

Realistic, fantastical, amusing, and tragic, "Ten Steps Higher" reflects the contemporary adolescence of a high school girl, Alexis McDaniels, as she weaves through the burdensome 'swim or sink' life she's forced to live.

Alexis may not be the coolest girl in her high school, but she has a biting wit, spot-on courage and way too smart to ignore the wiles of ignorant school bullies. She takes on the high-stakes game of teen-tyranny ten steps higher, and in the process fashions unexpected relationships in the most unlikely circles.

Inventing who and what she will be, Alexis builds the dream team, and out of it discovers she's so much more. She finally finds the life she so deeply sought, only to face a tragedy that leaves her gasping for breath and questioning her life.

Beautifully written, "Ten Steps Higher" nimbly blends sharp with unapologetic emotion and is sure to resonate.



Angie Adeyi is a Middle School student and the author of "I AM ME!" Her love and passion for fiction writing has led her to win various writing awards, including Author of the Year awards in her school for four consecutive years.

Angie is hard-working, creative, and talented in diverse ways. Her father, Wole Adeyi, also an author, inspired and mentored her into writing. She hopes to grow to become a light and a blessing to her world through her works of fiction.

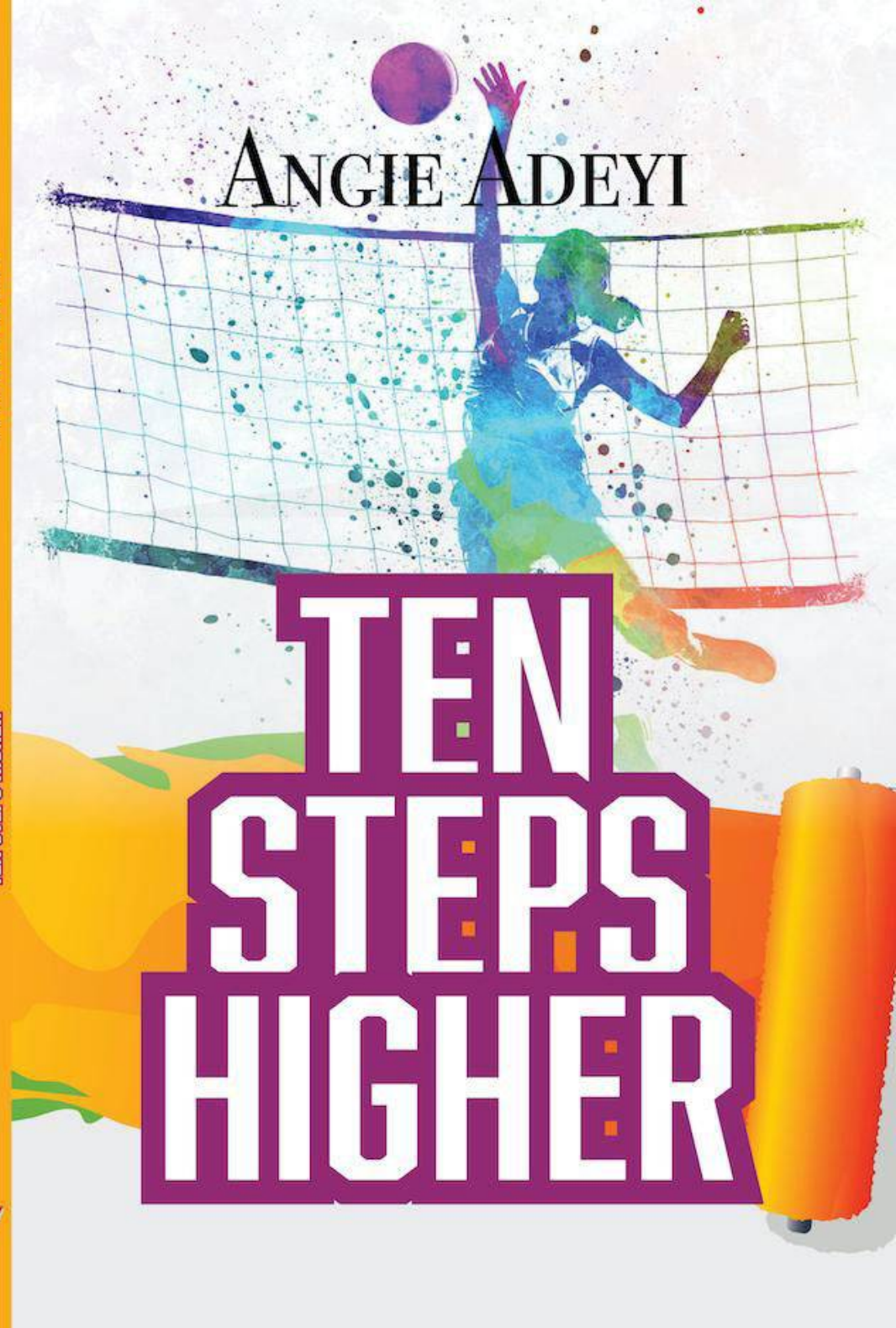
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ANGIE ADEYI

TEN STEPS HIGHER



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Angie Adeyi



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1

Perfect?

I looked at the wall clock in my room; it's 11:57pm. Little wonder the house was so quiet. I got off my bed and stood, leaning against the wall, staring at nothing in particular and occasionally peeking at the dressing mirror opposite me; my hip jutted forward with my arms folded across my chest and one foot backed up against the wall. I had a nose like one drawn by a lazy artist; the bridge was so low-profile as to be barely there at all, so that on a face of skin that is all the same dark-honey hue, my nose was a bump just above my full lips. I had once been told that I had the kind of

face you forget even when looking directly at it, but who cares; I believe I'm cute. My beauty is well-hidden behind all that tackiness I tend to portray; you only got to pay enough attention to see it, if you care enough, and that's all that matters. My head lolled down to one shoulder, casting my long jet-black hair onto the faded T-shirt that was two sizes too big for me. The T-shirt hung so low that my shorts only just peeked below the hem – a fringe of denim cut-offs, which I mostly wear to sleep. Truth is, I almost never remember to wear my actual nightwear to bed; I'm just not the nightwear type... I'm not a lot of things.

My name is Alexis McDaniels, not Alex or Alexa. Just had to put that out there. I'm a 16-year-old in my Sophomore year of high school. I live in Phoenix, Arizona, and I'm not your typical pink and glitter girl. Not the one you'd see at those nerdy events. Not the sports type either. So, ever so often, many adults would ask me this singular question, "So what do you have going on?"

That question is literally a ringtone, maybe even an anthem. Anyway, I do nothing. Well, not just nothing, I go to school and come back home, unless I have detention. I bet you're wondering if I have any friends. I have one, Xavier; he's my best friend. **WE ARE JUST FRIENDS!** I can imagine why people would think differently, though. No one in the school had ever seen Xavier go out of his way to deliberately make a friend and stick with her. Plus, at 16, he was almost six-foot-tall, and a good-looking boy with smooth chocolate brown skin and an athletic body. He had eyes of pure mischief and a heart of gold; he had that way of moving that honest people do, with the spark of a child and a smile that went all the way through to his core. He was a natural listener, giving encouraging feedback laced with intelligent comments. He worked hard; he got his schoolwork done and maintained straight 'A' grades while being a fantastic footballer.

So, what else is there? Oh, my parents, Felix and Rhoda McDaniels. I am their only child;

they did not want to have more than one child. I guess my mom was too concerned about keeping her stomach flat and dad wants the super-elitist single child family image. My parents are probably the classiest people you will ever meet, but I'm the direct opposite of them. So, when guests come over and see stains on my clothes, my messy hair and terrible posture, they must be wondering where my parents got me from. My parents' lives revolve around work, their social circles and their expectations for me. Each day blended into the next, and the only thing my parents ever asked me was about school and my grades, not my feelings, not who I was. Then when I don't get the grades they demand, the punishments begin. Any grade less than an A in any subject meant "privileges" revoked. My parents can't seem to understand that I'm just wonderful the way I am. That I am a gift from the divine, and that I simply bring a different energy to their lives. They don't get it that it's hard to transition from child to teenager when the main lesson they give me is "sink or swim".

And of course, for them, you're not special unless you can do really hard math and still come out with an A. Words like "*we love you for being you*," "*we love you always*" does not exist in their vocabulary. Yep; that's right. But honestly, I don't care; I just want to live my own life without people telling me what to do.

Anyway, it's way past midnight already; I have school tomorrow, and we aren't supposed to sleep in class. I better try to get some sleep now while I can. Good thing tomorrow is Friday – I love Fridays because it's the last day of school for the week and I get to have two school-free days to myself.

Soon after sweet sleep had begun to warm my eyes and body, there was a shrill sound, my alarm, which I had set to ring at exactly 6.30am; it never misses the target, but I just turned, placed the pillow over my head and went back to sleep. I guess my mom heard the alarm continuing to scream like it does every morning to stop me from swimming

in an infinity pool of slumber, and she leapt out of bed and flew upstairs faster than a rat from a trap. She barged into my room, pulled the pillow off my head and blew the air horn right over my head for added effect. So, after a brief fit-full doze with a combination of the alarm and the air horn, I knew this Friday morning would have to go according to daily schedule.

Typical of her, at least it was better than last week when she poured ice cold water on me. I'm kidding, she just shakes me, not caring that I say "stop", thereby infringing on my right to apply the "stop" word in a beauty sleep situation. She leaves once she knows I got the message, and she knows I got the message when I get up. I walk over to the bathroom, brush my teeth, shower, and comb my hair. I put on my Looney Tunes shirt with jeans and slides. Most people think I'm poor, but the truth is I don't try hard to impress people who impact not one thing in my life. In the morning, my dad goes to work, not really sure what he does; I

just know he works with political and government stuff. Whenever I ask either one of my parents any questions about his work, they ignore it and find a way to get off the topic, or just tell me to focus on my business – school.

Remember when I said my parents were classy. In other words, they're just people who try to make others seem like our family is perfect. They constantly remind me to make and do everything just right. They don't try to be hard on me on purpose; they're simply just trying to fix up my flaws and blind everyone with our "perfection". It just doesn't work on me... not at all.

After dressing up, I pick up my backpack and go downstairs; there was the reassuring smell of grain stewed in milk, but I wasn't really hungry, so I just nibbled on dry cereal while waiting on my mom to take me to school. My mom believes that riding the bus to school isn't for "classy ladies" and doesn't make a good impression. Don't get it

twisted though; their being “classy” stops when it comes to discipline: Yes, of course, I get punished when I get in trouble, and that seems to be quite often; they’ve moved schools for me plenty of times. I’m pretty sure they’ve finally given up on moving because it’s been two years since we moved last. Plus, they would probably not move me again, knowing I finally got me a friend, whom they believe helps keep me a “bit sensible”.

Halfway to school with my mom – it’s only 10 minutes away, and she begins her daily little talk to me – more like rules and regulations. “Be good. Don’t get in trouble. Learn...”

I respond with the same answer as usual, “Ok”. *Here I am... in jail... I meant school, but what’s the difference.* I thought.

We finally arrive at my school; I hop out, say bye to mom and head towards the closest door, the side entrance. I walk down the hallway and can see Xavier in the distance. He does his little speed walk to me, and we walk together to our first period. We both have Calculus with Mrs. Wilson.

I sit on the edge of my chair; this is Calculus class, always my chance to shine. The other kids seem to come alive in Art class, amongst the pastels and fine charcoal pencils, but for me, the sight of numbers is the haven I crave. Art is amazing, art is beautiful, but not when drawn by my hand. By my hand, it’s like a two-year-old with a broken arm was given a crayon and told to have fun. Mrs. Wilson is beaming at the front of the class, and I fought not to reflect it back; grinning at teachers wasn’t cool. In Calculus, we are learning about chain rules where we make formulas for the derivative of the compositions of two functions in terms of their derivatives. Did you get any of that? Yeah, I didn’t get it either, but I have an 87, so I’m not complaining. But as she announced the new assignment, she had my full attention; my face falls into a natural look of disbelief, my lips as straight as the pencil on my desk. Twenty percent of the grade is based on the neatness and perfection of the drawings – “artwork” that went with it. Nine out of ten kids in the class vote

to approve the new rubric, and I feel like something has just died in my mouth. Twenty percent! I might as well kiss my 'A' goodbye.

So far, History is my favorite subject. That is only because the past fascinates me and makes me feel like I'm in that time setting. Believe it or not, I actually have pretty good grades. I hate school, but questions do come easy to me... I have the best memory ever. I remember things that happened weeks, months, even years ago. Show me a photo for ten seconds, and I'll still remember it next year. My good memory somewhat helps me in my classes.

And guess what? I actually forgot, today is our last day in school before Spring Break, which is only a week; I'm excited about the break. So, I'm just hoping I can get through the day. We aren't really doing anything much, but just papers that go through with the topic of the subject. Anyway, now it's time for Athletics, we're simply doing flag

football because on Monday we are off school. Xavier, a girl named Maddison, and I are on the same team. Maddison is one of Xavier's friends, but she and I are only a little close.

Madison is a brown-skin, pretty Jamaican-American girl with a full head of dreadlocks as waves of pure earth. The earth color looks almost natural but for the black roots peeking out now and then. She's quite cool and has a spiritedness to her as if all the storms in the world were only a whispering breeze in her presence. She was kind and smart, perhaps that's what draws people like me to her. There was nothing "princess" about her though, just a fierce independence and a can-do attitude too. She's not one you can easily blow-off or dismiss, so I simply keep her only so close.

After Athletics, I went to my next class, HISTORY! Xavier isn't taking this class. And like I said before, this is my favorite subject. Mr. Davis, my teacher, is the funniest person in the school, in my opinion. Once again, since today is the last day

of school for the spring break, all we did was a word search of historical landmarks. The class was interesting, the period ended too fast, and I had to head to my next class, Algebra.

Mr. Williams is my Algebra teacher, and he has the most boring class in the universe. We went through three papers with questions, but they aren't for grading, so no one really did them. I couldn't wait for this class to be over; thankfully, it finally came to an end after what felt like forever. I raced off to the cafeteria for lunch.

At lunch, every student has the choice of eating food from the school or bringing their own food from home. Buying food from school and not knowing what's in it isn't for "classy ladies" according to my mom. Sometimes, the food does look amazing, but *noooooo*, for my mom, a slice of grilled cheese with unseasoned fries on the side is better. Sometimes, when I can't eat my packed lunch from home, Xavier gives me

a Nutella sandwich or some Oreos, and sometimes even his cheeseburger. Today he was willing to give me a sandwich, but I refused to let him starve for me.

Yeah, we've heard whispers and rumors about us, but I don't know why a friendship between two different genders is a problem. They think what they say will drive us apart or drive us into their thoughts, but all they're doing is wasting time they could use doing other things. I'm not scared to say it to anyone's face, "This is my best friend, Xavier; he's the only one who helped me when I was a new kid in the school – the second semester of freshman year. While you, the people who talk about us, just sat there and gave me titles by what you saw me as." Although, people would find that sappy.

I remember that first day like it was just yesterday. It was my first day at school, so obviously I was a bit nervous, everyone was looking at me; their eyes were judging if I was going to be one of the popular kids

or an outcast. The hallways seemed busier, the students seemed less friendly, and the teachers didn't seem to care that I didn't know my way around. Finally, the lunch bell rang, and I was freed from the Algebra class that I was unable to understand. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and picked up my map, determined to find the cafeteria without help. Big football players raced past me in an effort to get their lunch first, and cliques of cheerleaders clotted the stairs. As I walked into the lunchroom alone, looking desperately for an empty table, someone tapped my shoulder.

"You look lonely," he smiled at me, a bright smile that made my day a thousand times better. "Would you like to eat with me?"

I nodded and smiled back at him; he was one of the footballers. When we settled down to eat, he introduced himself as Xavier. And that was it; we became fast friends and did most things together at school since then.

Gosh! Now I have to go to Art class. The classroom is at the far end of the building

and has long south-facing windows. The Art room is designed to get as much light as possible and has all kinds of beautiful arts on the walls. My Art teacher, Mr. Robertson, is better described as the opposite of arts; his big old rotund body stands out in front of the class like a stilt-walking circus guy, with nostrils so wide he could take in all the oxygen in the universe in one deep breath. Still, he has beautiful smiling eyes that reveal he's a kind soul. He flashes each of us a toothy smile as we file into the class, announcing "welcome to Art" as if that was the best class in the world, but unlike most of the other students, I smiled back at him. We all finally settle down in our sitting spaces. Mr. Robertson first encourages us to take Arts more seriously; he asks, "Do you think words and numbers are more important than Arts? Can the plural possessive express the feelings in your heart?"

We all keep quiet, looking at him, a few shook their heads in response to his questions.

Then, he said, "If you don't learn Art now,

you will never learn to breathe!”

“How??? In what world?” I thought, looking at him bewildered. *“Yeah; little wonder his nostrils are so wide, learning to breathe in all the oxygen!”* I giggled.

