, distasteful expression on her face, like she can't figure out how I became popular. And lately Melinda's been taking her chronically cranky mood out on me—



especially when she feels like me and Kelsey are ganging up on her.

~~Before I can remind Melinda that I did stick up for myself (and still feel bad about it),~~ Kelsey says, “That’s your problem, Polly. You don’t assert yourself. Someone messes with you”—Kelsey pounds her fist on the table—“you squash them.”

“Squash them?” I laugh.

“Like a bug. And anyway, what girl was giving you a hard time?” She turns to survey the cafeteria, eyes narrowed.

“Some ugly girl from my history class,” Melinda says. “She’s no one.”

“Her name is Alyssa,” Lindsey says. “She’s usually pretty nice.” Lindsey quickly glances at Kelsey and me, to see if she said the wrong thing. As a seventh grader, Lindsey is careful to stay on everyone’s good side. So I smile back at her to let her know everything is fine.

Kelsey pales, and after the conversation turns to another topic, she leans over and whispers, “Alyssa Grace?”

It sounds weird to hear Kelsey use Alyssa’s last name. Like she’s a stranger. Like Alyssa isn’t the girl we once bought special best friend necklaces with—a heart splat in three ways.

“She’s sitting behind Melinda,” I whisper.

Kelsey turns, and we both watch Alyssa. “Why is she sitting there?” Kelsey whispers. “Doesn’t she usually eat lunch with her choir friends?”

“Yes.”

Kelsey and I glance at each other—both of us silently acknowledging that, even though we don’t talk about Alyssa, we’ve kept track of her the past year.

“Um, Kelsey?” A girl I don’t know—a seventh grader, I think—tentatively steps forward. “Mr. Fish says he needs to see you. R-right now.” Sweat breaks out on her upper lip, probably because she was forced to approach the Court without an invite.

Mr. Fish is the teacher adviser for Groove It Up. He seems nice enough to me, but Kelsey can’t stand him. She gives a long-suffering sigh before leaving.

Afterward I get drawn into a conversation about the upcoming football game, and whether I think the Winston Wildcats will win on Saturday. I smile and nod, since I’m not expected to care, but the whole time I’m watching Alyssa.

Sometimes I wonder what life would be like if the ground hadn’t shifted, elevating Kelsey and me—turning us into middle school royalty—while Alyssa was thrust to the bottom of the middle school heap. Back when the three of us had sleepovers every Friday night at Alyssa’s house, Kelsey and I would sing off-key to stupid pop songs on Mr. Grace’s old karaoke machine. Every now and then Alyssa would join in—overpowering us with her diva voice. But usually she’d make funny faces and dance crazily around the room—like a chicken doing the hokey pokey—and we’d all laugh till we fell to the floor in hysterics.

“Hey, Pretty Polly,” says Derek Tanner, a football player sitting next to Kristy. “I’m going to get a soda from the vending machine. Want one?”

I nod and tell him thank you. In the past couple weeks Derek’s started showing up at my locker, buying me sodas during lunch, and insisting on carrying my backpack in between classes.

After he leaves, Kristy and Melinda giggle, and Lindsey whispers, “He *totally* likes

you.”

“Maybe.” ~~The girls are convinced Derek has a crush on me, but I just can’t get a~~ that excited about it. I mean, yeah, Derek’s really cute. But he also has this weird look on his face all the time—like he’s constantly surprised by the smallest things. Plus, he smells like cardboard. Don’t ask me why.

Also, I happen to know (since he mentions it at least once a day) that Derek is trying out for Groove It Up and really wants a slot on the Talent Team. If it weren’t for the fact that Kelsey intimidates most of the boys at Winston, I think Derek would be buying *her* sodas. You know, go straight to the top, and all that.

I watch while Derek lingers in front of the soda dispenser, scratching his head and looking baffled—like the machine’s playing a practical joke on him. Then I turn to the girls. “What if he only likes me because I’m on the planning committee?” I ask. “Or because I’m popular?”

“So what?” Melinda looks genuinely confused.

After that, Kristy tells us about the camping trip she went on with her family over the weekend.

“That sounds super fun,” I say, watching Alyssa while I talk. “I love camping.”

Melinda turns to me. “Didn’t you tell Kate Newport last week that you’d rather stick a needle in your eye than go camping?”

“What?” I turn my attention back to the girls. “Oh, um . . .” Okay, I did say that. I wasn’t trying to be totally fake to Kristy or anything, but I’ve noticed people sometimes get upset when you disagree with them over the smallest things. Like if someone says “I really like lemon drops,” and you say, “I don’t like lemon drops,” the other person gets all offended. Like you’ve just said you don’t like *them*.

So in my opinion it’s just easier to agree with people.

“Um . . . I forgot,” I say.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s the PlanMaster herself!” says Toby Markowitz, another football player, as Kelsey plunks back down in her seat. “Death to American River!”

