



**ICE QUEEN**

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PYRAMID PRESS

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020900593

ISBN: 978-0-9964708-3-4 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-9964708-4-1 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-9964708-5-8 (E-book)

Published by Pyramid Press

Printed in the United States of America

## CHAPTER 1

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### *The Gatekeepers*

I'm having serious second thoughts as my mother's Ford Explorer approaches the Cedar Woods Community Clubhouse. The allure surrounding this must-go-to pool party suddenly evaporates and I clutch my stomach as intense surges of panic stab at my insides like sharp little knives. Drawing a deep calming breath, I try to shake off the doubts rattling around my skull:

*What if no one talks to me? What if they all stand around whispering and laughing at me like in school? My best friend Kayla's warning haunts me: You think they're not going to make your life miserable just because you're at a party?*

The Explorer rolls to a stop in front of the vast green lawn encircling the stately brick clubhouse. My nose twitches from the smell of fresh-cut grass as I crane my head out the window to scan the grounds for the Ice Queen and her Things.

"Honey!" my mom shouts. "I've asked you twice what time you want to be picked up and you keep ignoring me."

I stop chipping at my pink rose nail polish and glance up. "Uh...sorry Mom. Didn't hear you."

"You never seem to hear me. I'm going to meet your father at his office and go out to dinner. Should we get you on the way back?"

"I don't know yet. I'll text you." I slide out of the SUV, brushing the tiny pink flakes off my lap. My eyes dart around the perimeter to see if anyone is watching.

Small clusters of people are scattered here and there,

some near the road, some by the clubhouse entrance, but no one seems to be paying any attention to me.

My fingertips cling to the edge of the car door as I make my final decision. *Should I really do this? What if Kayla's right?*

I push out a deep breath, then swing the door closed.

"Just make sure it's before midnight," my mom yells through the open window. "Your father's been working around the clock all week on this huge case and he's exhausted. He doesn't want another late night."

"Okay Mom," I call over my shoulder, adjusting the straps of my new bikini top that slipped out from under my turquoise cami.

At the sound of a high-pitched beep emanating from the bottom of my beach bag, I dig my fingers around until I find my phone. It's a Snapchat from Rachel, my other best friend: "Good luck!"

I immediately send a message back: "Going in now. Am I really stupid?"

"Yes, don't go."

"Need to," I reply.

"You really think Hunter Hartman will be there?"

"Hope so."

"Leave if things get bad."

"Okay."

I slip the phone back into my bag and continue up the long path. If I get to talk to Hunter Hartman this will all be worth it. We're in the same psychology class and he always says hello, but we've never actually had a conversation. He sits with his people on the far side of the room by the windows, and I spend every class trying not to stare at those incredible light green eyes and muscular arms.

The knots in my stomach tighten and travel up to my

throat as I near the front gate. I stop before I cross through, my legs feeling like heavy tree stumps, the tips of the knives in my gut growing sharper.

I give myself a pep talk: *I can fit in here, just like everybody else. There's nothing wrong with me. No matter what happens don't cry...not in front of them.*

As I take a baby step toward the main entrance, an animated voice bellows. "Blair! I'm so glad you came. It's great to see you!"

Mrs. Levine rushes over and plants a warm, welcoming kiss on my cheek, her dark ponytail grazing my bare shoulder. I know I got invited to this party because of her, and unlike her saccharine-sweet daughter Alyssa—who my friends and I call Splenda—she's genuinely excited whenever she sees me.

"Great to see you too," I say.

"Are you all ready for finals next week?" she asks. "I told Alyssa that after tonight she has to study every minute. She has physics and pre-calculus on Monday and English on Tuesday. What about you?"

"I have only one on Monday, but the rest of the week is going to be horrible."

Mrs. Levine pats my upper arm, her cherry-red lips extending into a smile. "Oh, you don't have to worry, you're such a good student. I always see your name on the honor roll. Alyssa, on the other hand—"

"Well, one more week and we're all free," I break in, trying to change topics.

Thankfully, she follows my lead. "Your mother said you're lifeguarding again this summer."

I nod, discreetly looking past her to see who's already there. She keeps talking, gesticulating with her hands, waving them back and forth in front of my face.

“That’s wonderful that you’re making some money. Alyssa’s going to that performing arts camp in Upstate New York again—the one that costs a small fortune. I wish she’d get a job too.”

“I hope you don’t tell her that. She really loves that camp,” I say.

“I always tell her she should be more like you....”

*Uh-oh. You’re only causing me problems.*

I force a polite smile and nod some more as Mrs. Levine drones on, regaling me with stories of her own teenage jobs. I’ve completely stopped listening and am desperately trying to figure out how to escape when another mother interrupts looking for the paper cups.

“Mind if I borrow her?” the petite woman asks me as she places a hand on Mrs. Levine’s forearm. “We need to set up the drinks area.”

*Please take her!*

“No problem,” I say.

Once I’m free, I practically dive through the main gates. But I have no luck. As soon as I step inside, I find myself blockaded by Splenda and her greeting committee—Molly Mullet and BM. These girls are not, and will never be, my friends.