Now, am I good at art? Told you already... so you know the answer! But I do like to see other people’s great talent. I mean, I’m not that bad.... my last score was a 74, which for me, in this subject, is magnificent. Xavier isn’t in this class, but there is a girl named, Victoria, who I talk to a lot in this class. Are we friends? Not quite, so she’s more of an acquaintance. She seems pretty nice, though, and her artwork is fantastic! One day she drew a fruit basket with watercolor, the sunset with oil pastels, and Harriet Tubman with some type of Nikko Rull painting brush. The best piece that I’ve done was sketching a disfigured house with colored pencils. Today, just because the Spring break is tomorrow, we made origami. Now this, I’m good at! Victoria and I made Origami boats, butterflies, hearts,

and flowers. I was focusing on matching my work with her, so I copied each step with the paper she took. It ended up great, and I’m pretty sure she knew I was watching and doing each step with her because she went so slowly, to the point where I never lost track on which step to do next. We started cleaning up five minutes before the next bell rang, and I headed on to my next class.

Physics is everyone’s least favorite subject, but especially today, because it’s our last period before the break and everyone is impatient to leave. On the other hand, I want to stay because it’s better than going home to my parents, who enforce more rules every day, and even worse during the holidays. Maddison is in this class, and she sits next to me.

“Thirty-five more minutes,” she whispers to me.

I looked at her and smiled. Once in a while, I see a kid turning around to look at the clock; I don’t know why everyone is so desperate to go home. *Like – hello, you’re gonna come back;*

I might as well just sleep over at the school... dah!

“Twenty minutes,” Maddison whispered again, this time more animatedly.

I could see the happiness build up in everyone; their smile growing as the time goes down.

“RINGGGGGGG,” the bell finally rang, marking the end of the Physics period and close of school. Everyone sighed, the exhaustion finally setting in after a long day... OF DOING NOTHING! These people are just happy to leave, and now they’re yawning when all we did was word searches and quizzes that we didn’t even complete.

I bid Maddison goodbye and walk to the car rider line to join my mom in the car. My dad can’t pick me up from school because with his job, he leaves really early in the morning and comes back home late at night. “How did school go today; any trouble?” My mom asked before I could fully settle into my seat.

“School was great...,” I paused, “and no...; no

trouble,” I said, shaking my head.

She gave me a side glance because I say the same thing every day; I’m not sure if she expects me to ball my eyes out about how terrible my day went. My day went great, so that’s what I said.

“Thanks for checking up on my day. How was yours?” I asked, just to start a conversation and avoid any awkwardness.

“Went great; I cleaned up the house a little bit and got some new clothes for you – your dad and me,” she said, giving me a serious look.

I knew she was about to say something that I won’t like or just another rule for me to follow, so I say nothing and keep looking at her to continue.

“Your dad will be coming home early.”

I ask her why.

“He wants to have a talk with you about something, so once you get home, take a shower and read or do something, whatever, you until he gets back.”

I say okay, nodding. Then we stay quiet for the rest of the ride home.

2

Wait; What?!

The 10-minute ride home felt like two hours. Inside the car, I sit rigid, while my wondering mind continues like some choreographed dance, but without the soul it should have. What reason under the sun is there that my mom would look so serious telling me my dad wants to talk to me? She never gives me heads up about any talk or family meetings; none of them ever does; it's always thrown at me without prior warning, and I'm simply expected to absorb it and do as they say. So, why the heads up now? *Naaaa*, something doesn't smell right.

As soon as my mom park in our driveway, I sluggishly get out of the car and walk into the house feeling like someone beat me up. I'm more nervous now about what my parents have to say. I mean, what could be so serious that my dad is leaving his work early? I go up to take a shower and brush my teeth even though it's only 4:30pm; I need to smell good and get rid of all the sweat on my body and face so I don't upset my dad. I put on a Sponge Bob T-shirt with a pair of my stay-home sweatpants and spray some deodorant. And just then I hear the doorbell; IT'S MY DAD!

I go down with my heart beating so fast, open the door. "Good afternoon, dad," I greet, giving him a hug.

He takes off his coat and hangs it in the closet. We join my mom in the living room, where she was already seated waiting for my dad to get home.

"Mom told me you need... to talk to... me about something," I start, sounding nervous.

"Yes; I do. Sit down," he said, smiling and patting the space beside him.

I slowly take the seat beside him, looking at him questioningly; his smile making me even more curious now.

Do you know how we never really talk about my job?" He asked.

I nod as he continues.

"Well, would you like to know?"

I nod rapidly, "Yes, yes." Excited to finally get to know about my dad's job after years and years of not knowing. All nervousness suddenly gone.

"I work with the government, and I'm just going to go right into it. I am running for Mayor; well I've actually been running for it for about eight months now."

My mouth drops open in shock. I didn't know what to say. I don't know if I should be sad about being told this late or be happy for being told at all. My dad has been running for MAYOR for the past EIGHT MONTHS, and they didn't tell me, their daughter – their only child?!

“May I please know why I’m just being told now, four months until this year ends. Were you waiting for me to see you at a debate on the TV before you tell me?” I blurted out angrily, careless about whatever punishment would be meted out for my tone. But surprisingly, he ignores my tone.

“We wanted to wait until we felt you were ready and the time was right. Since the move here, for the first time, you seem happy and well-settled at your new school, and we didn’t want that to change with undue attention this may attract to you, or for many people to find out; you know how these things happen – you tell one person and it spreads. I know how much stress that could give you.”

“Well, this is my first time hearing about this, so if anyone knows already, they haven’t told me about it,” I responded coldly.

“Yes; I know that. We want you to know now and not be taken unawares because it goes public tomorrow; the first debate is tomorrow and all the media houses would air it live. The last eight months have only been

in-house meetings and preparations,” my dad said.

We talked about it some more and then my parents told me I’m not allowed to talk about it at school with anyone; they instructed that I simply stay focused on my studies and act normal like any other day before this. Apparently, the teachers know because my parents told them, so they could keep their eyes on me. I can’t even tell Xavier or Maddison. That just sucks. If my dad becomes Mayor, the pressure will be on me; I’m going to start getting noticed, and then whatever rules I’m given, I’m going to have to follow them to the letter. The thought of the cameras, seeing my dad a lot less than it is already, people staring at me, and then, having to be perfect for my dad’s reputation gives me a headache already.

My dad, Felix McDaniels; he’s one for appearances – everything had to be perfect, from how he looks; how he comports himself, whether publicly or privately, down to his family image; it has to be the

picture-perfect family. Don't get me wrong; he's a good man, just not one to show emotions, a little vain and a stickler for rules, especially rules that he gives to others. And he's quite good looking too; he has the kind of face, complemented by a smooth, shiny ebony-black skin tone that makes you turn to take a second look. I guess he must be used to all that – the sudden pause in a person's natural expression when they looked his way followed by overcompensating with a relaxed gaze and a weak smile. Of course, the blush that accompanied it was a dead give-away. It didn't help that he was so modest with it or maybe just naive about it. My mom used to tease him about how his African features and his unique blend of African and American accent, made the girls fall for him all the more, back in college when they were still dating. She said it was obvious in the way they hung on his words and reciprocated his smile so quickly each time he spoke with them. And despite all the opportunity that came his way, he was a one-woman-man who prized

genuineness and thoughtful, intelligent conversation above lipstick and high-heels, and so just stuck to her like paper to glue.

My mom isn't doing badly, herself. Rhoda McDaniels is a beautiful woman, not in the classical way of supermodel appearance. She's certainly bigger than a catwalk model and shorter than average, but in her ordinariness, she is stunning. She's a petite woman, no taller than five-feet-three, with an African heritage that shows in her features and body type, and her jet-black permed shoulder-length hair. There's a deep richness to her flawless black skin, like the hue of English oak, and something radiates from within that renders her irresistible to both genders. Men desire her and women court her friendship; she's quite the social bird, making all the right connections, and a great complement to my dad.

They would make a striking pair as Mayor and First lady, for both looks and intellect I guess - the perfect picture they always

wanted, now in full view of the public, and I, given no choice, have to play by the rules of the public game to maintain their picture-perfect image.

I retired to my room a little bit earlier than usual; I'm not even hungry, just tired. Maybe people will treat me better now, or they can treat me worse. It's pretty obvious that if my dad gets voted mayor, a long list of rules for me to follow are on my way! It's going to get harder because people will start asking me questions, there would be more people in the house, cameras, and the worst one yet – I have to be perfect because people will be watching every step I take! Can't I just be homeschooled already?! Frustration boiled deep in my system. It churned within, and I know this is too much for me to handle right now. The pressure of this raging frustration would force me to express thoughts I've ignored for so long, but I can't let it. I know I have to get out of everyone's way before I erupt in this frustrated state. I know the feeling will pass, but while it hasn't,

I'm well aware I could really hurt my parents' feelings because they expect me to understand, accept it, and be happy for them. But what about me; what about how this affects me? Tears of frustration were already beginning to well up in my eyes. I'm not even going to fight the tears; no, not anymore. So, I jammed my earbuds into my ears. Music pours out from my phone, sounding like the most beautiful noise I'd ever heard. I turned it up, shutting out the world around me, and I just let go – letting the tears flow as it wills.

I wake up late the next morning, Saturday, at 10:00am, thinking everything that happened last night must have been a dream. Too bad it wasn't, my dad has left already, and my mom doesn't seem to be home either – good for me. Today is the first debate with other people running for the mayoral office. I'm not going to watch it; instead, I'm just going to go through the whole day doing nothing. I head downstairs to get some breakfast because I am starving, and I turn on the TV to watch a show

while I eat. Then, I get a call from my mom; she tells me that she's gone out to the store to get a few groceries and didn't want to wake me, after which she hangs up.

Didn't want to wake me?! Now, that's a new one. Since when did my mom not want to wake me up for every and no reason?!

I continue watching the TV after I was done with my breakfast since there's nothing else to do. I usually go out with my mom to the store on weekends but today, for whatever reason, she chose to go alone. Shortly after, I get tired of watching TV and go upstairs to start getting ready for the day; whatever the day brings. I brush my teeth and take a shower, then put on a pair of jeans and a shirt and came back downstairs to the sitting room. I get on my phone and start texting Maddison. She asked me if I wanted to go to the amusement park with her. As much as I wanted to say yes, I know my parents wouldn't let me go.

I didn't want to say no right then, so I just had to text back saying, maybe, but will

have to get back to her later. Then I realize that if my dad is Mayor, I can't even go to the amusement parks because of the people. Knowing my parents, they probably won't let me use the restroom without three female bodyguards. My dad becoming Mayor has its ups and downs. Special treatment – I'm not complaining about that. Less privacy – we're gonna have a problem.

My mom gets home about an hour later. When she comes in, she turns on the TV to watch the debate. I get up to go upstairs, but she asks me to come back and sit down. A two to three-hour event on TV?! Here we go already!

However, to be honest, it wasn't that bad. My dad was very intelligent with his words and sounded very convincing. If I were one of the other debaters, I'd be pretty worried. Halfway through the debate, though, I fell asleep on the couch.

I wake up a few hours later, and it's already 7:00pm, we have to go to Church tomorrow,

Sunday, so there's a standing rule for me to go to bed at 8:00pm. I find my mom in the kitchen making Alfredo Pasta! It smells so good; she tells me that it's almost ready. The debate is over, and my mom tells me how amazing my dad did! Few minutes later, she serves me a plate of pasta, and we watch one of her favorite soaps on TV, and also have general conversations about nothing and anything while eating.

Forty-five minutes later, I head upstairs for bed, while my mom puts the food from the pot into plastic containers to refrigerate. I say my prayers and drift off to sleep.

Sunday morning arrives slowly with spreading sunrise, orange glow, clouds tinted and colors spread across the sky – greys, blues, pinks and reds painted across the clouds as if by a celestial hand. Powerful rays of sunlight flood through my window, lighting every corner of my room, rousing me gently from sleep as if whispering, *“this*

is the day the Lord has made, and I will rejoice and be glad in it.” And smiling, I slowly open my eyes, yawning and stretching before lifting myself off my bed. I'm feeling better this morning about the whole mayor thing; I guess watching a bit of the debate helped.

I didn't hear any of my parents' voices like I usually would on Sunday mornings as my dad would often stand running commentaries on an event they may have attended the night before, or my mom singing while cooking up a storm before we leave for Church at 10:00am. Then I remember, my dad must have come home late last night because of the debate; he must be very tired right now! So, we did not go to Church today since my dad was too tired and woke up late; we decided to have our own mini, family Church service in the living room. When we were done, my dad told me everything that he experienced at the debate. “There were a lot of professional people there, and I was really nervous at first; there

was plenty of good competition,” he said. My mom and I told him that he did great, and mom was really happy for him. We all eat breakfast together while talking about school and future things. My dad has to head back to his office in the next two hours, so he goes up to his room to get ready.

I have to go to the elementary school close by later today, to get some community hours in, but I still have a few hours to laze around at home before I head out. I’m volunteering to watch kids in the Boys and Girls Club. I think Xavier said he’d also be there. I sure hope he will because I most certainly will not answer questions of what the kids’ boogers look like. Trust me; I am not exaggerating, I’ve seen things – green, goofy, nasty things. My imagination is getting wild already; I quickly get the thought out of my head, as it gives me shivers.

Three hours later, I get ready and pack a bag with hand sanitizer, hand lotion, gum, my phone, a charger, and a spray sanitizer.

My mom dropped me off at the elementary school where I’m volunteering. Although I have my permit, both my parents still don’t like the idea of “putting people’s lives at risk” – young teenagers caring for young children. I just dismiss it, whatever. I mean, how do they expect me to have a family, or a job, or do regular daily things if I don’t start practicing now? I’m sixteen, soon heading to Seventeen.

When I get out of the car, I bid my mom bye and hurry through the front entrance doors. Getting inside, down the hall, I see four girls walking in a row.

Wait; what?! I must not be seeing right, so I walked on a little faster.

As I got closer, I realized I saw right; those weren’t just any girls; these were South Western High School’s four most popular girls walking before my eyes to volunteer or what! I couldn’t believe Cassie, Sadie, Kendall, and Lilia had a little bit of heart to care for kids. Now, don’t get it twisted, these girls aren’t just popular; they are the

evil kind of mean! They are labeled as many bad things; as in any bad stuff you can think of!

They all turn around and look at me, in sync, and then turn around. I hear a few whispers and a tiny eye glare from Kendall. The hall comes to an end, and we all make a right into this big room that will soon be filled with volunteers and little kids from Pre-K to fourth grade. I could already see the disgusted looks on Cassie, Sadie, Kendall, and Lilia's faces as they have a little run through our babysitting jig. Apparently, the Boys and Girls Club are having a celebration party for one of the people that usually helps out with them because she got a new job. The rest of the helpers couldn't make it, so they needed volunteers, and my mom thought it would look great for college, even though she still believes it's risky.

I hear the stomping of feet coming closer and closer to the room we're in. I can see

through the corner of my eyes, Lilia taking out her headphones and whispering to herself, "the torture begins".

I'm sure aren't excited to spend the next three hours with these girls; maybe even more if the kid's parents don't pick them up on time.

Everything was already set up, and we met the teacher in charge, Mrs. Valentine, or Mrs. V, as she's fondly called. We first get everyone's name, and there's a total of 15 kids – a few could not make it. We start the day's activities with everyone blowing balloons; some couldn't blow it and some couldn't tie it, but we at least got 20, which is enough for everyone to get one balloon. Then, we bring out the cake and sing happy birthday to the kids whose birthday it is today. Sadie and Lilia help keep the kids calm and seated. Kendall, Cassie and I get everything set out, like the plates, spoons, forks, and the knife and candles for the cake.

To be honest, they were pretty helpful –

surprisingly! We all use our hand sanitizers so we can pass out the cake. Every kid gets a slice of cake. And when everyone is all done with their cake and water, we settle down to watch *'Daddy Day Care'*. Some kids didn't want to watch the movie, so some make airplanes, read books, or play board games. Then everyone eat a sandwich. We all go around taking on different roles, and it's pretty fun; I even get close to Sadie, Cassie, Lilia, and Kendall. Surprisingly, I get their numbers too, which is really weird, but they seem pretty nice about it. When the three-hour program was over, the girls and I start packing up to leave. My mom picks me up on time.

On the way home, in the car, I get a message from Sadie and Kendall inviting me to a sleepover with all four of them. Wait; what?! The most popular and meanest girls in high school invite me to their midst – a sleepover?! No way; I have to experience this one; I have to go through with this!

So, I quickly ask my mom, pleading. And she questions me on why I suddenly want to go to a sleepover. Anyway, after a long discussion, she says yes, but only if she gets the confirmation from Mrs. Heritage, Sadie and Kendall's mom. I was super surprised she agreed at all, and very happy she did.