Then Kristy and the other cheerleaders start clapping and break into a chant, “Winston! WIN-ston! WIN-ston!” I can’t help it. I look around at the rest of the cafeteria and watch everyone else (including Alyssa) watch us. It feels good.

“Free concert with Shattered Stars, here we come! American River doesn’t stand a chance with Queen Kelsey as the PlanMaster!” Lindsey says.

(Yep, Kelsey also has a nickname that we think came from Alyssa. The difference is Kelsey *likes* hers.)

“It doesn’t matter who the PlanMaster is,” Kelsey says, rubbing her temples. “What matters is which school has the most talent.”

“Stop being so modest,” Melinda says, in a voice so sugary I wonder if *she* practices in front of a mirror. “We all know that if Winston wins, as PlanMaster, Kelsey should get all the credit.” Melinda smiles, but her yellowish-brown eyes—that remind me of greed wasps—don’t. For a second I wonder if Melinda believes the opposite. If Winston loses, does Kelsey deserve all the blame?

I think Kelsey must wonder the same thing, because she snaps, “I *know*, Melinda. Okay? Since you remind me practically every hour.”

Derek returns, having finally outsmarted the vending machine. He hands me a soda

and then offers one to Kelsey. "Here you go, Madame PlanMaster."

~~"It's dented." Kelsey turns the can to show Derek.~~

"Oh, yeah," Derek says, looking vaguely surprised. "I guess I dropped it."

"Look what I found." Kristy holds up an American River flyer advertising Groove It Up. "They hung it up outside of Chip's. Can you believe that?"

Groove It Up is a big deal in Maple Oaks, and a lot of the local businesses get into it supporting one school or another. Chip's, the diner across the street from Winston, is always firmly on our side.

"Give me that." Melinda snatches the flyer, wads it up, and tosses it behind her. It lands in Alyssa's tomato soup, sending red liquid splashing onto Alyssa's face—which sends half the Court into hysterics.

"She looks better that way." Melinda gasps, laughing so hard she can't catch her breath.

Everyone goes back to cheering for Winston. No one notices that Kelsey and I aren't laughing. Alyssa, meanwhile, wipes the soup off with a napkin, revealing a face that's still tomato-colored. Then she hastily gathers her things. After she's cleared her tray, she starts for the staircase leading to Winston's lower level—the Dungeon, as it's known around campus.

"I want to go talk to her," I whisper to Kelsey.

"Absolutely not. She made her choice."

I turn and stare at Kelsey. "I wasn't asking for your permission."

I stand up and start after Alyssa. Behind me I hear Kelsey say, "All right, Polly. *Finish*. Wait for me."

I'm at the edge of the staircase, and Alyssa is down the stairs—heading into the Dungeon—when I call down to her, "Alyssa!"

This is the part I will always replay in my mind:

1. Alyssa turns to stare up at us.
2. Next to me I hear Kelsey pop open her soda, and icy liquid sprays my shoulder as the soda spurts everywhere. Then I hear a dull thud as Kelsey drops the can.
3. Alyssa grins, but her look quickly turns to panic and she mouths the word *No!*
4. I turn just in time to see Kelsey trip over the can and go toppling down the stairs, her screams tumbling after her.
5. When Kelsey lands, Alyssa is at her side.
6. Alyssa looks up at me. Then, like a mirror image, we each bring a hand to our neck.

Both of us reaching for a heart necklace that isn't there anymore.

# Chapter 3

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*True Confession: Besides Kelsey, I never show my report card to the girls at the Court. I don't want them to know I get straight As.*

THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW I BECAME POPULAR AND LOST a best friend, all in the same week:

On our first day of seventh grade, Alyssa and I sat together at a side table in the cafeteria, trying to calm down Kelsey, who was livid that some eighth grader named Amanda had dared to call her Squirt in the hallway.

"It's not a big deal," Alyssa said. "And who cares what she says, anyway?"

"I care, Miss High-and-Mighty," Kelsey snapped. "And so should both of you. Do you know what kinds of decisions are made in the first weeks of middle school? Where you sit, who you hang out with? It defines your entire existence."

"Okay, now you're just being overdramatic," Alyssa said.

"Don't talk to me about being dramatic, Miss I'm-Saving-My-Voice-for-Choir-Tryouts Tomorrow." Kelsey stared pointedly at the scarf Alyssa had tied around her neck.

I kept quiet, but I actually agreed with Kelsey. Right then in the cafeteria most people (except for Amanda) seemed pretty nice—spread out like pieces of a living puzzle, trying to figure out where they fit. But eventually, I knew, everyone would find their matching pieces and connect together, making up Winston Academy's student body. After that, if you tried to switch groups or sit at a different table, people would look at you funny.

"If we were sitting at the Court," Kelsey said, "no one could touch us. We should go over there."

I'd only been a middle schooler for approximately four hours, but I'd been hearing all about the Court—the table where the cream of the crop of Winston Academy sat ruling from on high—for years in Winston's elementary section. Jenna Huff always acted like it was just a given that she'd end up at the Court. Once, in fifth grade, I heard Jenna and her friends making a list of the people they'd allow to eat with them once they were in charge. My name wasn't on it. "Polly's too dorky to sit at the Court," I'd heard Jenna say to her friends. But I wondered if the real reason was because every week I beat Jenna for first place in the class spelling bee.

Alyssa stared at Kelsey like she'd just suggested we chop off a finger or two. "You can't be serious. You have to be invited to the Court. No one just goes over and sits down."

"Oh yeah?" Kelsey stood up. "Watch me."

"Kelsey, wait!" I said. Alyssa and I grabbed our lunches and scrambled after Kelsey, who marched straight over to the Court and pointed to two empty chairs at the end of the table.

"Sit down," she commanded.

Alyssa and I sat. Kelsey dragged over another chair. Then she sat down and quietly began eating her lunch.

Meanwhile, everyone else at the table stared at us. Amanda, the girl who'd insulted Kelsey earlier, said, "What do you think you're doing?"

Kelsey smiled back at her. Then she proceeded to utterly pick apart Amanda's outfit and all the ways it wasn't worthy to be worn at the Court. When Kelsey finished, there was a stunned silence.

Until Brooklyn Jones, the most popular eighth grader, said, "What's your name?" After Kelsey answered, Brooklyn smiled and said, "Nice outfit." Then her smile vanished. "And, Amanda? She's right. Tomorrow don't bother sitting here unless you can clean yourself up. You're making us all look bad."

While everyone talked about clothes and football and their classes, I quietly ate my lunch and read an invitation I'd received in homeroom to take the Star Student test—program for academically gifted kids. The students who passed the test were bused over to Maple Oaks High School during lunchtime to take a couple of afternoon prep classes. I hadn't decided yet if I wanted to take the test. I knew my mom would love it if I did, but I wasn't sure yet what I wanted.

"Polly, what are you reading?" Brooklyn said suddenly, sounding irritated that I hadn't been paying enough attention to her.

I looked up at Brooklyn and realized I couldn't tell the truth, especially since she had just called the AcaSmackers—members of the Academic Smackdown club—"hopeless überdorks."

"Nothing." I quickly stuffed the letter back into my pocket. "But, hey, there's something super important I need to ask you." I leaned toward Brooklyn and made my eyes go wide, like I was about to ask her the most important question in the history of the world. "What are you wearing to the football game on Friday night?"

At the end of lunch Brooklyn said she'd see us all tomorrow. But the next afternoon in the cafeteria Alyssa refused to sit at the Court.

"No. I'm not eating there again. Not even for you, Kelse. The people over there are lame."

"Will you please lower your voice?" Kelsey said, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one heard. "And you don't know the people over there, so don't make generalizations. Don't you see? If we join the Court, we could do whatever we wanted and no one could mess with us. It's the only way."

"It's not the only way," Alyssa said. "We don't have to sit there just because you're obsessed with being popular."

"I am *not* obsessed," Kelsey said.

"Can't we go down to the lower level?" Alyssa asked, pointing to the staircase. "I want to check out the choir room before tryouts this afternoon. And I heard a lot of people eat lunch down there."

"You want to eat lunch in the Dungeon?" Kelsey said. "The only rooms down there are the music and drama rooms for all the weird artsy types. The geeks . . . I'm sorry," Kelsey said immediately as Alyssa's face flushed red.

"I may be 'artsy,'" Alyssa said, making air quotes, "but at least I'm not shallow."

Kelsey and Alyssa glared at each other. I stood between them, feeling like a thin paper clip caught between two powerful magnets. Instinctively I grabbed for my heart necklace. It was appropriate that I had the middle section, the one that joined the other

two. Because that was always my role—to help Kelsey and Alyssa work things out when they got into one of their famous fights.

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Peacemaker Polly, Alyssa always called me.

I twisted my necklace around my finger. Today, I noticed, neither Kelsey nor Alyssa wore theirs. Both of them turned to stare at me. Kelsey's eyes pleading, Alyssa's wary.

"Tell her, Polly," Alyssa said. "Tell her you didn't like sitting there either."

I bit my lip and said nothing. It was true, I hadn't liked sitting at the Court and worrying I might say or do—or be wearing—the wrong thing. Up till then, most of my clothes had come from the thrift shops Alyssa and I shopped at. The previous afternoon I'd begged my mom to take me to the mall. Mom, who had just gotten a big promotion at work, had handed me her credit card and said she'd catch up on paperwork in the food court while I shopped. After I got a haircut, I spent two nerve-racking hours hunting down a week's worth of outfits that I hoped Brooklyn (and Kelsey) would consider Court-worthy. Thankfully, Mom didn't seem to care how much money I'd spent. She even said that since she would be working more hours, I should keep the credit card, just in case.