I look at the time on the dashboard in the car, and see it's only 5:00pm, which means I still have five hours before bedtime. I'm exhausted from playing around with the kids, but it was still fun. Mrs. V, the teacher in charge, is 23 years old, and she's so cool to hang around. As soon as we get home, I head straight to the kitchen to eat some orange chicken with fried rice. After which I head upstairs to shower and get myself all cleaned up for the night. But because it's still quite early, I go back downstairs to watch TV with my mom. "Your dad will be coming home earlier than usual because there's not much to do today,"

my mom tells me. My dad's next debate is in two days, and he has six more after that. I start yawning, and my mom tells me to go to bed.

There is no school tomorrow, Monday, because of Spring Break! I'm going to Kendall and Sadie's house on Friday to Saturday for a sleepover with them, Lilia, and Cassie. I kneel by my bed to say my prayers and hop into bed, falling asleep almost immediately with beautiful dreams of my forthcoming sleepover.

I wake up mentally checking the days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, were just stay home days, and a little bit of shopping. The plan is to do PLENTY of sleeping on most of the days.

Tuesday soon arrived; it's the day my dad has his second debate, and once again he did very great. So far, Monday and Tuesday, I woke up later than usual since school was not in action.

Finally, it's Friday; thank God! I wake up, excited, say my prayers and get freshened up, then start packing my bags for the sleepover today. After eating a delicious breakfast of pancakes, eggs and bacon with hot chocolate, my mom drives me over to Kendall and Sadie's house. When I get to their front door, I can see that Lilia and Cassie are already here through the glass front door. Mrs. Heritage comes to open the door and welcomes us inside. The girls and I head upstairs and start the day. I heard my mom leaving, and I knew the sleepover was in action.

3

Clueless!

Saturday, 5:00pm, the last rays of the late afternoon sun fell slanting through my bedroom window at home. I was lying on my bed, washed up from the sleepover I had with my new-found friends, Cassie, Kendall, Sadie, and Lilia. We'd made S'mores after Mrs. Heritage – Sadie and Kendall's mom, and I went to buy the supplies from Target. Surprisingly, the sleepover turned out to be better than I had thought. We had a water balloon fight, and they let "ME" put water in all 250 balloons! I did so good at it that it looked like I wasn't even playing, I was hardly wet. After

that, we all settled down in the girls' room, and they took turns to give me a makeover, but I'm pretty sure that I must have been exhausted because all I kept seeing were facial hairs coming on and off my face – beards and mustache that tickled my nostrils. But after sometime, the beards and mustache eventually disappeared from my face, and I looked really nice when they were done with my face, much that I was tempted to leave my face that way forever, but I had to wash off the make up before I went to sleep because I don't want to break out.

I'm so happy that I made new friends, and especially that I was invited to my first ever sleepover. At about 9.00am, my mom texted me that she was on her way to pick me up; I was sad to leave, but I had to, so I started packing my things. When I heard the doorbell ring, I made my way downstairs, said bye to everyone, and headed out the door. I gave my mom a hug and said good morning. We got into the car, and she

asked me how the sleepover went. I told her I had a lot of fun, but that I was very tired. Then, my mom told me that my dad was having another debate today and she wanted me to be a little more supportive and watch the debate with her.

“I’ll try to stay awake for it,” I said, showing no enthusiasm.

But she ignored my unenthusiastic attitude.

The rest of the ride home was silent. When we got home, I saw my mom had made me pancakes! I ate them; I was really hungry and had no time to have breakfast with my friends in their home. After breakfast, my mom and I went to the sitting room to watch the debate. I couldn’t stay awake during the commercials, so I basically missed the whole debate, but my mom told me he did outstanding! Surprisingly, she did not wake me up to continue watching, especially since she really wanted me to see my dad do his thing. I’m glad she didn’t though; I would have been too grouchy to notice how good he was at it.

In the evening, seeing how exhausted I am, my mom made dinner earlier than 7.00pm so that I can retire early for the night. I sleep all through the night without waking till 8:00am on Sunday. My family tune on to online Church service, Sunday morning; it seems this is gradually becoming a new normal – Church at home. The rest of the day was pretty lazy and filled with eating, watch TV, talk about my dad’s debate with my parents, and sleep.

First Monday after the spring break, I wake up in a good mood. Odd? Yeah, quite odd. Maybe that’s because I kinda got four new friends; Xavier is gonna be stoked! I haven’t talked to him in two weeks, which is also unusual. I get ready, wearing a pair of blue jeans and a red shirt, with red Vans shoes, and my mom takes me to school as usual.

The morning breeze gently caresses the trees along the drive-through as the students arrive and walk through the gates, hustling and bustling down the corridors. Friends are greeting each other with a hug or a playful punch while some stroll morosely, looking unprepared to return to school. Soon the bells ring, and everybody runs except an occasional slowcoach or chatterbox. Everybody goes in except Xavier at the other end of the corridor looking out for me, and all is quiet; then, he sees me and lights up with a huge smile on his face.

“Soooo good to see you, Alexis,” he shouts, smiling and sliding to me, and gathered me in a bear hug.

After he releases me and we both catch our breath from the excitement of seeing each other again, I tell him about my encounter with the famous four girls.

I’m so excited, I cut straight to the chase, “I’m friends with Cassie, Sadie, Lilia, and Kendall,” I announce, grinning.

His smile from seeing me quickly turns into a frown, “Well don’t come running to me

when ‘your friends’ treat you badly.” He walks away without even a backward glance. And just like that my whole day turns grey, even though I gained four new friends. I’m pretty sure I just lost my one best friend. It’s obvious not a lot of people really like the girls, most call them shallow, saying they just look for ways to stay relevant, leading to them getting in some unnecessary drama now and then.

Just then, I see Lilia walking towards me, and we walk together to go meet the others. But then I turn back to look at the wall clock, “I’m going to be late for Calculus,” I say to her.

“It’s okay; only by a few minutes,” Lilia says. I can’t risk getting into trouble again because I don’t know what bad consequences my parents can give, especially now that my dad is running for office, and I really don’t want to find out. So, I turn away from her and head up to my first class, feeling good about doing the right thing. The bell rang just then, and I made it to class right on time. I usually sit beside Xavier, but he’s sitting

beside some other girl today, just because he doesn't want me to have "other" friends. Anyway, in Calculus with Mrs. Wilson we're learning about Derivatives – a differential calculus. I was pretty zoned out; good thing we don't have an exam anytime soon.

I have Athletics next. Kendall has this class with me, but she's in a different group, so I didn't have to engage much with her; however, she would smile and wave at me occasionally, and I returned the gesture. Xavier is in the same group with me, but hangs out with Tommy, a boy in our Athletics group, and Maddison; he ignores me and keeps his distance like I have some incurable disease. That makes me sad, but I try my best to focus on the class. We're doing tons of conditioning today; we did squats, push-ups, wall-sits, planks for minutes, and a whole lot of running. We ended the period by playing dodgeball for the last 30 minutes.

Next I had History – the one class no one I know is in, well except for Maddison. She

and I talk a little bit; she sits across from me. We're learning about U.S history and the civil war. Mr. Davis gets graphic about the civil war in the United States, which began in 1861, after decades of simmering tensions between northern and southern states over slavery, states' rights and westward expansion. The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 caused seven southern states to secede and form the Confederate States of America; four more states soon joined them. He asks us to note that the Civil war was also known as the war between the States, and how it eventually ended in Confederate surrender in 1865. He points out that the conflict was the costliest and deadliest war ever fought on American soil, and how it left much of the South in ruins.

My stomach flutters as the class ends. I did not grasp much of what Mr. Davis taught in the class today; it all sounded like gibberish. Don't get me wrong; I still love History class, and it's still one of my favorites, but I was mostly distracted by the thoughts of how my best friend can so easily treat me

this cold. It felt like taking a class in charades, and I am not cool with that.

I try to do better in Algebra class. Cassie is in this class. When she makes eye contact with me, she smiles and comes running to sit beside me. Today we're solving mathematical expressions and equations. We did a worksheet that will make up half our grade; maybe that's why Cassie wanted to sit by me – to get a better grade. Oh well, if that's her plan, it failed because we have to use cover-up sheets to hide our answers. The class ends uneventfully without too much distraction; I guess knowing that the classwork accounts for half my grade kept me focused because I must maintain the A grade or face the wrath of my parents.

It's time for my favorite part of the day – LUNCH!!! Good thing I still got my appetite. For lunch, my mom packed me some of our leftover Alfredo Pasta, cut up strawberries, a cookie, and a bottle of water. I sit alone, Xavier is still ignoring me and

sits at the other end of the Cafeteria with Maddison, but just as I'm about to take a bite from my pasta, my new friends motion me over to their table. I'm not sure if anyone could see me blushing as I walked over to their table; I am beyond excited that I get to sit at the "cool kids" table! It was fun; we all talk excitedly about our weekend together. None of the girls mentioned our volunteer work with the kids at the Elementary school; maybe they forgot or something like that.

Next was Art; the only person I know in this class is Victoria. Today, we have to make a mountain landscape, using oil pastels and it's due at the end of the week. Mr. Robertson goes on about the importance of Art in our lives while we try to do the work. You know, for someone who always questions the value of words compared to Art, he sure uses a lot of them. Anyway, I did as much I could in class; I would be sure to do my best to finish up the mountain landscape before the end of the week.

Thank goodness, the day is almost over; we're in the last class for the day, Physics; everyone's least favorite. Maddison is in this class, and she sits right beside me.

"It's been a long day," she says.

"Oh yeah! I can't wait to go home and get on my bed," I say jokingly.

She laughs, and we both fall silent to focus back on the Physics pop quiz we're doing. Though I really dislike Physics class, I always have and still have to make good grades in it. We get our grades back tomorrow, so I guess we'll see if I made an A or not. The bell rings signifying the end of the class; everyone submits the quiz papers, happy and ready to get out of school!

Phew! I made it through the first day of school without a nuclear meltdown, despite the cold war waged against me by my best friend, Xavier. Smiling, I bid Maddison bye and stroll over to the car rider line, where my mom is already waiting to pick me up.

Tuesday morning, I wake up earlier than normal, starting the day angry. I don't want to go to school; I just want to stay home and sleep all day. The only good part of school for me is when I'm with my friend, Xavier, and now he won't talk to me. I plead with my mom to let me stay home for only today, but she's not having any of that "nonsense" from me, especially since I won't tell her why I don't want to go school. So, I get up and get ready; she drops me off at school.

I walked into school just like any other normal day until this happened: I was walking down the hall when I notice a lot of people staring and pointing at me with dirty looks. I ignore the dirty looks, though my heart is pounding really fast, and I continue walking down, then I saw my new friends Sadie, Kendall, Lilia and Cassie walking down the hall from the opposite end, in the signature way they always do – Kendall in the outer right, Cassie in the inner right, Sadie in the inner left, and Lilia in the outer

left. I had asked them a few times yesterday why I'm never in their little cluster, but something always came up EXACTLY the same moment I ask, so I never got an answer.

Anyway, as they continue walking towards my direction without noticing me yet, I notice they are high-fiving and fist-bumping some of the people that are laughing at me. When I come in full view of Kendall's sight, she quickly taps the other three, and they all walk to me, faster than they were walking before. I could hear a little chuckle from Lilia, but there could be many explanations for that, right?... RIGHT!?! After that chuckle from Lilia, Sadie gives her a little kick to tell her to stop, which she does, and there they are, face to face with me.

"Alexis, I'm so sorry I don't know how that leaked out... I think I left my phone out in the open and someone found the picture," Cassie says.

"What picture?" I ask, looking confused.

I'm not sure what Cassie said about some picture, but before she could finish, I push

the four of them out of my way and bolt down the hall. There, on the wall, I see pictures of me picking my nose with horrible makeup on, disguising me as a man... not too much but enough that others would still know it's me.

I stare wide-eyed at the image on the wall. First of all, I don't pick my nose; I was probably just scratching it.

Second of all, how did they even get that picture of me?

I stop myself from jumping to conclusions as I did not know for sure it was those four girls that did this. But Cassie did say that she thinks she left her phone out, so it had to have been them. I turn around that instant to see Lilia, Sadie, Kendall, and Cassie receiving more high-fives from others. And suddenly, I realized that these girls aren't my friends at all. Maybe that's WHY they invited me to the sleepover – just to create this and mock me.

I go through the rest of the day, ignoring all the laughter and mimicking of the photo.

When I get home after school and lay on my bed, understanding finally hit me; everything became clear as crystal. They picked ME to get the S'mores supplies from the store. They picked ME to put water in all 250 balloons. They didn't even come for me in the water balloon fight, so I basically didn't play – they never played with me! And I wasn't even tired when they gave ME a makeover; they actually added facial hairs to my face, concealing it quite well with makeup, and the hair tickled my nostrils, which means I had to scratch my nostrils, and they had taken photographs of me before they eventually removed the facial hairs from my face! **THEY PURPOSELY LEAKED A PHOTO OF ME IN SCHOOL!**

How could I have been so clueless?!

And Xavier warned me; he knew I was being played. How did I not see it? Am I that desperate for friends; for acceptance; for validation by others?

The tears burst forth like water from a dam, spilling down my face. I feel the muscles of

my chin tremble like a small child, as I let out gut-wrenching sob; I bury my face in my pillow to stifle the sob. I hear my own sounds, like a distressed child, raw from the inside. The hurt must have come in waves, several minutes of sobbing only broken apart by short pauses to catch my breath, and then continue.

Later at night, I didn't eat dinner neither did I sleep much through the night. Lucky for me, my parents are out on one of their social events, so I lay in my bed without disturbance, lost in my thoughts.

The next morning, Wednesday, I rise with vengeance in my heart, and as I turn to go to the bathroom to have a shower, the poster on my bedroom wall catches my eye. The poster reads, "Ephesians 4:32 – *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, FORGIVING one another, as God in Christ forgave you*".

"What they did was wrong, but I should forgive them? Really?!" I say to myself.

No, not so easily; I want to and I will get back at them. But as I step out of the shower I come to a reasonable and calm solution. I'm going to forget about payback, but I will never speak to them again; they're dead to me.

I get dressed, and my mom drops me off. When I step out of the car, my mom demands that I give her a kiss on the cheek, which I reluctantly do. I just don't want to be bothered today – not by my mom and definitely not by anyone else at all. When I walk through the door, people are still mocking and laughing at me. At this point, I really couldn't be bothered; I already prepped myself to get used to it. All that confused me, though, was how none of the administrators noticed. *Happy to know I'm not the only clueless person.* I see my so-called new "friends" walking towards me, and as they came towards me, I went boldly towards them too.

Lilia said, "Good Morn-..."

I cut her off mid-sentence, "Stop the act; I

want to know right here, right now, why have y'all been faking with me all this time. It's crazy how much thought and effort you all put into making yourselves look higher than other people and keep your spot in being relevant"

"What do you mean?" Sadie asks, looking nervous.

Then I forget all about the ignoring plan and boldly tackle them head-on.

"First of all, y'all used me at the sleepover we had, and second of all, I know you guys were the ones who put that picture of me around the halls. Go on and lie; cowards!" I say with much attitude.

They all look embarrassed and try to say something, but I put my hand up in their faces to stop any words coming out of their mouths, "Zip it."

I hear their stupid laughter as I walk away. It felt like one of those kindergarten fights, but the anger and frustrations was real.

So, you may be wondering where I am walking to. Well, if you guessed the front

office, then you're doggone right. I asked the Secretary, Mrs. Middleton, if I could talk to my Counselor, Mrs. Ridge. After that confrontation with the girls, I decided that I would stand up for myself and stop being afraid of the outcome. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for equal rights for African Americans. Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone fought for equal rights for women. They had many people trying to stop them. So, what's stopping me from standing up for myself? My fear is, but I'm not going to let my fear win. Although, the problem I'm dealing with is less serious than the racial injustice and little or no freedom many people around the world have, where most of those problems remain unsolved, but we got to start from somewhere.

So, I tell my counselor everything that happened from Friday to Saturday – the days of our sleepover, leading up to yesterday.

She nodded and asked me a few questions, "How did you feel? Have you seen any more

of the pictures on the walls today? Have you told your parents? What are the names of the girls? How did you meet them?"

I answered her questions honestly, "I felt used and betrayed. The pictures are off the walls now; I'm guessing some kindhearted person took them off. I haven't told my mom or dad anything. The girls' names are Cassie, Sadie, Kendall, and Lilia. I first started talking to them when we volunteered for the Girls and Boys Club."

So, I was in Mrs. Ridge's office for about an hour; yeah, the counseling session lasted that long – I was that traumatized. I missed Calculus, and I'm sure many of my classmates would have loved to skip it.

As I walk out through the front office, Mrs. Middleton told me to just ignore them, but I didn't feel like that's right, so I decide to take matters into my own hands and take it a notch higher.

I spend the rest of the day pretty much alone, and only talking to Maddison and Victoria.

When I got home after school, I decided to tell my mom what had happened. I didn't want to tell my dad, who has a debate coming up soon; he already has too much stress on his hands, knowing him he'd use our money to make sure those girls get the punishment of getting suspended or some exaggerated thing like that.