That morning in homeroom a couple of girls—who'd ignored me the day before—had started asking me all about the Court. When I casually mentioned I'd been invited to eat there again, they said they were having a sleepover that weekend and wanted to know if I could come.

And *that* I liked. A lot. But I knew it wasn't something Alyssa would understand.

Alyssa's eyes hardened. "You can't say it, can you? You can't say what you really think. You've changed your whole look just so those morons over there will think you're cool. Will you change your personality, too? You're plastic, you know that? Plastic Polly—*that's* who you are." Alyssa turned back to Kelsey. "Fine. You two go and sit in Fakeville, but I'm leaving."

Alyssa stomped over to the staircase. After she disappeared down into the Dungeon, Kelsey grabbed my arm and led us to the Court. Once we were settled, Brooklyn asked Kelsey where our friend was.

"She . . . had something she needed to take care of." Kelsey shot me a look that told me to keep quiet.

"Good. I didn't like her attitude," Brooklyn said. "Don't bring her over here tomorrow."

That night I called Alyssa to smooth things over. I didn't want Kelsey to do it because I was afraid she'd lose her temper and make things worse. I asked Alyssa about the Dungeon, and choir tryouts, and listened while she talked about some new friends she'd made. But it turned out Alyssa felt bad about our fight, and she offered a solution to the lunch problem. "I can't handle being at the Court every day. What if I eat with you guys, like, a couple times a week or something?"

"Um, the thing is, Alyssa," I said, choosing my words carefully, "you have to be invited to the Court."

"And I'm not?"

I didn't know what to say. It occurred to me I could offer to eat with Alyssa in the Dungeon the next day, but I figured if I did, Brooklyn would ban me from the Court too. And that was something I didn't want, I realized. Because even if I didn't really like

Brooklyn and some of the other girls at the Court, I *did* like how people were starting to talk to me in class, or in the hallways. I didn't have to even *do* anything; the power of the Court seemed to draw them to me.

Popularity, it seemed to me right then, was the middle school equivalent of a security blanket. Something thick and warm to wrap around yourself to keep you safe from the dangers outside. And incredibly enough, it was being offered to me. (Mostly because I was Kelsey's best friend, but still.) All I had to do was reach out and take it.

And also, I knew if I asked Alyssa not to hang out in the Dungeon, she wouldn't listen. She would tell me if I was really her friend, I wouldn't ask her to give up something so important to her. So why should I give up something *I* wanted, just for her?

"Look, even if we don't hang out at lunch, it doesn't mean anything else has to change."

"Yeah, right," Alyssa said. Then she hung up on me.

I called her back every day for a week, but Alyssa always got her mom to say she was busy or not home or something. Kelsey was furious that Alyssa wouldn't take my calls, and she decided we shouldn't speak to her until Alyssa apologized. Except neither of us had any classes with Alyssa, and her locker was across the school from ours. We rarely saw her—it was like Alyssa didn't exist anymore. But when I began hearing people call me Plastic Polly, I knew who I had to thank.

I threw away my invitation to test for the Star Student program. Who wanted to spend lunchtime being driven over to Maple Oaks High when I had a chance to join the Court? Every day Kelsey and I ate lunch there—until it became clear to everyone that this was where we belonged. Sometimes, though, I couldn't help wondering what would have happened if it had been Kelsey who'd stomped away first. Would I have gone to the Court on my own? Or, like Alyssa, would I have sunk into middle school obscurity?



In the waiting room at the hospital, Mrs. Taylor tells me and my mom that Kelsey has a broken wrist, a slight concussion, and a mildly sprained ankle, and she's pretty bruised up—but that Kelsey is really lucky because it could have been so much worse.

"Her room is down the hall, fourth on the left. You girls catch up, and your mom and I will get some coffee from the cafeteria."

Mrs. Taylor takes Molly—Kelsey's little sister—by the hand and heads with Mom to the elevator. After they're gone, I don't immediately go to Kelsey's room. Instead, I pull my cell phone from my pocket. Maybe it's because I just saw her earlier, but my first instinct is to call Alyssa and let her know Kelsey is okay.

Before I can stop and ask myself why I still have her number in my cell, I'm dialing and the phone is ringing. It's not until Alyssa answers that I realize how stupid I'm being. Although she initially rushed to Kelsey's side, by the time I'd scrambled down the stairs, Alyssa had floated away into the crowd. Maybe she doesn't care how Kelsey is doing.

I'm about to hang up when Alyssa says, "Hello? Polly?"

Stupid caller ID. "Hey, it's me." I explain Kelsey's injuries. Then I say, "But she's okay. They're going to keep her here for a few days before sending her home."

I expect Alyssa to say something snarky, but she doesn't. In fact, she doesn't even seem surprised I called. She just says, "I'm glad."

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There's an awkward silence until I say, "I have to—"

"My mom is calling me," Alyssa says.

I think we're both relieved when we hang up.

As soon as I walk into Kelsey's room, I feel nauseous. Colorful bouquets of flowers are spread out on every available surface, making the room smell sickeningly sweet.

"You must have a lot of friends on campus," a nurse is saying to Kelsey as she makes room on the nightstand for a vase of tulips.

"You have no idea," Kelsey answers, fluffing her hair. "Hey, Polly."

A pile of get-well cards sits next to an arrangement of daisies. Kelsey follows my gaze and says, "Mr. Fish brought them over earlier."

I nod and move over to Kelsey's bed. One card sits next to Kelsey. It's from Melinda and reads:

*I know you'll be a great PlanMaster, even if you might be injured! It would really stink if we lost this year. Everyone will be soooo mad if they don't get that concert with Shattered Stars. So get well soon!*

I hand the card back to Kelsey and roll my eyes. Typical Melinda.

After the nurse leaves, I sit down on the bed and give Kelsey an awkward hug. "How are you?"

"Okay." Kelsey looks more than okay. A hot-pink cast encloses her left hand, but otherwise she looks great. She's propped up on a pile of pillows, and her sleek black hair is fanned around her like she's a princess. Her face is perfectly made up, and she's wearing her favorite silver hoop earrings.

"I might be out of school for a while," Kelsey says, staring out the window.

I squeeze her good hand. "You'll be back in no time. You look great. Really."

Kelsey shakes her head and looks at me. "My doctor gave me a note. I can be out for three weeks if I want."

"Three weeks? For a broken wrist?"

"*And* a concussion. *And* a sprained ankle," Kelsey says, defensiveness creeping into her voice. "And I hurt everywhere you can imagine."

"Okay. But three weeks? You're not even left-handed. And why would you want to be out of school that long, anyway?"

Kelsey glances at the get-well card from Melinda. "I just—"

"Excuse me, girls." Another nurse walks in, carrying a tray. "Dinner is served! Hospital food at its finest!"

I move off the bed while the nurse places the tray on a table next to Kelsey. I don't get it. Kelsey can be extremely persuasive, which is why Alyssa and I always let Kelsey do the talking whenever the three of us wanted something from one of our parents, so anyone can talk their doctor into giving them a free pass from school for three weeks—it's Kelsey.

But she never misses school. Not because she loves her classes—Kelsey has an on-again, off-again relationship with her homework—but because as the queen of the Court, Kelsey considers Winston Academy her personal playground. I look around a



the bouquets of flowers. It seems to me she'd be dying to go back to school so she could be showered with gifts and attention. So what's going on?

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After the nurse leaves, Kelsey takes a bite of chocolate pudding, then makes a face and pushes her tray away. "Since I'm going to be out of school, I called Principal Allen and resigned as the PlanMaster for Groove It Up. I'm really sorry, Polly."

I frown. "What are you apologizing for?"

Kelsey rolls her eyes. "You know, for an A student you can be really slow sometimes. What happens to the vice president when the president is unable to perform his—or her—duties?"

"They—" I stop as the light finally clicks on. "Oh."

"Yep." Kelsey nods and raises her good arm like she's passing a torch. "Congratulations! You are now the new PlanMaster for Winston Academy!"

# Chapter 4

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*True Confession: You know how everyone says you shouldn't care what others think about you? Well, I care. A lot.*

SOMETIMES I THINK ALYSSA GAVE ME THE WRONG nickname. Sure, Plastic Polly is clever. But Parrot Polly might have been an even better choice, because my job at the Court—and on the Groove It Up planning committee—is to agree with whatever Kelsey says. It's not like she gets mad at me if I don't. (Not usually, anyway.) But Kelsey always knows what she wants, and most of the time I don't, so it's just easier to go along with her.

Groove It Up is always planned by the members of the Court, with the most popular eighth grader serving as the PlanMaster. It's not a school rule or anything, more like tradition. And when Mr. Fish holds a meeting for anyone interested in being the PlanMaster, and Queen Kelsey raises her hand and stares down everyone else—silently daring them to cross her—how many other girls are going to volunteer?

Look, it may not be fair. But this is middle school. This is how it is.

So the next morning while Mom and I wait outside Principal Allen's office, I'm trying to figure out how to abdicate as the PlanMaster. It has always looked like a ton of work (even though Kelsey didn't seem to be doing a whole lot). And, being the Vice PlanMaster, I get to stand in front of everyone at the Groove It Up pep rallies. But I haven't had to actually *do* anything. It's been nice.

Next to me Mom is firing off texts. Her black pantsuit is freshly pressed, her nutmeg-colored hair is twisted into a severe knot at the nape of her neck, and her ice-blue eyes are narrowed as she taps on her cell. Sometimes I wonder how we could possibly be related when we look so different. Once, I heard Grandpa Pierce say she was the most striking woman he's ever seen. But no one would ever call me striking. Most things about my appearance—my face, my height, my dirty-blond hair—are average. Except for my eyes. Dad says they're the perfect shade of aqua, like they couldn't decide if they wanted to be green or blue, so they chose somewhere in the middle.