My mom is furious; her face turns red and looks like she's going to explode. I didn't want to take any risks, so I take a few steps back from her. She quickly calms down, seeing my fright.

"So, what did your counselor do?" She asks, trying to sound calm.

"She says to let it go! She did nothing, mom; absolutely NOTHING," I reply angrily.

"Ok then; I will have to..."

I stop my mom mid-sentence, "No, mom; I will handle this myself, please. You'll only make things worse for me if you get involved."

After that, my mom said nothing more, but still angry; she gets up and goes into her

room. I stay back to relax in the sitting room for a couple of hours before dinner. My mom comes out later to serve dinner, after which we watch a movie on Netflix for an hour and a half; then I head up to my room, say my little nightly prayers, and drift off to sleep. I have a long day ahead of me.

4

The Plan

It's been a week since the incident, and this Wednesday dawned like a beautiful dream, bringing with it a new freshness to my stale state and lighting up my darkness as if the world has been upgraded to some higher definition. The new day had come bearing new possibilities and a new page yet to be written by my hands. I wake up with a smile, ready and confident to face what the day holds in stock for me, and I hop into my victory ride – my mom's car, with a pep in my step. On getting to school, I remember something – like light bulb clicked on in my head!

When I was “friends” with the four mean girls, there was this one girl that they always made fun of; I think her name is Aubr-, wait I think it's Sanai. Or is it Kaydence? I'm pretty sure it's all three of them, Aubrianna, Sanai, and Kaydence. I believe three of them are still friends the last time I saw them. Anyway, I need to see them, but I don't know their schedule, so I will just have to wait till lunch because they usually sit by themselves in the cafeteria.

I go on with my wonderful day, finishing four of my classes before lunch time. I am so looking forward to lunchtime. The first couple of days within the first week of resumption from the spring semester, I usually sat with my four old “friends” at lunch, but that's so history now; I've been sitting alone. But today, I am going to sit with the three girls I've been thinking about all morning. I never really talk to them, but today I'm going to try to start a conversation with them. So, on getting to

the cafeteria, I go over to their table, where they're already seated, and I settle in with my food like I have no motive.

"Hi; I'm Alexis. What's your name?" I said, even though I already knew it. Well, I guess I was right; their names are Aubrianna, Sanai, and Kaydence. Knew it! All three of them are African-Americans.

I started off the conversation on easy grounds, like favorite colors, birthdays, favorite subject, and whatever questions I thought of and slowly weaved my way in. The only thing they were questioning is if I was crazy. But I wouldn't blame them; I looked like a stalker, coming up to them and asking random questions!

I look at my watch and see that lunch is going to be over in less than 15 minutes, so, I stop fooling around with them and go straight to the point.

"I know those girls," I start, pointing to the four mean girls, "used to and still bully you, and it's okay because they bully me too. Actually, it's not ok; it's wrong, but you're okay, not that I know everything about you."

I stop, take a deep breath and continue, "You see; I'm trying to get a group of people they have bullied to stand up to them – you know like one of those Disney movies when the antagonist gets what they deserve in a sappy way."

At first, they were confused, looking at me like I was crazy; it took a few seconds for it to sink in, and once it did, they all agreed. And right there, I have three people on my team already.

Lunch is over, and I leave them to go for my Art class. On my way to Art, I notice Sanai, Aubrianna, and Kaydence were right behind me; I turn back and ask, "What's y'all's next class?"

Apparently, they have Art with me, but I've never noticed them in the class. Well, great, at least we can talk more then. In Art class, Sanai spots a boy who is sitting by himself, writing in a journal; his name is Peter. I had initially decided that four of us are enough, but then I thought, it wouldn't hurt to have one more person,

especially a boy, with us.

After the class, we speak to him together; he's very shy. He told us he hadn't been bullied, but he thought our idea was cool. So now, I have a total of four people with me, making five of us – we're rising. At that point, I thought of Xavier, maybe I can talk to him too, and we can work things out. I don't want Peter being the only boy, that'd be awkward. I got all their numbers and created a group chat. I never knew it was this easy to make friends; my parents were right – you just got to be open to it.

The last class of the day comes up, Physics. Again, I never knew that Aubrianna, Kaydence, Sanai, and Peter were all in this class; maybe because they're all really quiet and sit at the far back of the class. We get our Physics pop quiz grades; I got a 97! Maintained my 'A' despite the cold war with Xavier, which caused me major distraction in class on that day.

Immediately after the Physics class, I excitedly motion for Aubrianna, Kaydence, Sanai, and Peter to come sit with me to talk briefly. Maddison walks over to me then, and I introduce them to her but didn't invite her to join our group; we have way too many girls to add her in our plan, so we didn't mention it to her. With nothing more to say in her presence, I bid them bye and jog to the car rider line, to join my mom and head home.

In the car, I explain to her about how I have made four new friends, who AREN'T bullies. Then, I ask her if they can come to the house for three hours at the most for a meeting, and she agrees because my dad will be coming home late, so there won't be any way for us to bother him. We had all agreed to meet up every day at lunch, but we needed more meeting time. So, after getting confirmation with my mom, I text everyone about coming over to my house for our meeting after school tomorrow, Thursday, to which they all agree. I named

our group chat, “*The Dream Team*”. At this point, I think I’ve found enough people, as long as Xavier agrees to join, making six of us – together we are six steps higher.

As my mom and I get into the house, I run upstairs to my room to drop my bag and take off my shoes, and then, something hit me. I realized that whenever I confronted the core four – my ex-friends, Cassie was always acting a little strange. She looked sad, like regretful. I’m sure there’s got to be something else on her mind. I’ll find out later; I really don’t want to spend my time thinking about them. The Dream Team and I have a few conversations on our chat group, then I head down to have dinner with my mom, and we watch a movie, after which we pray together, and I head up to bed.

As my body shuts down, I drift off to a dream. In the dream, I was captured in handcuffs, sitting in a wooden chair, with a timer set on my side that had one minute on it. There was no way of escape for me. Then, outside

the hard steel door where I was trapped, I heard people shouting. It sounded like girls fighting – three or four girls. Then suddenly, I heard someone’s footsteps approaching, getting louder and closer to me, then the person threw my door open. It was CASSIE! Quickly, she unlocked my handcuffs.

“Run now, run, run, run!!!” She screamed with urgency, and the echo of her words followed me all the way, till I got out. Then for some reason, my dream changed to where I see myself sliding down rainbows with Leprechauns.

Griiiiiiiiiinnnnngggg! My Alarm clock goes screaming, and I wake up, questioning my dream. I was sure it didn’t mean anything, so I just dismiss it. I brush my teeth, take a shower and dress up for school. I am wearing three-quarter jeans and a black shirt, with socks and slides. I eat yoghurt with granola and pray with my mom before heading to school. As I walk into the school, I see Lilia, Sadie, and Kendall

walking down by themselves. I get curious about where Cassie is, so I walk up to them. “Where’s Cassie?” I ask.

“Mind your own business. We see you have some new friends; now run off to them,” Sadie said with an attitude.

They all nod in agreement. The “core four” is now the power puff girls – four turns into three.

“First of all, I don’t have, own, or work at a business, so I have no business to mind. Secondly, they are my friends, and I don’t care if they’re nerdy, as long as they don’t have attitude like you.” I say sarcastically, right up close in Sadie’s face, looking straight into her eyes as if daring her to say one more word.

The other two tried to speak, but I put my hands up in their faces, hushing them and continue talking, “Thanks for giving me so many nickname ideas. Tell me the one you like - Three Musketeers, Three Amigos, Fiddle De, Fiddle Dum, Fiddle Do. Oh; I also have the three Stooges.”

“Ok! Cassie is sick. Leave us already!” Lilia

spills in frustration, begging for me to leave. They just wanted me to leave, but I ride on their frustration a little more.

“I think the nicknames are cool for y’all. I’d be glad if someone took the time to help create such lovely nicknames for me,” I added for effect, winking at them before walking away with a satisfactory grin on my face.

I think I still have Cassie’s number. Just because she’s friends with the other evil three, doesn’t mean that I can’t check up on her. Plus, there’s no harm in being nice. What’s the worst that can happen?

During the first period, Xavier and I start talking a little. And after the period, just a few minutes before the next class, I tell him about Sanai, Kaydence, Aubrianna, and Peter, and a little detail about our plan, and then invite him to join us. He agrees to join us, and after calling his parents, he confirms he’ll also come over to my house after school today.

School goes out, and I go to the car rider line with Kaydence, Sanai, Aubrianna, Peter, and Xavier. My mom picks us up; thankful she brought the bigger car.

“How are y’all today?” My mom asks.

“We’re good, Mrs. McDaniels.” They answer at the same time.

“Thank you for letting us meet at your home, ma’am,” Aubrianna added.

“Oh; you’re welcome, dear,” mom said in her sweetest voice.

Once we enter my house, they all look around surprised.

Sanai says, “I love your house; it’s so beautiful and pretty...”

Thanks,” I quickly respond to stop her, while smiling at her.

“...and big, the color is beautiful; it looks super comfy,” she continues.

I couldn’t take any more compliments, so I take them to the living room upstairs and say thanks, making it clear that I understand. All of them talk with my mom, just to get a

bit more acquainted before she leaves us alone. Though not completely alone, she comes up now and then to bring us snacks or something and ask questions to see if we need anything.

I bring out several posters that we can plan with. So, on the first poster we put down what we could do or give to help the team. Peter is great with computers and electronics. Sanai is great at art. Kaydence is great with shapes. Aubrianna is good with metal and plastic, meaning that she can basically turn trash into treasure. Xavier is good at making things with a sewing machine. Then we have me; I’m good with names, places and memorizing things. So, we decide that we should put each other to the test with what we are good at.

For Peter; he has to design a one-minute animated video that has more than three characters. Sanai has to try to make art following a Bob Ross painting tutorial.

Kaydence has to draw 20 pictures only using shapes, like triangles, circles, squares, ovals, rectangle, rhombus, trapezoid, parallelogram, hexagon, heptagon, etc. Aubrianna has to get metal and plastic pieces, then turn it into anything she wants, as long as it looks good. Xavier has to make six shirts that say, “THE DREAM TEAM”. And I have to name every element in the periodic table, and for now, I only know one, Oxygen. I also have to name all the States and Capitals. We all have one week from today to do all of these.

Aubrianna’s mom picked her up first. Then, followed by Kaydence, Peter, Xavier, and Sanai. Once they’re all gone, I take a shower and get ready for bed. We eat pizza for dinner, only because my friends were over. I pray with my mom and head straight to bed. Halfway up the stairs, my mom calls me back down.

“I’m so proud of what you’re doing. It’s like three weeks ago, you couldn’t listen to one

rule we enforced. Now, I see that you’re growing. Your dad and I are very proud of you. You see, some teenage kids can be quite cruel; they can hate you for being too pretty, too smart, too popular with the other kids, for looking different, being fat, or just because they need to pick on someone. I experienced that too, and I couldn’t even stand for myself but here you are, bold and strong, doing something about it. I want you to know your dad and I are proud of you, and most importantly, we want you to know we love you very much, always. High school doesn’t last forever; in a few years those girls will be out of your life, and we would still be here cheering for you. And you will make mature friends; ones who aren’t raging bags of hormones.”

“Wait... Did my mom just say, ‘we love you’ to me?!”

Of everything she said, that was all that stood out to me; it was all I needed and have been yearning to hear them say, like all my life!

Somehow, I know my parents care, but I have never heard either of them say those words to me. And there isn't a better feeling EVER than hearing those words come out of my mom's mouth. I turned fully to face her, searching her face, tears welling up in my eyes. I have never seen anything more real than the genuineness of the love I see on her face this moment, and I know she didn't just say it to make me feel good; she means every word.

"Thanks, mom," I whispered, choked by my tears, now flowing down my cheeks and she held me in a tight hug for a while. Then I kiss her on the cheek and head up to my bedroom. I slept like a baby.

Friday morning arrives in a daze, I lay still in bed, momentarily unable to figure out where I am, while the annoying alarm clock keeps screaming for attention. I finally find my memory and heave a sweet sigh of relief about the promising life last night birthed. I'm grateful it's Friday, so I have the weekend to laze around. For now, I

have to get ready for school.

As soon as I get out of the car in school, I notice the ambience was different, and I walk into the building, confused. Is it just me, or isn't every day the same routine? Well today, it appears different. When I continue further down the hall; it's still silent. Well, not that silent, there were whispers, of course. I'm not sure what's happening, most people have sad or confused looks. The whole school is called to the two gyms: 9th and 10th grade – my grade, went to Gym A; 11th and 12th grade went to Gym B. Each Gym has one school administrator there.

What we learnt before exiting the gym, left many of us in shock and a few others in tears. Cassie, you know, a part of the core four, was going out with her Aunt, and they were involved in a car crash. Since she was so popular, everyone knew her, so everyone was sad, even those who've been bullied by her were sad. Most people who didn't like her were still devastated.

Right now, Cassie and her aunt are in the hospital, Cassie broke her arm and had a few minor concussions, and that's all we were told; there was no further information.

Her core friends were crying, but Lilia was crying the most; her mom and cousin are in the hospital, not the best thing that you want to hear on a Monday morning. I put aside all the times the core four – Lilia, Sadie, Cassie, and Kendall made fun of me, and I go to them and give the three of them hugs. I said no words; my kindness was enough. Peter, Aubrianna, Kaydence, Sanai, Xavier and I decide we should just hang out with them, and they let us hang out with them. Just a sympathy act.

Since when did they start letting anyone hang out or talk with them?! I thought, surprised. They'd usually snicker and push us away. Maybe it's just a one-time thing. Anyway, we agree to call off the whole "Expose them" plan for now. We actually hang out with them, and later, we wrote

letters and made pictures for Cassie and her aunt.

I'm still not friends with the girls; I'm just ok with them. Plus, they're dealing with enough bad news – that's never a time to come up with nicknames or anything.

During our regular lunchtime we invited Kendall, Sadie, and Lilia to sit with us, and they agreed, surprising us all. It was really pretty awkward, so I try to start a conversation.

"Do y'all want to play Concentration."

"Yes," they all nod.

I had to explain the game to everyone, since the core three didn't know how to play the game.

"Ok, so we go around the circle in order. We say, 'this is the game of concentration, no repeats or hesitation, category is...?' Whoever the word 'is' lands on has to say a category. So, if I say colors, we have to go around in the circle saying colors. If you repeat or hesitate on a color you're out."

Then we start the game. The first-round lands on Lilia. On Lilia's right is Kendall, then Sadie. Beside Sadie, there's Peter, then Kaydence, then Aubrianna, then Xavier, then me, and then Sanai, who was on the left side of Lilia. Lilia's category was States. She said Texas; Kendall said Arizona; Sadie said California; Peter said Mississippi; Megan said Colorado; Maddie said Alaska; Xavier said California. At the same time everyone shouts, "You're out!"

Xavier asked why, and Sadie explained, "I said California, and you repeated it." She was laughing now, and so were her two friends and the rest of us.

We take a break so that we can eat our lunch and go back to the game. Even though we're all playing and enjoying the game of concentration, there was only one thing on my mind: "Why did they let us talk to them, and even play with them? Was it another mean trick? Maybe it's a one-day thing," I shrugged, trying to dismiss the thought.

When we play the second-round, it lands on me. I choose celebrities and said Zendaya; Sanai said Robert Downey Jr.; Lilia said Ariana Grande; Kendall said Taylor Swift; Aubrianna said Annie LeBlanc, and I said, "uh uh." And they all excitedly shout, "YOU'RE OUT"!

I totally did it on purpose!

So, Xavier and I are out. They keep playing until there's a winner. It's Sanai. She did her weird victory dance and forces everyone to watch, but it's pretty funny.

During our 10-minute break, we hang out together again having conversations, and Lilia breaks down crying. We all hold hands together and pray for Cassie and her aunt. Then, Kendall's demeanor suddenly changes, and she opens her mouth to speak but stops like she was afraid to speak, looking down and fidgeting. I encourage her to get whatever it is off her chest.

"We...we...we only ever bullied you because we were jealous." She stutters.

Sadie and Lilia nodded, looking sadly at

all of us.

And Kendall continues, “We bullied all of y’all because we were jealous of how smart and pretty you are. And you, Alexis, always hang out with one of the most popular and finest football players, Xavier. It doesn’t get any cooler than that; you kinda stole the shine from us with that.”

“I don’t know if you ever noticed but Cassie never wanted to bully y’all. She was always trying to tell us how nice y’all are. Now we see what she saw. Y’all came to help us after everything we’ve done,” Sadie adds.

“Thank you,” Lilia said, “and please forgive us... all of you.”

Everyone stood, staring at them with mixed emotions, unsure what to say or do. But I stood there simply amazed as understanding finally came to me.

Now, I know why I had that dream about Cassie and why they seemed tortured in the dream.

Looking at my team members, I said, “Guys, com’on,” my hands spread out,

beckoning and bringing everyone together in a group hug, the type of sappy moment I’d seen on TV. And then an idea occurred to me.

5

Getting Together

I remember, as a little girl, my mom used to tell me, whenever someone hurt my feelings, that forgiveness is letting go of all negative emotions and memories; it is moving on with whatever positives remain. Today, the positive that remains is that the core four have come to see their mistakes for what it is and bravely taken responsibility.

Standing here hugging everyone, both the bully and the bullied, I realize that we're not born to judge but to love, and to live that love in our words and actions. To heal with the simplicity of a hug and a smile.

And to build together with our talents.

These were the thoughts going through my mind as we stood with one another in that group hug earlier today. And in light of letting go of all negative emotions, I suggested that we tell the core four what we were going to do, and everyone in my team agreed. So, Xavier told them about the assignments we had given to each other, and that's when it occurred to me that they can also be a valuable part of the Dream Team bringing their experience and perspective from the other side of the coin.

And suddenly, without warning, looking directly at my team members, I asked, "What if we recruit Kendall, Sadie, and Lilia to the Dream Team?" Pausing briefly to gauge their reaction, I continued, "And of course, Cassie when she recovers, by God's grace. We could give them assignments too, depending on their talents, and we could all make a gift for Cassie and her aunt."

There was absolute silence, as everyone, especially the team members, stare at me in shock like I am crazy because the whole idea is to bring down the core four in the first place. I try to explain the higher purpose of the cause, which goes beyond the core four and how we could attain great heights by building together using each person's talents, and the added opportunity to understand the workings of the bully's mind through them. Then, I see everyone relax after that and begin to smile. They all agree the idea is flawless.

Before we left the cafeteria, I took the liberty to invite them all over to my house later on after school, and I gave the three new members my number. I know I had given it to them before, but just in case they've deleted it.

The Dream Team now has three more people – soon to be four when Cassie recovers, making us ten. I'm excited; we're ten steps higher to bringing down this dictatorial

menace – bullying, in the school. And what better way to do it than to win over the bullies; even I, didn't see that coming. Anyway, during our free periods, each of us spend some time making cards for Cassie and her aunt; we got enough cards made for them. And at the close of school, I head to my pickup spot after saying bye to my friends. Truth is, it's going to take a while to get used to saying I'm friends with Sadie, Lilia, Kendall, and Cassie – again.

As soon as we get into the house, I tell my mom about the people coming over later today, for which I should have asked permission first before inviting them. Good thing she said yes though, that could have ended badly. I wait to get the responses of "The Dream Team" as they ask their parents' permission. Everyone responds that they have permission to come over.

Within 45 minutes everyone is gathered at my house, and they exchange greetings with my mom. She is as confused as a skunk

trying to cross the road, as I did not mention the three new members to her; I wasn't sure what she would do if she knew they were coming, and I didn't want to risk her saying no to them. I told her what happened to Cassie and her aunt. Surprisingly, she was quite gracious and decided she would write a letter to them too for me to take to school on Monday.

I take my friends upstairs. Xavier, Peter, Aubrianna, Kaydence, Sanai, and I take turns to share with Kendall, Sadie, and Lilia what our original Dream Team plan was, and how that will be different now since they are no longer the target. We have no person targeted at all for that matter, only the act. So, we ask three of them some questions to find their talent and give them their assignments.

Lilia said she's good at coding, so we decide to pair her up with Peter. So, Peter and Lilia have to make a two-minute video that has more than three characters. Kendall is good at drawing faces, so we pair her up with

Megan. Megan and Kendall somehow have to find a way to create the Founding Fathers; they could use clay to shape it or something. Sadie is an A+ student in Social Studies, so she's with me; we have to name all the States of the U.S., and to make it harder we have to make a sphere out of anything we can find or buy and make a replica of the Earth with the States on it. We also have to label the oceans, rivers, other countries, and some other stuff the Earth has. Good thing we don't have to name all the elements in the periodic table. Believe me; I AM NOT EXCITED!

So now we have it:

Peter and Lilia – Two minute video with more than three characters.

Sadie and I – Replica of Earth with names of States in the U.S.

Xavier – To make ten shirts written "THE DREAM TEAM" for everyone, including Cassie.

Maddie – To make artwork out of trash.

Sanai – To do a painting following a Bob Ross tutorial; it doesn't have to be perfect.

Megan and Kendall – To create a replica of the Founding Fathers.

After our meeting, the nine of us eat snacks and raise a prayer for Cassie and her aunt, Lilia's mom. What we're doing isn't forced; we just thought it would be fun to see what we can all do and then, use it to make a difference in the school with it. Now, we made our timeframe two weeks instead of the original one week. So, we're all going to Sadie and Kendall's house tomorrow, because her house is bigger than the rest of ours, and we have *NINE PEOPLE*, soon to be ten: Now, that's a Dream Team!

A few minutes later, everyone leaves; I brush my teeth, shower, and settle in for the night.

Still lying awake in bed at 10:30pm, I decide to text Cassie, to see if she blocked me or not.

"Hi, it's Alexis," I start texting, "I heard about what happened, and I'm really sorry.

I'm always praying for you, and hope you get better soon."

It takes a while, but she responds, *"Hello Alexis, nice to hear from you, thank you."*

"Wow! She didn't block my number," I said out loud to myself. I go on to text her that Kendall, Sadie, Lillia and I are good now.

She replies with many shocked emojis. Then I respond, telling her that I know why they'd been such Douchebags to my other friends and me. I also tell her that I know she wanted to be my friend.

"Oh yeah; I'm sorry about that," she replies with a sad face emoji.

I ask her what happened and how long it would take for her to come back to school. She said that someone hit them hard from the back, and she hit her head on the dashboard and also sprained her arm, and her aunt hit her head hard on the wheel. They both had a concussion and been suffering a lot of headaches but should be back home in seven to ten days. We keep chatting, and I share with her everything

about the Dream Team, which she totally loves. She tells me she's not sure what she's good at, so I tell her that I'd get back to her and that she might have to just randomly pick whose group to be in. She says she might want to join Xavier on the sewing.

I'm just happy she's alright. Now, I can count the sheep in the sky and fall asleep.

Saturday morning, I wake up, but it takes me about 20 minutes to finally get out of bed. I go downstairs to greet my mom, and my dad, who is leaving in the next few minutes for his next debate, after which I go back upstairs to brush my teeth and take a shower. I spend a few minutes reading my daily Bible devotional. It's a lazy day; not much to do till later, and not quite hungry. So, I eat my breakfast late, watch a little bit of TV, and peeped in some phone time. I send a text on the Dream Team group chat, asking when everyone is going to be on their way to Sadie and Kendall's. Aubrianna and Lilia said they were on their way already.

I go down to remind my mom about my meeting with the Dream Team at Kendall's, and she goes in to get ready – that will be another one hour because she still has to eat. You know how mothers do, put one outfit on and change it last minute, wasting so much time on nothing.

Finally, we get into the car and start the 15-minute drive to Kendall's. When we get there, I walk to the door to ring the doorbell. Mrs. Heritage opens the door, and I blew a kiss to my mom as she drives away; I hug Mrs. Heritage, and walk into the large, tastefully furnished sitting room. Kendall and Sadie run down and hug me. At first, I couldn't help but think this is a trap, and that they're going to lock me in a closet. To be honest, someone would call it a stretch, but if you had known them, I'm sure you'd be scared too. Yeah, I can call them my friends, but it's going to take a lot for them to regain my trust. Everyone else starts arriving shortly after me. We go up to their living room upstairs. And the ones who have

partners go with their different partners. Sadie and I go to a corner and use our phones to look up States because we're making the replica last. Peter and Lilia go to another corner of the living room, with a laptop to brainstorm and see how they're going to make an animated video. Kendall and Kaydence go to Kendall's room but stay close to the door, so that everyone can talk to each other; they start looking up where they can buy clay and carving materials to make a replica of the Founding Fathers statue. Xavier goes on the couch with his iPad, to design the shirts. Aubrianna is on the other side of the couch looking at pictures to get some ideas of what to make with plastic and metal items – basically things that people would trash. Sanai sits in the middle of the room watching Bob Ross videos to see which one she likes most.

After a long while, we take a break and watch TV while having some snacks and just talking. Sadie and Kendall's dad comes home from work; everyone says hi and

introduces themselves. Being here in their house feels really awkward, as I keep getting flashbacks of the last time I was here – *the sleepover!* Ugghhhhh; it gives me chills. Anyway, we all talk about how far we have gone on the project and what more we need to do. Sanai says that she will definitely need two weeks; she's found a Bob Ross video that she thinks she can work with. Peter and Lilia say they have figured out the topic for their video clip. Sadie and I have got half of the states down in a song, like ten and will make the replica later. Xavier says he has the colors and design of the words, DREAM TEAM. Kendall and Kaydence are searching for the best types of clay that allows paint to stay on; also carving and shaping tools. Aubrianna said she needs all of us to give her our empty plastic water bottles, straws, and any pieces of metal we can find. She doesn't know what she's going to make until she receives all the items.

Mr. Heritage, Sadie's dad, walks in and asks

if anyone needs to go to the store. Sanai says she needs paints, two canvases – just in case she messes up one, paintbrushes, and an apron. Kendall and Kaydence needs clay, paint, and shaping tools. Sadie and I also need clay, green and blue paint, and paintbrushes for the Earth replica part. Peter and Lilia need to buy a tech book. Xavier needs fabric and sewing materials; he already has a sewing machine at home, and he will need some plastic letter tracers and black paint. I tell him that Cassie will join him whenever she recovers. I add Cassie to the Dream Team group chat and tell everyone she should be back in seven to ten days. Aubrianna also needs to get some paint to paint the items that she receives. So, we all leave with Mr. Heritage, while Mrs. Heritage stays back to clean up.

When we get in the car, Sadie screams at Kendall, “GIVE ME THE AUX CORD,” startling everyone. We all turn to stare at both of them, wondering what’s going on between the sisters.

“No; you always play rubbish,” Kendall screamed right back.

I really want a sister, and these two that have each other are here fighting over radio; I thought, rolling my eyes. To quell the fight, we all decide to take turns with the radio. I skip all my turns because I’m not one to know songs, especially “trending songs”.

We get to the store at precisely 4:30pm, and everyone split up into their groups and go in different directions in search of their items in the store, but we agree to meet up at the Bakery area as Mr. Heritage requested. He instructs we all should go to the bakery area at 5:00pm, which means we have only 30 minutes to shop. He stands by the bakery and waits as we all go about our business in the store.

Sadie and I first go to the Arts and Crafts section to buy green and blue paints. Oh, Sanai, Aubrianna, Kendall, and Kaydence are here too; we met them already here.

“What do you need? We hear Sanai ask Aubrianna.

“I need paints, canvases, and paintbrushes,” Aubrianna replies.

Sadie cuts in excitedly, “I need paint and paintbrushes too; I’m so excited, can’t wait to start.” Then they go to the Arts and Crafts section, Aubrianna gets PLENTY of paint colors, three brushes, and two canvases. Sadie gets all the colors of the rainbow, along with neutral and neon colors and three brushes; we both added smaller containers of white and black paint, just in case we might need it for lines, and five paintbrushes. Then, we move further down the aisle to get some Air-Dry Clay, which is the last item Sadie and I need, after which we leave and go back to meet Mr. Heritage to wait for the others. A few minutes later, Sanai, Aubrianna, Kendall, and Kaydence come back to join us with Mr. Heritage.

Peter, Lilia, Xavier went to the sewing aisle to get Xavier’s fabrics. He gets several blue and black fabrics and black paint. Hopefully, he remembers that he’s only making ten shirts. He gets some other materials –

thread, needles, and so on.

Then they go to the book aisle to get the book “*Animating For Beginners*”. Here’s the thing, we thought they’d done this before since they know how to code, so it should be easy for them without the book, RIGHT? Well, they grab it and starts heading back to Mr. Heritage; it’s now 4:50pm. You would not believe that they spent most of their time trying to figure out where they were in the store; they got LOST! Everyone is here already with Mr. heritage, waiting on them.

Mr. Heritage, speaking out the words, texts his wife, “*Give me heads up next time Sadie and Kendall invite friends over, so that I stay longer at work. Only 20 minutes in, and I feel like I’m about to explode.*”

Who blames him, taking NINE KIDS to A STORE! Not every parents dream, huh? I thought, smiling, trying hard to suppress my laughter.

Mr. Heritage gets up and takes us to the register. The line is quite long; we wait in

the line for about 10 minutes and another five minutes to scan our items. He pays for all of our supplies; he paid a total of \$80.00. That's more than the pocket money I get for TWO years! We end up getting in the car a little bit past 6:00pm.

We all thank Mr. Heritage and he drops us all at our various houses. Good thing we brought all our belongings with us to the store. I got dropped off last; I thank Mr. Heritage and hug Kendall and Sadie.

Woah! Who thought I'd ever say that?!

I walk to my door and knock, and my mom opens the door. We both wave to the Heritages, and they wave back as they drive off. It's now 6:55pm.

Tomorrow we have Church. My mom and I decide to do a little devotion together because, why not; it's been a great day and I'm thankful. We read from John 3:16; our devotion took about 30 minutes, after which we watch a movie to pass the time, and I fall asleep less than halfway through the movie. When I woke up, my mom was

cooking dinner.

"Today went by so fast! It's 8:00pm already," I said to my mom.

And she smiles at me and says, "You must be tired." To which I yawn in response and settle into one of the highchairs in the kitchen with her.

My mom made us Chicken Alfredo, and it's so good. When we finish eating, I wash the dishes and go up to my room.

My room looked quite untidy – IT WAS A JURASSIC PARK!!! So, I start tidying up. I take my bed covers and put them in the dirty hamper, then pick up all my clothes, which was all over the floor and put them in the area to which they belong. Once my floor is somewhat clear, I vacuum every corner of the room, clean my desk and the mirror on the desk, and organize everything on it. Then, I get new bed covers and put them on my bed. When I finished 30 minutes later, I was exhausted.

With all that done and dusted, I go back

downstairs and find my mom sleeping on the couch; I get a comforter and cover her with it. She opens her eyes a little and whispers, “Thank you.”

I didn’t want to wake her up, so I pray quietly beside her, kissed her cheek and head back upstairs to sleep. I usually sleep at 8:00pm on Saturday nights, because we have Church the next day, but today is an exception. It’s now 10:15pm, so I get in my bed, feeling pretty good with myself, and fall asleep immediately.

6

Switching Roles

Sunday morning, my alarm wakes me up at 7:30am, but I’m still tired and Church is at 9:00am anyway, so I turn around to sleep for a few more minutes, and as expected, my mom barges in to make sure I get out of bed. Thank God today she didn’t use the airhorn; she pulled me up. I get up reluctantly, dragging my feet every step of the way to the bathroom, and do my daily routine in the wrong order – I take a shower first, put some lotion on my body, and then go back to the bathroom to brush my teeth; the truth is I almost forgot to brush my teeth. I put on a red

pantsuit, matching it with a pair of sparkly silver flats, pack my hair in a ponytail and spray some perfume, then head on downstairs.

My mom put some fruits in a bowl for me, and I learn my dad is already out of the house; he is attending a strategy meeting with his campaign team. So, it's just my mom and I going to Church today; we pray, eat our fruits and head out to the car. I sit in the passenger seat, and we both buckle our seat belts. Our Church isn't far from our home, but my mom needs to stop for gas, so we might be running a little late, as my mom's car is almost out of gas. And guess what? She chooses today – Sunday – of all days to teach me how to operate the gas pump and buy gas in the car!

I think it takes about five minutes or more to fill up the tank, after which we will take another 10 minutes to get to Church. We're totally going to be late, but I have to learn "operating the gas pump and filling the

tank – today!" I thought, rolling my eyes in frustration.

I'm 16, which means I'm old enough to drive, so I tell my parents that I want to start driving soon. But according to my "mom's law": I have to first learn how to pump gas into the car before I learn to drive it, so that way, I never bring the car home empty and expect them to fill it. Can you imagine that?! Anyway, she left me no choice; it was that or no deal, so I had to agree. And my first pump lesson is on a Sunday morning, 8:30am, on our way to Church!

"Now, this is how it's done, dear," she starts, "You're supposed to look at the Pump screen to see what I'm doing; how many liters it takes and how much it costs to fill the tank. Okay; I'll give you another chance, so, I'll cancel and start over," she said as she cancelled the transaction.

"Mom!" I exclaimed, "We're going to be late." Stomping my feet in frustration.

"Pay attention and remember what I say and do. But I won't go so hard on you today

because you're new at this. And you better don't that take tone with me, child. You're just a handful..."

"Alright, mom; I got it. Can we fill up and go now? I really don't want to be the last person walking into the Youth Church." I said with an attitude.

"You know, usually at work, when I tell people I'm raising a handful; they say, 'Oh really, but you have only one kid, and I have three more kids than you.' I reply saying, my kid has a personality of FIVE kids, trust me".