Mom glares at her phone and mutters something under her breath. She's a lawyer for a big firm, but she's not the cool kind of lawyer that struts around in shiny high heels badgering witnesses and demanding that they tell her the truth. More like she spends all day (and many times all night) poring over stacks of boring paperwork in her stuffy office.

Mom says she always knew she wanted to be a lawyer. After she graduated from Harvard, she planned on going to law school. But then she moved back to Maple Oak in northern California and met Dad. They got married and had me. Mom stayed home with me when I was little, but once I started first grade, she told Dad she was going to law school. I'm probably the only first grader who learned to read by sounding out sentences in legal briefs. Mom just seems happier when she's working and has a huge to-do list. I don't take it personally. Most days, anyway.

"Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

"In a sec," Mom answers, scowling at her phone and texting away.

~~I wait, but she keeps sending one text after another. Finally I give up and send a text of my own:~~

I need to talk to you.

"Almost finished. I promise."

"Have you had a chance to look at the application for Camp Colonial?" Mom asks once she's put her phone away.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about. And, no, I haven't." A couple of weeks ago Mom handed me an application for this lame camp where you spend half your summer prepping for high school. Look, I may get all As, but that doesn't mean I want to spend every second of my life studying. And sometimes I think Mom looks at my future like it's a geometry problem: What is the shortest distance between point A and point B? With point A being me and point B being Harvard. And the only obstacle standing between Mom's alma mater and her perfect AB line to academic excellence is, well, *me*. That's why I never told her about the invitation I got last year to test for the Star Student program—or the one I received this year either. I knew if she found out, I could kiss any fun I might want to have in middle school good-bye.

"Polly, do you have any idea how many kids would kill for an opportunity like this?"

"I'm guessing somewhere in the range of zero?"

"A little hard work wouldn't hurt, is all I'm saying. Next year you'll be starting high school, and then you'll have to get serious."

"Fine, I will." And then just to annoy her I add, "But in the meantime I'm going to be as unserious as possible. Besides, Kelsey says she wants me to help her train for the high school soccer team over the summer."

"Kelsey says, huh?" Mom frowns. I don't know what her deal is. Lately it seems like she doesn't like Kelsey as much as she used to.

Mom begins to say something else, but she stops when the office door opens and Principal Allen greets us. I expect to hear the stern voice she uses with her students but instead Principal Allen squeals, "Laura! So good to see you!" and hugs Mom.

"Trudy!" Mom exclaims, all traces of her irritation gone. "It's been ages. How are you? I'll bet when we were cheering for the Winston Wildcats, we didn't think we'd end up here!"

Mom and "Trudy" chatter about the good old days as we walk into the office and settle into chairs around Principal Allen's desk. I can't help feeling a little weird that Mom and Principal Allen know each other. I mean, yeah, I vaguely remember Mom telling me they went to school together, but it's hard to imagine Mom and Principal Allen as middle school cheerleaders.

Next to Principal Allen's desk is a display case holding several trophies. My stomach clenches when I see the three golden microphones—representing Winston's Groove. Up wins over the last three years. A fourth win this year would set a new record. The trophies occupy their own row, but they're not centered. At the end is a large space like Principal Allen has already reserved the spot for our fourth win.

"Thank you for coming in today," Principal Allen says. "With Kelsey out that means"

that, as the Vice PlanMaster, Polly is next in line to coordinate Groove It Up. There's much to accomplish in the next few weeks."

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Principal Allen looks at me like I'm supposed to speak, to express my gratitude or maybe tell her all about the plans I have for Groove It Up.

"I visited Kelsey in the hospital," I blurt out instead.

Principal Allen nods and waves her hand slightly. "Yes, I've spoken with the Taylors as well, but Kelsey won't be coming back to school until after Groove It Up, and, as they say, the show must go on. The question is, what to do now? There was a school board meeting last night, and questions have arisen regarding Groove It Up and what's best for the school."

"I see," Mom says. I can feel something shift in the atmosphere then, but I can't figure out what.

"Yes," Principal Allen continues, "and we just need a little bit of clarity about what Polly wants to do—if she wishes to continue on as the PlanMaster, or if she wishes to resign." Principal Allen looks at me. "Polly, what are your thoughts?"

My thoughts? The only thought in my head is that I wish I could get away—from Mom, who would sign me up for Harvard right now if she could. And from Principal Allen, who seems more concerned about Groove It Up than she does about Kelsey.

I hesitate before answering, maybe too long, because Principal Allen says, "Polly, there are leftover cookies in the teachers' lounge, just down the hall. Why don't you grab a few—there's milk in the fridge—and we'll pick this up in a few minutes."