I burst out laughing on hearing that from my mom, and she also starts laughing. All frustration dissolve away from me, and afterwards, we drive happily to Church. We finally get to Church about 15 minutes late, and my mom parks the car closer to the Youth Church.

"I'm sorry I made us late to Church, dear; I'm just trying to make you as advanced as I can. I love you, bye," she explains and kisses my cheek.

I get out of the car while she's reaching for

her purse on the back seat, and shut the door, waving her bye as I walk away.

"Wait. When you get to the children's Church, pay attention. Bye; love you, dear," she said.

"NOT A CHILD; IT'S THE YOUTH CHURCH, mom!" I said, shaking my head and laughing as I continue walking toward the Youth Church.

"Compared to my age, you're an infant, so, it's okay for me to say Children's Church," She said and winks at me, laughing. "Ok, bye now. You still have to tell me what you learned after Church though."

I don't reply; I walk faster so that she doesn't have to say any more to me.

"Alexis, can you hear me," she calls out.

I still don't answer and keep walking till I disappeared into the Youth Church building and head to my class.

"*Woooooh!*" I let out some breath and go into my own class in the Youth Church. I notice we have a new teacher today. Last week, I'm not sure who we had, though, because my parents and I had to stay home

and watch the service online because my parents were tired from my dad's debates. Anyway, in my Youth Church class, the choir is still on with praise and worship. Shortly after I settle in, our new teacher comes up to share the Word. The sermon was about believing in our hearts and not just talking with our mouths.

When service is over, I say hello to some Youth Church friends; then go to wait by the car for my mom. I had to wait a little bit since the Youth Church often ends before the Adult Church. Five minutes later, she comes out of the sanctuary; I see her greeting a few friends before rushing over to open the car, and we both get inside.

"Hi, mom; I learned today in class that looks can be deceiving, and that it's not about what people say, but about their actions and what's in their heart. It was actually very interesting," I said quickly, without waiting for her to ask me.

"That's nice, but from now on, you need to start taking notes, and we'll go back home

and go over everything together, okay?" She said as she started the engine.

"Yes, mom," I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

We arrive at the house, and we're both famished. My mom made salads with grilled chicken, and we eat while watching *Family Reunion* on Netflix. When we finish eating, I take our plates to the sink and wash the dishes. My dad is still busy at work and so not yet home. He's in the top 10 now; I'm happy for him.

I left my mom with the show on Netflix to practice the States for the Dream Team project. Not so long after I get upstairs, I hear snoring; mom is asleep, so I know I have to work quietly. There's an alphabetical song for the States, and I already know it. *Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan,*

Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico. New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. So that's the 50 States of America.

Believe me when I tell you I learned this in an hour. I text Sadie to see how far along she is in learning the States. She says she's done with the States, just like me. So, we decide to do the capitals just for fun, since we still have a lot of time. There are 50 capitals, and I only know six – Montgomery, Juneau, Austin, Little Rock, Sacramento, and of course, Phoenix, the capital of my State. So, I go to my trusted friend, Google, and search up "*Capitals of States in the United States of America*". I get the list and get to work. It's been so long! I learn one more capital – Denver. Going through the list of capitals made it feel like it's been an hour already, but I check my phone, and it's

only been three minutes. I text Sadie again and tell her I wouldn't be ready today for the capitals. Meanwhile, I have my mom still "snoring", which is causing me major distraction, and Sadie, who has mastered half of the capitals already, to keep up with. So, I start taking it seriously and shut out the distraction with my earplugs – game on.

The next 20 minutes, I learn 23 more capitals, which brings the capitals I know to 30, including the six I knew before and Denver – the one I learnt earlier today. I have 20 more to go. *Montgomery, Juneau, Phoenix, Little Rock, Sacramento, Denver, Austin, Hartford, Dover, Tallahassee, Atlanta, Honolulu, Boise, Springfield, Indianapolis, Des Moines, Topeka, Frankfort, Baton Rouge, Augusta, Annapolis, Boston, Lansing, Saint Paul, Jackson, Jefferson City, Helena, Lincoln City, Carson City, Concord.* I've done a lot, and I need a little break, so I decide to take a power nap.

I wake up an hour later and check my phone

for any messages; I see some messages on The Dream Team group chat; I see Sanai had sent a long text, following the team's rule of "CLT – clear language texting" – no text abbreviations or codes. If we speak good clear English language when speaking to one another, not using abbreviations, we might as well write clear language in texting each other – it only makes sense to keep our vocabulary growing, rich and consistent, in light of building together to bring out the best in one another.

Sanai: Okay so, I've found the easiest painting by Bob Ross, and I'm pretty sure it's up to my abilities. I'm doing the painting titled 'Sunset Aglow'. My board is ready, set out all my brushes and the paints I'm using. I have my Apron on, and I'm getting ready to start the video tutorial. The colors I need are, Titanium White, Phthalocyanine Blue, Prussian Blue, Dark Sienna, Midnight Black, Van Dyke Brown, Alizarin Crimson, Sap Green, Cadmium

Yellow, Yellow Ochre, Indian Yellow, and Bright Red. Good thing I got a lot of paints and watched the video for the types of paints I needed before shopping. I don't know how to pronounce half the names of the paints, but I have them (*laughing face emoji*).

I have the 18 x 24-inch canvas and brush on the board with a very thin, even coat of liquid white. Bob Ross says to start with a two-inch brush, so with the brush, I dip in to get a small amount of the Indian Yellow and paint little criss-cross strokes in the mid sky area of the canvas. Without cleaning the brush, I dip it right into a little bit of the Yellow Ochre: You blend it in at the bottom of the Indian Yellow color. Then once again, without cleaning the brush, I dip it into the Bright Red and blend it in with the bottom of the Yellow Ochre. For the rest of the sky, Bob says that I need to make a lavender color. You mix a little of the Phthalocyanine Blue with the Alizarin Crimson. Much more Crimson

than blue. Then with that mixture, I put it around on the top of the Indian Yellow. So far, it's the mixture of Crimson and Phthalocyanine on the tip. Below that is the Indian Yellow, then Yellow Ochre, then the Bright Red. Bob Ross' painting is looking similar to mine. I'm already tired but I can't stop because if I do the other color won't blend in properly. So, moving on...

I get a touch of the Phthalocyanine Blue and put it all around the top mixture area. Then finally, I wash the brush in water. Then, I use the water on the brush to blend in the colors. I blend the bottom of the Indian Yellow mixed with the top of the Yellow Ochre, and the bottom of the Yellow Ochre with the Bright Red. So now all the colors are blended in, and it's looking A-M-A-Z-I-N-G! Now we make the clouds. Wait – have I told you how relaxing Bob's voice is? If not, then you know now – it's so relaxing. Anyway, with a clean brush, I get a bit of the Titanium White and add some Bright Red to it. Then with that whiteish-pinkish color, I make some cloud

in the Phthalocyanine Blue and Crimson mixture area. Then, following Bob's direction, I start putting all sorts of the colors on the clouds.

Now, I'm exhausted; phew! And the painting is finally done – finished! So, I can rest already – Yaaayyyyyiiii! The good thing is that the painting looks amazing, but it's going to take HOURS to dry. So, I will take my canvas down to the garage where no one can touch it – no one uses the garage in my house. After setting it in the garage and cleaning up, I will eat some doughnuts while I watch something on YouTube.

I'm done! Hopefully, y'all understood all of...that.

I was the first to respond to Sanai on the group chat.

Me: Yaayyii!!! Let's give it up for Sanai; she finished her Bob Ross painting! (*clapping hand emoji*). Good job, Sanai. Thank you!

I got to admit; I wish I got her job; she said she needed two weeks, and she did it in an hour. Megan and Kendall are starting their project tomorrow at Kaydence's house. I'm pretty sure Mr. Heritage would be happy about that (*laugh-out-loud emoji*). Laughing alone in my room as I remembered him at the store with nine of us.

Xavier: Whoops, whoops, whoops! Way to go, Sanai!

I'm about to start making the shirts. I'm going to make the whole shirt blue. Then, use the letter stencils that I got, which come in different fonts. I'll position the letters where I want them, then paint inside of the stencils black. For the word, 'THE'; I made the letters capitalized in a bold font. Then, I made the letters capitalized in a bold and cursive font for the word, 'DREAM'. And finally, for the word 'TEAM, I made the letters capitalized and Italicized'. I had to do that nine more

times to make 10 T-shirts. Phew! Glad that's over.

I suddenly remembered that Cassie is supposed to be on my team, and we're supposed to do this together, so I had texted Alexis earlier to let her know that Cassie might not be back in time to join me in the production because I will finish all of it today. She suggested that Cassie can just rate all of our works on a scale of 1-10, which I think is a great idea if it's okay with everyone, and also be the main speaker for the 'Xavier-Cassie' pair of the Dream Team project, which I have no problems with.

You know, it makes me laugh every time I think of this: No one is forcing us to do these projects, but we're doing it with such commitment. At school, when we are assigned projects, we DON'T want to do it or in many occasions, we grudgingly do it (*laughing face emoji*). And to think that 'Art' is Alexis worst nightmare, yet she's all neck-deep into this, designing the Earth – how ironic (*laughing face emoji*). This is what our

parents refer to as ‘kids these days.’. It’s just hilarious! (*three Laugh-out-loud emojis*).

Sadie: *Clapping Hand emojis*. “Good job, Sanai, and you too, Xavier. And Xavier I find that funny too (*laughing face emoji*); I guess the commitment comes from the ‘freedom to choose’ what and how we want to do things.

Well, now Sanai and Xavier are done, and I’m still learning the last 20 capitals, but since everyone is moving quickly, we might have to present next week and beat the agreed two weeks timeframe. So, I’m getting to work immediately as I’m determined to finish, which is, by the way, what I said five minutes ago before I fell asleep AGAIN... (*Laugh-out-loud emoji*). But my timer is on now, and I’m in ‘study mode’, even though I would rather be in ‘sleep mode’ with a large sign that reads ‘DO NOT DISTURB’.

Everyone posts a *laugh-out-loud emoji* on Sadie’s comment. We all also agree that

Cassie can rate our works as her own input in the team project and be their pair’s main speaker. Then, further down the group chats, I see Peter and Lilia had chatted earlier on their ideas.

Peter: Lilia, just to be sure we’re on the same page – we agreed that for our video, we’d use old cartoons as our characters. Since we have to use more than three characters; we’re doing four. It’s easier on us because we don’t have to animate anything; we just need to code the cartoons to do whatever we want.

Lilia: “Thanks, Peter; the FaceTime we had earlier made it easier. Okay, so, you’re the one with the computer, and yes; we agreed on four characters using old cartoons since it has to be more than three. We chose the four cartoon characters; they are – SpongeBob, Charlie Brown... Wouldn’t it be wrong NOT to have picked Mickey Mouse?! Fred Flintstone is a

MUST for both of us, and I could not forget Betty Boop! Sorry, everyone meet 'MY CHILDHOOD', or my toddler days, because I'm like 16 now...*(Laugh-out-loud emoji)*.

Anywho, that makes it five characters, not four that we originally planned it would be. We already have a topic, and we agreed it's going to be comedic, just so that it's easier, even though the coding will be a war. We still have a whole lot of stuff to do, and everyone else is almost done, so that's totally freaking us out.

We agreed that in our video, SpongeBob builds a time machine, which messes up and so he ends up in a different dimension and meets Charlie Brown. Charlie follows the yellow, sponge creature and goes into the time machine, forgetting it was broken. They end up in another dimension, meeting Betty Boop. Once again, they go back into the time machine, forgetting that it's broken. But as soon as the yellow sponge presses the button, they all

remember it's broken and find themselves a different dimension.

In this new dimension, they meet Mickey Mouse, and they all have an earache from Mickey's high-pitch voice. Mickey fixes the machine and sets a random time on it, and it finally works. They go far back to the ancient days, where leaves are toilet paper, rock is paper, and sticks are writing stencils. The good old days where bullying was non-existent.

Get the days I'm talking about? No? Yes? Maybe not. Ok good.

The machine breaks down there, and they're stuck in the past; now, they have to wait for things to evolve so that they can all get back to their real-time dimensions. THAT'S OUR ANIMATED STORY!" But y'all keep in mind the story is so much better than we're texting here; it'll make more sense when you see the short movie. We chose comedy because the plan is to make our audience feel relaxed and clear-minded just before we all come up

stage to speak about the issue of bullying in the school, on the day of presentation.

Peter: Great Lilia, everything sounds great. So, I will get to work on this storyline, and also send you some pictures I have of the cartoon characters, later.

I read all that Peter and Lilia have shared, and I'm really impressed and excited, and I text them:

Way to go team Peter and Lilia; good job (*Thumbs Up emoji*).

I am so looking forward to 'The Dream Team' presentation event themed, ACT THE ART TO STOP THE BULLY. The Principal is yet to give us a workable date for our presentation to the whole school and parents, but she's approved the event, as part of the school's effort to stop the menace. Ok, so, I continue my chat with the other members of The Dream Team.

Me: So, I still have 20 capitals to master.

Be right back, Peter is calling me.

"...sup Glasses," I say as I pick his call, using the nickname we call him because of the thick, nerdy glasses he wears. He cannot see a thing without those glasses.

"...sup Dudette," he said, also calling me by the nickname he gave me, "I got tired of typing and thought to just call you and speak; I'm thinking we should be able to finish with the video in three days. So, yeah, I'm open to the option of rating the project in a week instead of the originally planned two weeks, but don't say anything about it yet; give me until tomorrow evening to confirm the possibility. Ok?"

"Ok cool, sounds great. I will expect your call tomorrow then. Thanks for letting me know, Glasses."

"Thanks a bunch, Dudette. Bye."

After the call with Peter, I go back to chatting with the group.

Me: Well, Sadie has learned everything,

and she has the clay, I told her to form a big sphere and tomorrow she'll give it to me. I'll paint it after school on Monday. In the last five minutes, I've mastered 10 more capitals. Trenton, Santa Fe, Albany, Raleigh, Bismarck, Columbus, Oklahoma City, Salem, Harrisburg, and Providence. I have 40 capitals in my brain, and 10 not yet existing in my brain.

Aubrianna: Even though Alexis, Lilia, Peter, Xavier, Kaydence, Sanai, Sadie, and Kendall didn't give me the recycled pieces, I've asked my family not to trash water bottles, straws, metal pieces, and so on. I'm planning on making a variety of cool objects. I'm not going to tell anyone yet, but I'm just going to go to 'Five Minute Crafts' on YouTube and use that to help myself. Earlier today, I checked the containers I gave my family to put the recycled pieces, but THERE WAS NOTHING! Then, I looked in the trash and saw the straws and everything else I asked them to put

in the containers. Now, that is what me, myself and I call 'MY FAMILY helping me' (*laughing face emoji*). So, I put on some heavy-duty gloves and picked out all the straws and plastic pieces. Now, I'm on YouTube trying to find some ideas and inspirations.

Some of us text '*Laughing Face*' emojis in response to Aubrianna, and also apologize to her for not sending her our recycle materials as we agreed, giving her some encouraging words to offer support.

It was getting late, and we all needed to go, so we say our goodbyes and sign off. Everyone who wasn't done promised to do as much as they can during their break times at school to finish in good time. We never know when the Principal will call us with a date for the event, and we have to rate the works before the presentation event. So, we must be ready, and not just ready with our arts but also ready with our

speaking parts on the subject of bullying.

I go downstairs happy and satisfied, and I find my dinner already on the table; it seems that my mom has already gone to her bedroom. After eating, I go back upstairs to get ready for a good night sleep, and I see a text that Cassie would be coming back home in two days, a little earlier than what was planned.

“This day can’t get any more beautiful than this; thank you, Lord!” I whispered, smiling broadly. Then, I say my prayers and drift off to sweet sleep.

7

A New Introduction

Give me the freedom to learn by my own errors without judgement or keeping me imprisoned with overly high standards of your own expectations of me, and I will school myself faster than you can ever teach. My mind is inditing wonderful things, as I sit in the car, smiling and lost in thought, on my way to school with my mom this Monday morning: I’m talking about the things which I have discovered about myself, and even about my friends through The Dream Team project. We have achieved great things with such commitment, borne out

of a boundless spirit, which means only one thing - anything is possible for me!

This morning, I woke up with the decision to take a huge step in my life, to dare to do something different from 'my normal'. You know, I'm not your typical high school girl, and definitely not the sports type, or any type for that matter. And until The Dream Team, I did "nothing" but go to school and make good grades to satisfy my parents high-handed "sink or swim" rules, which left some of my teachers and my parents' friends often asking me what I got going on.

Well, today, I'm trying out for volleyball. I want to try something different; I loved and always secretly wanted to play volleyball when I was younger, but I never took it further than that. My school is having tryouts later today, and I plan to make the team. Two tryouts will be held - one today and one tomorrow. All tryouts are before school, so I had to wake up at 5:40am. I packed my knee pads, socks,

court shoes, and my water bottle. I'm mostly doing this to have something else to do other than just coming home every day. As you can see, I've changed a lot, and I think the new me needs more events on her schedule.

My mom drops me off, "Have a good day at school, honey, and good luck with the tryouts; you'll do great. I love you!" My mom says as she drops me off.

That boosts my confidence. "Thanks, mom; I love you too!"

I walk into Gym B, and sign in my name on the tryout sheet, then head to the bleachers where all the other people trying out are waiting. The volleyball coach comes in and tells all the girls to get on the court. Coach Smith played volleyball professionally, but she is retired and now coaches; she has the experience and all it takes to be the best. She gives every girl a volleyball, and one by one, we all serve. I go to the serving line and serve just as I remember from watching it on TV some five or six years ago. I hit the ball as

hard as I could, serving it deep over the net! “Great Job!” Coach Smith says, impressed on how fast, hard, and deep I served.

Everyone gives it their best shot and a little bit over half of the girls make this first round. Next, we try spiking. I do my full approach and once again spike the ball to the other side of the court; so far, I’m doing great. Then comes the passing – the goal is to get the ball high enough so that someone else can get it. Once again, I did it right; I put in my all to the very end. I feel very strong and confident about this; I think I did great! Well, by this time tomorrow, I will find out – I either made the team or got rejected.

The practice was already over when I noticed that Maddison was also trying out; I don’t know what it is with me, but I just don’t seem to be noticing a lot of things lately; maybe too focused on what’s more important. So, I walk up to her to say hi; we talk a little and leave the court to go freshen up and get ready for classes.

I go through all my periods with ease, and

during the break period, I receive the replica of Earth made out of clay from Sadie for me to paint after school. My mom picks me up, and on getting home, I see my dad is home, which is odd; he’s usually still at work at this time of the day.

“Hello, dad. Are you ok? You are home early,” I say, looking surprised.

“I took two days off to be with my girls,” he replies, smiling broadly. “Come, sit with me and tell me all about your volleyball tryouts.” I sit right beside him and give him all the details of the tryout, excited that he’s really interested in knowing, especially seeing that he put aside the pile of papers he was working on before I came in. He tells me he’s very proud of the girl I am becoming, and I could see the sincerity of his words on his face. He hugs me, then I get up and go straight upstairs to my room and start painting the Earth replica.

Two hours later, my dad announces he’s taking us out and so to get ready. That’s a first; things are looking up around here! We

went out for a family dinner at Red Lobster. I've never been there, but everybody talks about how awesome it is. Apparently, it's crazy expensive, so I'm just going to order the cheapest thing. I got two Lobster legs, some shrimps, mashed potatoes and broccoli on the side. IT WAS DELICIOUS!!!!

I came back home stuffed, and I thank them both before going up to take a shower and brush. Then, still bubbling with surprise and excitement, I go back downstairs and thank my parents again. It feels so good that they are proud of me; I am proud of myself too. I head back upstairs for bed after praying with my parents.

Tuesday morning, I wake up 40 minutes earlier than the planned 5:40am for the second day of the tryout, to watch and master a few basic skills – setting, spiking, blocking, digging, and serving, before going to take a shower and leave for school. Yesterday, we were told that today each girl would be put on a team, and we'd scrimmage

against each other to see what we're best at.

I get to school at 6.30am and go straight to Gym B; I'm put on *Team One* with five other girls. Not many girls are here today for tryout; there are only 13 of us here today. *Team One*, my team, has six people; *Team Two* also has six people, and there's one person on the sideline. So, everyone will stay on the court.

Then the game begins. My team gets the ball first, and I serve it over. *Team Two* hits the ball back over, and my team passes it up, someone sets, then I hit the ball into the court, giving my team a point.

At the end of the game, my team lost 24-25, but I still did amazing!

Coach Smith then put us all on a straight line in the court and instructs, "When I call your name, please step forward."

"Destiny Myers, Jada McHenry, Jasmine Scott, Anthem Allen, Victoria Stewart (not the one I know) and Alexis McDaniels. Please step forward."

It's a 50/50 chance, and right now I'm

standing beside five other players that I think are amazing, but behind me, I notice that there's Maddison, whose name was not called, and she is a fantastic player that has been playing for longer than I have known her. So, I'm wondering, did I make it, or did she make it? And just then Coach Smith intrudes into my thoughts.

"Welcome to the team, front row!" She announces.

I scream, alongside the other five players. I made my school's volleyball team! My parents are going to be so happy for me. I look behind me to see Maddison; she's packing up her things to leave. As the other girls head to the locker room to change and get freshened up, I walk up to her, knowing that this must be hard for her.

"Hey look, you did amazing! Don't forget that there's always next year! It doesn't matter that you didn't make it this year; I know that you're an outstanding player and it's the team's loss."

"Thanks, Alexis; there are other sports I can

try. Congratulations though; you're really good," she says, hugging me.

I congratulate my new teammates and head to the bathroom to freshen up just in time for Calculus.

All day, basking in the euphoria of making the team, I go through all my periods smiling, mostly out of my mind with joy; I can't wait to get home and tell my parents. I texted the great news to the Dream Team members on our chat group; everyone's excited for me, and all show up during the break period to congratulate me with high-fives, hugs and screams of excitement.

Then I remember the replica of Earth that I had painted last night is still in the bag I carried it with, and I hand it to Sadie – beautiful and finished! We're Done! I learned the last ten capitals I needed to know last night and got it all in, before going out to dinner with my parents. So,

as of right now, Xavier, Sanai, Sadie and I are the only ones done. Peter and Lilia will be done tomorrow. Kendall and Kaydence started yesterday; they've got the format of the Founding Fathers' statue. All they need is to get their faces – a reminder of the original values America is founded on; definitely not on bullying each other, which is what Kendall and Kaydence would be speaking about at the ACT THE ART TO STOP THE BULLY event. Aubrianna still has to put together all the recycled pieces. Cassie didn't show up today, so maybe there were some last-minute checkups or something.

After school, I go home as usual with my mom. Today is my dad's second day on his two-day break, so he's home, and as soon as my mom joins my dad on the couch, I share my news with them. The news of my selection rolls over both my parents like chocolate melt over ice cream, refreshing and sweet; their eyes widen, and their smile broadens at the sound of my words. And

suddenly, they're both on their feet, talking excitedly at the same time, saying congratulations and squeezing me in a group bear-hug; then my dad lifts me off the floor, spinning me around the room, with all of us laughing so hard.

When he finally puts me down, he said, "You're a star, always have been; we're very proud of you, sweetie. Don't you ever forget that."

I get emotional at this; a drop of tear escapes my eyes, and I say, "Thank you, dad; it's really great hearing that from you. You too, mom, thank you."

After we all take it in, we settle down to enjoy the family movie night that my dad had planned for his second day off, and while watching the movie, we eat some of the leftovers we brought home from dinner last night. When the movie is over, my parents hug and congratulate me once more. We pray together; my dad leads the prayer. Then, I go up to my room, as my parents also retire to theirs. I take a shower, chat a

bit with Xavier, and then drift into a peaceful, sweet sleep.

Today, Wednesday, is the first official practice for the South Western High's Volleyball team. We're told practice would be after school on Mondays and Wednesdays, but since tryouts were on Monday, today will be the only day for practice this week. I wake up early, this time without my alarm; I pack my knee pads, extra socks, court shoes, water bottle, and deodorant in my string bag and head out with mom.

I get to school early, and surprisingly, I see Cassie walking with Aubrianna – they're never this early. Happy to see Cassie back on her feet in school, I run up to them.

"How are you?! Is your aunt okay? We missed you sooo much!!!" I say, hugging her excitedly.

She hugs me back tightly and laughing, before responding that both she and her aunt are fine. Xavier comes to join us and we all stand talking and catching up with

her; we must have been carried away talking with each other that we lost track of time as the bell rings to remind us it's time for our first classes. We all rush off to our first period classes; Xavier and I head to History class.

Today is going really slow: The 9th graders are testing all day today, so the whole school needs to be quiet, plus the fact that I was just too restless and couldn't wait for school to be over to start volleyball practice. The day drags on, and during lunch, the first day with Cassie back, all the Dream Team members get together to talk with her about everything else she didn't already know.

"We want you to be the Judge for the Dream Team project – rate our works, and while at it, please carefully choose who did the best! And on the day of presentation, we need you to join Xavier on stage as the main speaker to speak on '*Taking Off the Bully's Dark Cloak to Put on the Bright Shirt of Great Dreams*'. You and Xavier are paired up as the Dream Team's T-shirt makers;

your pair made the shirts of brilliant dreams.” Peter says, nodding at the rest of us for confirmation.

And everyone, including Xavier, nod to affirm Peter’s words, looking at her and smiling.

“I will be so honored to rate the works, y’all, and also join Xavier on stage to speak,” Cassie responded, getting emotional.

“And yeah; everyone is already done, or almost. So, let’s meet up somewhere later next week to do it! Maybe at my house?” Kendall adds, looking at everyone for approval.

“Sure; we can meet at your house later next week,” Xavier, Peter, Sadie and Aubrianna chorus. Everyone nods, smiling excitedly.

It’s amazing how Cassie just met everyone this morning, and everyone is already getting along very well. And it’s crazier how I went from one friend to nine friends! I’m doing sports now, I have friends, and I still maintain good grades. So, the new me calls for a new introduction. Here we go:

“My name is Alexis McDaniels! That’s still what I go by, no abbreviations, but now I have a nickname, Dudette, which only Peter calls me – he made up ‘dudette’ as the female version of dude; he says I’m a guy-girl, not a girly-girl. I have nine friends – Xavier, Sadie, Lilia, Cassie, Kendall, Peter, Aubrianna, Kaydence, and Sanai. I live with my parents, and I have no siblings. My dad is currently running for Mayor of Phoenix, Arizona. I play volleyball for my high school. I am 16 years old; my 17th birthday is coming up in two months. THIS IS ME!”

Wow! It’s a little crazy thinking how long it took me to come up with those sentences I just spoke out loud, but it does take time becoming this “good”.

Now, I’m heading to Gym B for volleyball practice instead of the car rider line for home. I go to the locker room, where I find 15 other girls changing into their sports clothes. I change into my shorts, a t-shirt (we’re to use our own clothes until Coach

Smith gives us our assigned practice outfit), my knee pads, socks, and my court shoes.

To warm up, we run two laps around the gym; we do high knees, butt kicks, lunges, sprints – to the net and back, shuffles, and push-ups. Then everyone warms up their arms by passing the ball to a partner in groups of three. We have five groups since there are 15 of us in the team. When everyone is warmed up, we get in a circle and introduce ourselves. I remember seeing a lot of these girls in the halls of the school – just imagine how many more friends I will gain from this team.

We start with ten minutes of serving the ball over the net; everyone did really good with this. I can't wait for our first tournament – too bad my dad most likely won't make it due to his job and mayoral stuff. And at that thought, I suddenly remember my dad has a debate today. So, I say a little prayer for him and wish him good luck in my head!

Then, the actual game practice begins,

and I push myself really hard at it, moving as fast and hitting as hard as possible. Coach Smith notices, and I feel like I'm going to burst with pride and excitement. The way I feel when I get a hard hit, or my teammate gets an amazing dig is something that I cannot describe. I stutter step to line up with the flying ball, taking those infamous steps. At this point, my body takes over me and goes into autopilot, playing as nothing else matters, and when the ball is in front of me, it's as if time stops; I'm floating, then when my hand connects with the ball again, the intensity of the game continues. Right here, right now, playing this game, I feel like I'm in a different "dimension" as Lilia and Peter described in their movie clip for the Dream Team. I play like it's a real tournament, in for the win. By the end of practice, I'm a hard-breathing sweat machine – totally drenched in sweat, but I don't care what I look like; I am proud of the work I put into my part in the team. And for Coach Smith to notice my improvement; boy,

that's only the beginning of greater things for me.

After the practice, the team captain, Holley – a girl in 11th grade, got everyone together in the locker room and created a group chat with everyone for reminders of practice, tournament dates, and just to keep each other updated. And next thing I know, I find myself asking the ball, “Where were you all my life?”

And everyone burst out laughing; I start laughing too. I think I found my “thang!” Ok, I’ll never say “thang” again; it doesn’t even sound right in my ears anymore. I have found my “thing”.

My mom picks me up, “Hey, how was practice?” She sounded kinda gloomy.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“Your dad is out of the race,” she answers sadly.

I could see in her face just how much she wanted this; it’s going to be hard to see my parents down. I know they expected to win,

even I expected him to win. The thought of my dad running for mayor automatically made me think he’d win.

“There are always many more opportunities. He still has his job, doesn’t he?” I ask, hoping his job remains.

“No. We don’t care about the race for Mayor; he lost his job. They found someone better and fired your dad. The organization that he was working with expected him to win, and things just took a downward spiral from there.”

I knew that this would change everything. My dad’s job was the base of our home; we live on his job, I go to school on his job, so what’s going to happen without his job?! My mom and I, who are still sitting in the car in the school parking lot where she picked me up, start weeping. My dad is in his office right now, packing up his stuff. When we had cried enough, my mom starts the car, and we drive home.

There, in our driveway, is my dad’s car,

which means he's already home and not still in the office parking as I thought. My mom and I walk into the house, and I rush to hug my dad, and my mom joins in the hug; I didn't have to say a word, everything he needed was in our hugs – the comfort of family. We still love him; we still appreciate him, job or not.

After a long while, we break the hug and sit to talk as a family. My dad and mom decide that they will be going job hunting from tomorrow. And as of right now, we have to do as much saving as we can until we know one of my parents have a job that will cover everything we need. We all understand that this will be a rough season, which sucks because they may end up not able to afford the Volleyball tournament uniforms for me, and the meals too, which is a total of \$90. So, I decided to take one for the family and QUIT the team I just joined! But I didn't say anything to my parents about my decision. I'll do it on Friday after school, so I don't have to stick around to receive

any nasty looks from my soon-to-be ex-teammates.

I take both my parents hands and suggest we pray, and all three of us go down on our knees to pray, after which I pick up my school bag and quietly go up to my room. I have a lot of thinking and praying to do on my own.

8

The Unexpected

I wake up Thursday morning and go down to check on my parents – just to be sure they’re good, but none of them is in the house, then I see a note for me on the kitchen table saying they are out on their job search. With that, it only leaves me with one thing – the BUS!! Henceforth, I know I have to wake up earlier than usual because the bus comes to my bus-stop at 6:30am, but it can be unpredictable; you never know what time it decides to show up each day, so it’s better to be early. I have to hurry now to catch the bus if I must make it to school today;

I look at the kitchen clock and see I’m already running late. So, I rush a shower, get dressed and race out of the house without eating breakfast or packing my lunch.

At the bus-stop, I call my dad, just to let him know that everything is fine and that I’m ready and out of the house to go catch the bus to school. I end the call saying, “I love you, dad.” Right after the call, the bus arrives, and I get in. There was dirt on the floor of the bus; I’m pretty sure I saw gum under one of the seats. All the kids were shouting and yelling; I was sure that my ear drums were going to explode. I take a seat beside a girl who was smacking gum in her mouth and blasting loud music from her phone. The 11th and 12th grade boys kept cursing like that’s the only language they know. I know I’m not seeing things because I just saw the bus driver give me a smirk that said, “*You signed up for this, don’t ever take the bus again*”. The girl beside me that was blasting music is now snoring. How can you snore in this

gorilla cage? I wanted this torture to be over, but when I looked at my phone, it's only been a minute since I got on the bus.

"I can't do this," I whisper to myself, remembering all those times I had gotten mad at my parents for saying the bus isn't good for me. Now, I know – **THIS BUS ISN'T GOOD FOR ANYBODY!** I'm pretty sure the loudness from this bus can cause a health problem! Then I remember that I have headphones in my backpack, I pull them out and start listening to an audiobook, reducing the loudness from a 10 to a 5, and before I know it, we are at my school. I get up before the bus even comes to a full stop and doors open, happy to be getting out of this torture. I run out of the bus as soon the doors swing open, breathe in the fresh air like I've been held captive for a week.

Yeah, I had some eyes on me, but I'm sure that they would do the same if they were trapped in the bus for 20 minutes. Even the very thought of it makes me want to gag. After taking in enough fresh air, I

call my mom and tell her that I'll find a ride home because I can't stand another 20 minutes in that bus. I think I have a phobia for school buses now; I don't even want to look back at the nasty, yellow creature.

I walk into the school, and the principal, Mrs. Aldridge, is at the entrance, "Please follow me, Ms. McDaniels!" And without even waiting for my response, she walks on faster.

My heart drops, everyone knows that if you're called by the principal in that tone she gave me, you're in hot soup! The only thing I could do was hope for the best – maybe she wants to give me the dates for the **ACT THE ART TO STOP THE BULLY** event.