I know she's trying to get rid of me—though I'm not sure why—but I don't argue, and try not to run from her office. Inside the teachers' lounge I ignore the cookies and send Kelsey a text:

Are you there?

It takes a minute, but then:

Yes. Hard 2 txt with 1 hand tho.

I'm meeting with Principal Allen. She wants to know if I want to be the PlanMaster or if I want to resign.

I hesitate and then add:

Do you think I could do it?

I had meant to text "should" do it, like whether or not Kelsey thinks it's worth my time. But instead, I typed "could" do it, like I'm wondering if Kelsey thinks I'm able to plan Groove It Up by myself. Which, I guess I am. Wondering, I mean.

I wait for Kelsey to text back.

And wait some more.

When it's clear Kelsey isn't going to respond, I leave the teachers' lounge. The door to Principal Allen's office is cracked open, and I hear whispers. Instinctively, I slow down.

"Oh, Trudy, you mustn't let it get to you," Mom is saying. "People get worked up over

Groove It Up. They always have. Remember when we were in eighth grade?"

"Yes, but things are different this year. These prizes are making everyone crazy. Do you know how many phone calls I've received from parents who want their kid to get a slot on the Talent Team, just so they can get on TV if we win? Or because their kid is dying to see Shattered Stars? Henry Huff is even insisting that this is too important to let the students handle it."

"But Groove It Up is always coordinated by the students. It's tradition."

"That's exactly what I told him, but he's one of our biggest donors, so others listen to him. I need a win here, Laura. Tell me honestly, do you think Polly can get the job done?"

I step closer to the door. I know I should cough, clear my throat, make a bunch of noise, and pretend I haven't just been eavesdropping. But I can't. In the few seconds of silence as we wait for Mom's response, I hear the question a hundred times over:

*Can Polly get the job done?*

I hear it so many times, it's not until Principal Allen says, "Oh, I see," that I realize Mom never answered the question.

"You have to understand, Trudy," Mom says, sounding embarrassed. "Polly's more of a follower than a leader. And anyway, you know kids today. They're lazy. They're more interested in shopping and texting their friends than working hard."

"So true," Principal Allen says. I don't hear the rest of what she says, because I feel like I've been punched in the gut, and there's a strange buzzing noise in my ears.

The nickname Plastic Polly has always bothered me, but I figured it was mostly just because people were jealous, that they coveted a spot at the Court, and when it was denied, they turned to nastiness as their consolation and decided to dismiss me as shallow and fake. But do people really believe it? Does *my own mother* really believe it?

I feel hollow—like I'm nothing but empty space—as I silently back up a few paces, cough loudly, and clomp through the door. I refuse to look at Mom as I take my seat in front of Principal Allen.

"So, Polly," Principal Allen says, "we were just discussing your options. We feel it's unfair you've been put into this position, that you are now in charge of something as all-consuming as Groove It Up."

*Unfair to who?* I want to ask, but don't.

"I realize that perhaps you didn't want to be PlanMaster, that it may interfere with your other interests, like . . ." Principal Allen pauses, and frowns.

*Like shopping and texting?* I say to just myself.

". . . well, whatever they might be," she finishes.

"Yes, Polly," Mom adds. "We want to make sure you have a choice in this. You don't have to be saddled with this responsibility if you don't want to be."

"I can choose what I want to do?" Even my voice sounds hollow. It's funny, but I guess I was expecting Principal Allen to give me a pep talk and tell me I can do it, and go team, and all that junk. And then I'd have to tell her I was choosing to resign. But right now it doesn't feel like much of a choice. It feels like I'm supposed to just go along with Principal Allen so she can give the task to someone else, someone she believes in. This should be easy for me, right? Don't I usually just agree with whatever Kelsey wants when it comes to Groove It Up?

Plastic Polly, Parrot Polly, People Pleaser Polly—they're all me.

~~My cell pings then, a text from Kelsey:~~

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I'll B helping U the whole time. So of course U can do it!

Suddenly I feel mad. Mad that my own mother won't stick up for me. Mad that she thinks she knows me so well, just because I don't want to go to her stupid pre-high school camp. Mad that she would criticize me for being on my phone too much, when she practically can't breathe without hers. Mad at myself, that I need Kelsey's advice to make a decision. And mad at Kelsey, too, because her text makes it sound like she thinks I can do it only if she helps me.

"I can choose what I want to do?" I repeat. And this time my voice sounds solid. Not hollow. And definitely not plastic.

"Absolutely. No guilt, and no explanations necessary." I'm staring at Kelsey's text, but I can hear the smile in Principal Allen's voice.

I look up. "Then I choose to do it. I'm going to be the PlanMaster." I stand up and walk out the door, leaving Mom and Principal Allen gaping after me.

Then I text Kelsey:

You've just texted Winston's newest PlanMaster. American River is toast!

# Chapter 5

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*True Confession: I know I never would've become popular if I wasn't Kelsey's best friend.  
I'm pretty sure other people know it too.*

THE TEXTS FROM KELSEY START FIVE SECONDS LATER:

The next Groove It Up meeting is 2morrow.

You need 3 judges 4 tryouts.

Do NOT pick Melinda, she'll B impossible 2 work with.

On second thought, Melinda's ruthless. She'll B a great judge.

By the time I've left the administration building, Kelsey has sent five more messages—apparently she texts just fine with one hand. Finally I text her back that I'm going to be late to class. Then I shut off my phone.

Groove It Up fever is spreading around campus. Under a banner I hung up yesterday a group of soccer players are clowning around and pretending to be members of a boom band. At the drinking fountain a boy is break-dancing while other students clap around him. As I pass the library, I hear several students singing the lyrics to Shattered Stars, the newest hit while Mrs. Turner, the school librarian, yells at them to stop being so loud. When I pass Derek's locker, I hear him ask a couple of his friends if they think he'd look good on TV.

Over at the sign-up sheet for tryouts, which I purposely posted across from my locker, students are cheering as Kristy and some other cheerleaders add their names to the list.

"American River is going down!" shouts one boy.

I'm hunting through my locker for my history textbook when I hear Melinda's loud voice behind me. "Guess we have a lot to discuss about Groove It Up."

The cheering stops and a hush falls over the hallway. I hear a couple girls whispering about Kelsey's fall. I turn around. Kristy and everyone else in the hall are watching us.

Melinda is standing in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest. She's wearing lipstick in a disgusting shade of pink that reminds me of raw fish. Lindse stands beside her, looking nervous as her eyes ping back and forth between Melinda and me.

"Aren't you going to ask me how Kelsey's doing?" I say.

"I don't need to. Everyone already knows Kelsey only broke her wrist and bumped her head."

"Only, right." I stuff a textbook into my backpack. "I'll be sure to tell Kelsey that when I text her. Or when she comes back in a few weeks." For some reason I feel the need to remind Melinda that Kelsey will be back, that the Court won't be without it.

queen for long.

~~“Sure, but now that Kelsey’s gone, we need to figure out who’s the new PlanMaster. Even Kelsey can’t do it from a hospital bed.”~~

“I’m the new PlanMaster. I just had a meeting with Principal Allen.” I decide not to mention that Kelsey voluntarily resigned.

“And she chose you?” I doubt anyone in the crowd hears Melinda’s slight emphasis on the word “you,” but I can hear it, loud and clear. Melinda sighs and continues, “Polly, there’s a lot more to being the PlanMaster than just wearing cute clothes and telling everyone they’re doing a super great job.”

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Melinda *never* would have said that to me if Kelsey were here.

“Dude, that was *nasty!*” whispers one boy, but he’s grinning ear to ear, like he’s hoping for a fight.

Everyone is staring at me, and I know they’re waiting to see what I’ll say. Right now I want to remind Melinda—and everyone else—that in Winston Academy’s inner circle there’s a pecking order. Which goes: Kelsey, me, and *then* Melinda.

*Don’t wimp out. Melinda can’t get away with that,* I say to myself. Then I squinch up my eyes like I’m studying Melinda. “I’ve got one word for you, Melinda: ‘understated.’”

Melinda frowns. “Isn’t that two words?”

“No, it’s not.” I point to my mouth. “If something’s fluorescent, it doesn’t belong on your face. So unless you want people calling you Sushi Lips, I’d wipe that lipstick off.”

Several people in the hall start snickering, and Melinda’s face flushes a color that actually matches the sushi lipstick.

“And another thing,” I say, “now that I’m the PlanMaster, I’m going to need a Vice PlanMaster.” I make a show of turning to Lindsey. “Are you up for it? Want to be the Vice PlanMaster?”

Lindsey looks from me to Melinda, then steps closer to me. “Absolutely.”

“Great.” I turn back to Melinda, and in my best in-command voice I say, “You got a problem with that?”

Melinda glances around at everyone. She starts to say something, but then seems to think better of it. “No,” she finally answers.

“Good,” I say. “Now go wipe your face.”



I’m used to people staring at me. When you’re a member of the Court, it goes with the territory. But as word spreads that I’m the new PlanMaster, the looks I get change as I pass from one morning class to another. These stares are questioning, like people are sizing me up.

I decide to skip lunch at the Court. I don’t feel like dealing with Melinda. Also tomorrow afternoon is the next planning meeting, and I have no clue what I’m supposed to do. So far at our meetings we’ve mostly decorated banners and gossiped. So I head to Mr. Fish’s classroom, hoping to get his help.

“Mr. Fish?” I knock on his classroom door, which is open.

“Come in, Miss Pierce.” Mr. Fish is leaning back in his chair, reading a magazine.

Besides teaching English, Mr. Fish is Winston’s football coach. So today, like every



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