When I walk into the school building, right behind the principal, I could feel many eyes on me. I didn't want to look back because of the fear of seeing one of my friends, or worse, the school bus ready to take me back home. I couldn't be in trouble because I haven't done anything wrong, or at least,

anything that I know of?! When we get to the office, Mrs. Aldridge, already seated behind her desk, asks me to sit down in the empty chair, opposite her.

“So, how are you holding up?” She asks me. I’m so lost right now. Is she confusing me with another person who has the same last name as me? I don’t say anything for a full 40 seconds before she understood that I’m confused.

“Oh; I mean with your parents and everything?”

Now I understand; she’s talking about the whole mayoral race loss situation at home, but I don’t really want to talk about it, so I simply say, “Everything’s good; I’m going to head up to class now, the bell is going to ring soon!”

“Hold your horses, young girl; I’m going to send you over to Mrs. Ridge.”

I freeze; the last time I talked to her was when I was complaining about the situation with Cassie, Lilia, Sadie, and Kendall, and she did nothing about it – *dab!* I already feel frustrated knowing that I’d be in that

room with Mrs. Ridge for hours. I wait in Mrs. Aldridge’s office while she goes to get the counselor ready for me.

“Mrs. Ridge is ready for you; you may go to her now,” she says as she walks back into her office.

I stand up and go across the hall to the counselor’s office.

“Hey Alexis, sit down please,” she points to an empty chair in front of her, “First I’d like to know how that whole situation you came to talk to me about is going.”

“It’s all good now,” I say, wanting to get out of there.

She stares at me, waiting for me to say more.

“Everything’s good; we’re friends now as you may already know. Have a nice day; I’ll be going to class now,” I say gesticulating, hoping it’s enough to please her.

“Sit down, young lady,” she says sharply, “Talk to me about what’s happened at home!” She says again.

“My dad was running for mayor; he got dropped, then he got fired,” I summarized

urgently, getting fed up!

“How do you feel about that?” She asks.

Does she expect me to start crying?! “I’m good, everything will be better soon. The bell just rang, so if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to go to my next class,” I say.

“Watch your tone but have a good day!”

I could hear Mrs. Ridge whispering to herself, “You get paid for this; you get paid for this; breath.”

“Oh well, whatever,” I mutter beneath my breath as I walk out of her office.

As much as I wanted to leave, she wanted me to leave even more; I was completely uncooperative, and maybe Mrs. Aldridge was listening in on us as she made no attempt to call me back to her office.

I walk into Calculus class five minutes late, but I’m not counted late, even though Mrs. Ridge didn’t give me a pass just in case Mrs. Wilson ask for it. Today, we did practice for our exams next week. I’m quite distracted with all that is going on in my life, and not passing this exam can mean

getting held back for a whole year. So, I try to push myself to stay motivated and pay attention to all she’s teaching, and the writings on the board, knowing one slip-up next week, could mean late graduation.

The day goes by slowly until lunchtime when I suddenly remember I still need a ride home today. I ask my friends if their parents or themselves could drive me home – they all still don’t have their permit, so their parents it is. Peter said his mom is picking him up today, and that they could give me a ride.

“Thank you so much, Peter! I am never going on that yellow creature again!” I say, so thankful I have a ride.

“You mean the bus?” Peter asks, questioning my words.

“I’ve seen, heard, and smelt things on that thing that I never want to experience EVER again!” I say once again, getting chills at the thought!

At that point, all the students on my table are staring at me, questioning if there is

something wrong with me; then we all break out into laughter.

At Art, I try to finish the mountain landscape we have to turn in by tomorrow. I have one last step, but I would have time tomorrow to finish. At the close of school, I meet up with Peter in the car rider line, and his mom picks us up.

“Good Afternoon, ma’am; I’m Alexis,” I greet his mom and introduce myself.

“Good Afternoon to you too. Please give me your address to put in the GPS, so we can drop you off.”

I give Mrs. Watkins, Peter’s mom, my address, and we start the drive to my house. It turns out Peter lives on the street right after mine – a walking distance from each other, and we never knew. Mrs. Watkins then tells me that I can ride with them to and from school for as long as I need. *Phew!* I’m grateful for that, and I thank her profusely. When we get to my house, I pull out my keys and say thank you again to Peter and his mom. I enter the house and call my

mom, but it goes straight to voicemail; I leave her a message, “*I got dropped off at home, call me back when you can.*”

I go to the kitchen to wash my hands and grab something to eat; I’m completely famished because I didn’t eat breakfast, and I also did not take lunch to school today. Though Xavier shared his lunch with me; it was hardly enough for both of us. I make grilled cheese and cut up some strawberries. I eat while watching a TV show. Later, I go upstairs feeling exhausted and sleepy, but then I decide to do my homework, laying on the bed.

“Wake up, Alexis!” I hear my dad’s voice, tapping my shoulder gently. I must have fallen asleep at some point, doing my homework.

“It’s time to start cleaning!” He sighs, obviously exhausted at the sound of it.

“Did you or mom get a job, or find a job that may be up for grabs?” I ask wide-eyed, getting off the bed with urgency.

“Yes, we did; I might be a bank accountant. It will take a little bit of time to become official, that’s it. But that’s not why I’m waking you up; it’s time to clean the house as we agreed; we can’t afford a housekeeper for now. We have to save, remember?”

I totally forgot we’d all agreed to clean the house ourselves today since we have to save on some luxuries henceforth until our situation improves. And I have to admit; I thought that my parents might end up working at a Cheesecake Factory or something, so, I’m glad to hear that my dad might be an accountant in the bank.

Well, now its 5:30pm, and we have to start cleaning the house. My dad did the living rooms and two other rooms, my mom did the kitchen and the master bedroom, and I clean all the bathrooms and my room. We work hard until the house is spotless! With our goal met, we go to our rooms to have a shower and change into fresh clothes. Then we come out to the kitchen to eat. My mom had ordered some pizza while we were cleaning; she knew everyone would

be too tired to whip up anything.

After eating two slices, I feel like I’m about to pass out, so I get up and go upstairs to the comfort of my bed. I lay there praying, thanking God for my parents and the volleyball situation for a little while before my eyes start to close. I hear my door creak open, and I open my eyes just a little bit to see my mom and dad come in to give me a kiss on my forehead.

“Love you, sweetheart,” my dad whispers.

“Thank you for putting up with the whole job situation,” my mom adds.

I give them a small grin, too tired to speak. I’m not sure if this means I don’t have to quit the volleyball team anymore, but it’s still going to take a while to get our money back up to normal.

I turn facing the wall and go to back to sleep, forgetting everything; too exhausted from today’s work!

Friday morning, Peter and his mom pick me up for school. I leave the house, questioning myself about the volleyball

team. Should I quit the team, or should I hope for the best and remain in the team? The dream I had last night made everything more confusing for me: *I saw myself in a huge stadium with so many fans; I was standing in line with my other teammates for a tournament, and the national anthem was playing. For some reason, I had my hand on Destiny Myers' shoulder, and I was shaking. I'm not sure what was happening to me, but I knew I was going to make a huge impression in the tournament. I was only a sophomore, but they didn't know what I was capable of. The line-up was a blur. And soon the referee was checking the line-up, and I was pacing back and forth. Then the whistle blew. We had won the serve, and Victoria Stewart was serving. It was a high serve, and they easily popped it up to their setter. Without thinking, I jumped with both of my hands pressing over the net. The next thing I knew, I had blocked their setter. The crowd roared, but I didn't notice – too focused on my play. We won the game with ease.*

Was the dream a pointer that I may have a future in volleyball? I find myself debating my decision to quit and suffering panic attacks at the mere thought of quitting. Quitting the team almost feels like losing a vital part of me. I mean, I did make the A-team, and I've made new friends there too. Well, at least for now they're my friends until they're my enemies once I quit.

Peter pulls me out of my thoughts when he calls my name, telling me to get down from the car; we're already in school. I thank his mom and get out of the car. Peter asks what's on my mind as I seem zoned out, and I said nothing. I really don't want to talk to anyone about it; I think I have a pretty good idea what they will say, and I really don't want to quit the team anyway.

By midday, I began to gradually lean toward staying with the team since we still have a whole month before we have to turn in

our payments for uniform and food. My final decision – stay with the team! It’s an opportunity to get me out there more, and a great chance for scholarships to college. I’m pretty sure that even I can help save some money along with my parents, and at least contribute some of the total sum to help my parents out.

I go for the volleyball team meeting this morning, and everyone gets to know each other some more; we have breakfast together, while we talk.

The day goes on like any other day, and when I finally meet up with Sadie, Lilia, Cassie, Kendall, Sanai, Kaydence, Aubrianna, Xavier, and Peter at lunch, we all decide to meet up next week Friday for the rating of The Dream Team project. We finally got a response from the principal – the date for the ACT THE ART TO STOP THE BULLY event is set for the 28th of next month. We’re all excited and looking forward to it.

At the close of school, Peter and his mom drop me at home; my parents are not yet home. I go upstairs to my room and relax, excited for the weekend. I have a busy schedule – SLEEP!

The weekend passes quickly in a blur with same old routine – sleep, TV, Church, eat, and more sleep.

Monday morning fades in like a scene from good theatre production; this morning isn’t grey, but by soothing lavender and brilliant amber, the colors merge into neon pink and peach. This morning is as assured as the tides and just as unstoppable, yet this singular morning, little did I know, or should I say, little did WE know, that our lives will be turned upside down. Maybe this wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t go to school today. Like never before, this morning, I wish for a few more hours, not to sleep, but to prepare, to think, to reorganize, to prioritize... But my very annoying alarm just had to sound, waking

me up from my vacation in *Bora Bora*. Some alarm you are! But it's Monday; I have to go to school.

School starts out well like any other normal day, students arrive the premises through the walk paths and ride paths, going into the building, hustling and bustling down the corridors, cluttered hallways, noisy chatter. Friends are greeting each other with a hug or a playful punch, haters ignoring each other; everything is normal until a few minutes before the first bell, and after leaving Peter to walk into the building alone, while I catch up with Xavier.

I run up to Xavier, and we're walking together to take the front entrance into the school building; he puts his arm around my shoulder, smiling.

"What are you smiling about?" I ask him.

Still smiling, he says, "I'm so proud of you, Alexis; you know, seeing how much you've evolved. And your commitment to the Dream Team project, using Art, your

"worst nightmare" opened up your mind to finding your passion – Volleyball," and then laughing softly, he adds, "Who would've thought – you and Art?!"

"I know; right!" I say, laughing out loud. Then I stop laughing and add, "Thank you, Xavier; we all did it together. With you, we rose ten steps higher above the challenge."

Then, taking on a more serious look, he continues, "Don't ever lose this person you have become; you can only get better. Remember, each time you're faced with a challenge, stay focused and raise the bar a few more steps higher. There are always people who would support you when you need it; you only got to make a move."

I'm smiling to myself as he's acting all like a big brother. I'm about to respond to him when we both notice a car driving toward the building. With a closer look, one could see the driver isn't focused; he or she seemed dizzy. But before we even had time to think, the car comes lunging through the all-glass front wall, knocking down Xavier and me.

Everything goes black. All I hear are sirens, shouts, crying, and screams. My eyes open a little, and I could see Xavier, knocked out flat on the floor, not moving. I can taste the blood dripping down my face. My eyes are fluttering; I feel myself gradually slipping away, and I faintly hear someone, as if from a faraway place say, “stay with us, the ambulance is almost h...” And just then everything goes blank and black – I was out. I was knocked out.

“Beep...beep...beep,” I keep hearing. My eyes drift open, little by little until they’re fully open. “Where am I?” I wonder; my eyes roving around to find my bearing, but my head is not moving, as if held down by something too strong for me. “Someone, come, quickly; she’s up!” A familiar voice calls.

I look sideways to see my mom in tears, with my dad holding her. I can see they have been praying, as I noticed the Bible beside them. I try to sit up but could not move because my body hurts like crazy.

“Where am I,” I ask them.

My parents rush to my side, “You’re in the hospital, sweetheart,” my dad answers, taking my hand.

Then, the doctors come in and ask them both to step outside, but they are reluctant to leave me.

“She will be okay,” one of the doctors encourage them.

My parents sigh in relief, and then suddenly remember there was someone else, “What about the other kid with her; is he awake?”

“Unfortunately, the other kid involved has fatal injuries. His parents have put him on life support, but we aren’t sure how much longer we can keep him; it’s been two weeks with no improvement.”

I feel a tear run down my cheek. I want to get all these wires off me and run to my best friend, Xavier. He shouldn’t be the

one in the intensive care room; it should be me! If anyone deserves to live, it should be him!

“SAVE MY BEST FRIEND, PLEASE,” I say hysterically. That was the last thing I said before I blacked out, due to the shot the nurse gave me, so the doctors could give me body checkups.

I had no life-changing injuries or long-term damage; I will recover fully, but it’s a different story for Xavier. He took the worst of the hit.

Two Weeks Later, I leave the hospital but not Xavier; he is still on life support. All I can do is stay strong and pray for him. Xavier’s parents come to visit him and confirm with the doctors that my parents and I can visit him. When we visit him, we all break down; I couldn’t stand seeing him like this. Why do I get to live while he is on the verge of death? I feel this pang of guilt in my stomach, seeing my friend like this, basically lifeless, while I’m here, on

my two feet, alive and normal.

“WHY COULDN’T IT BE ME!” I screamed, running out of the room.

I go into the waiting room, weeping, not letting anyone touch me! They say things happen for a reason. Well, what reason is there that just has to take my best friend away?

I hear Xavier’s parents, “We know what we have to do; you can take him off life support.”

On hearing those words, my world feels like it has come to an end. It’s so unreal; my best friend is dead. Xavier is gone. Xavier is no more. No matter how I say it, nothing feels right. I don’t want anything more right now than to see my friend – my brother! I can’t handle any of this... I feel so many different emotions rushing at me all at once: I feel pain, guilt, grief, and madness. I want to cry, scream, and take the place of Xavier, who deserves to live more than anybody else. THAT STUPID CAR!!!! If I could just go back... if only I could just go back

to that Monday morning, I would change everything. I could have pushed him out of the way; we could have run. I double over on the floor.

“I COULD HAVE SAVED HIM! IT’S ALL MY FAULTTTTTTTTT!” I scream hysterically until I black out, and wake up hours later on the hospital bed.

A week later, Saturday 11:00am, I am at the funeral – Xavier, my best friend’s funeral, with everyone in the Dream Team holding each other’s hands. The magnitude of despair in my eyes must be enormous, you’ll think. But no; I am blank; my eyes, empty.

The funeral service was slower than a country bus, taking just as many detours. Everyone had a memory to share – a beautiful memory, a reminder of a bright future suddenly snatched away. His parents arranged the service and must have agreed to every request given them, to keep him in view for as long as possible. By halfway through, some of the students and friends were swaying on

their feet from despair, every one of them with puffed red eyes. Outside, the sun shone brilliantly; its glare was offensively bright and cheerful. It was as if the elements conspired to show me how the world would miss my dearest friend. Everything should be as grey and foggy as my emotions; it should be cold and damp with silent air. But the birds still sang, and the flowers still bloomed – such an irony, yet reminiscent of the wonderful boy he was.

After the burial, I left the graveyard with my mom like a silhouette of myself, wishing I really was as unreal as the shadows so that my insides will not feel so mangled. As I get into the car, the long held back tears began to flow. Xavier is gone, a light has been extinguished in my heart, and were it not for the keen spring wind pushing through my lungs in heaves, forcing me to breathe, there might have been more to bury today than just Xavier.

It's been six weeks now since I got hit by a car, alongside my best friend, Xavier. He's dead and buried. He was so talented; he was so kind and giving; he was always there for everyone, and he was ALWAYS there for ME! The only one who was, when I first came to school! Though my eight friends, Peter, Lilia, Aubrianna, Sadie, Kaydence, Kendall, Sanai, Cassie, and my volleyball team friends are all here now for me, and being very supportive, I still struggle and miss him like crazy, every day. They all tell me Xavier would want me to live, to be happy, to keep playing volleyball and doing everything I love; all the things he would never get the chance to be or do. He didn't even live to see The Dream Team project rated by Cassie; he never lived to find out the T-shirts he made for us was rated highest.

Heartbreakingly, he did not live to present and speak at the Dream Team's ACT THE ART TO STOP THE BULLY event, even though he got us ten steps higher to

achieving that dream. We dedicated the event to him, as we all stood proud in the T-shirts he made for the course, raising his own T-shirt on a balloon mannequin towering above us all, as he always did.

It was a successful event, and he was not there to take the applause and bow with the rest of the team; yet, he was the Dream Team star, just like he was on the football field, in the classroom, and even in death. Because of him, "STOP THE BULLY" is the new mantra on everyone's lips at school.

The driver that killed him and took away his dreams is the worst bully EVER; he was drunk and still felt he had the right to drive without a thought for others.

I miss him so much; I still feel I could have done more to save him from this bully, and I'm still not sure I can handle being here without him.