The Mullet is really Molly DiFrancesco, one of the leads in the spring musical. She prances around with her nose tilted upward, like she’s a Broadway star who’s too good to associate with the common folk. Back in sixth-grade science when we learned there was a tropical molly fish, everyone started calling her Molly Mullet. My friends and I shortened it to just Mullet in high school when we got tired of her holier-than-thou attitude. We could’ve called her Bosc since her bottom half has a striking resemblance to a pear, but we went with the fish.

And BM doesn't actually stand for the gross body function. The initials represent the two words that best describe Erin O'Donnell: Big Mouth. The whole school calls her BM. It's because Erin makes herself into a caricature by accentuating her giant lips with deep burgundy lipstick and dark liner. At first glance all you see is this larger-than-life mouth popping out at you like in a 3-D horror flick. And it doesn't help that she's one of the biggest gossipers in the school.

"Oh...you decided to come," Splenda remarks in a cold tone, her embarrassment at seeing me dangling off each word. Of course, if our moms were watching, Splenda would be masquerading as my adoring friend. But there's no need for pretense now.

"You know you don't belong here," BM chimes in.

"You invited me," I retort, smiling as pleasantly as possible at Splenda.

"You weren't supposed to come though. You *know* my mother made me invite you." Splenda turns toward her friends and assumes a defensive air. "It wasn't my fault."

The last thing I want is a confrontation, but what am I supposed to do? I've had it with Splenda's saccharine-sweetness. Now that she's showing off for her friends, the artificial façade is gone and the real Splenda—the nasty, spiteful one—is fully exposed. She may think she's great, but I know everything about this girl, like she wore Pull-ups through fourth grade and was always such a spaz growing up no one ever wanted her on their team in gym class.

I'm not going to let her keep me from this party—I have to say something. The best I can come up with is: "Your mother is so nice. What happened to you?"

"She doesn't know you're such a freak!" Splenda fires back.

There's that "f" word that I hate more than anything. If I could, I'd remove it from the dictionary. My entire body stiffens, and my cheeks start to burn. I can't stop my long-suppressed anger and frustration from bubbling to the surface and spilling out.

"Yeah? You didn't think so when you hid in my house after your nose job," I say. Even though Splenda didn't want anyone to know the real reason for her Christmas-time operation, Mrs. Levine had been straight up with my mom.

Splenda gasps, as if shocked by my accusation. She places her right hand over her heart, like she's saying the Pledge of Allegiance, and loudly announces, "I had a deviated septum. *Everyone* knows that!"

The gloves are off. Why pretend there's anything left to salvage of our fake friendship? "The only thing deviated is your ability to tell the truth!" I retort.

"Are you calling her a liar?" Molly Mullet asks, hands on her wide hips.

I glare at the Mullet. "Was I talking to *you*?"

"I think you should leave now," BM declares with an authoritative edge, folding her thick arms over her humongous chest.

*Is she really telling me to leave before I even walk in?*

I'm speechless at first and don't know how to react. If I let them chase me away, I'll never get to the good people at the party. I hate doing it, but I have to match their rudeness or they'll think I'm weak and afraid and they can just squash me.

I finally recover enough to stammer, "I...I didn't know you could think. I thought your big mouth just moves by itself!"

The Mullet's awful fish face looks like it's about to start spouting out steam instead of water. "Blair, you don't belong



at this party.” She thrusts her right index finger between my eyes as she enunciates each word in a harsh staccato, “There-Is-No-Room-For-Losers-Like-You-Here!”

*Now the “L” word?*

It’s three against one and they’re relentless. I have to stop their attack. Fight fire with fire. “You’re right. There’s no room for me or anybody else here because of your big butt!” I extend out my arms, simulating the immense size of the Mullet’s pear-shaped rear end.

This is obviously not the first time she’s heard a butt joke and she comes right back at me. “At least I have a body and I’m not a pre-pubescent little twig like you!”

I happen to be rather self-conscious about my skinny freckled body, but I try to think of a clever response, spitting something else out that I’d never normally say. “Hey, this little twig broke the school record this year for the fifty-meter backstroke. What have you broken lately? Your kitchen chairs?”

“You’re such a bitch, Blair!” Splenda spews, her face hot crimson.

I know from one look at my former friend that I’ve won this battle and need to get out of here fast. With my head held high I throw Splenda the widest, phoniest grin I can muster and brush past the nasty trio, flicking my wrist in a triumphant wave.

“Well, thanks so much for the invite,” I call over my shoulder.

As I distance myself from the rotten threesome, I can practically feel the icy shards their eyes fire into my back. I don’t need to hear their exact words to know they’re cursing me out big time.

I walk about twenty more yards, stop, breathe deeply, and squeeze my eyes closed. Here I am so worried about the

Ice Queen and her Things when just getting through the front gate was a disaster. Maybe I should skip out back and head to Betty Boo's for Double Fudge Cinnamon Graham Cracker ice cream with my real friends before things get any worse.

## CHAPTER 2

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### *The Party*

I stand on the edge of the expansive stone patio behind the brick clubhouse searching for someone—anyone—I can hang out with, but there are hardly any people here yet. Behind the large rectangular swimming pool the grounds are completely deserted. The clay tennis and basketball courts adjacent to the pool are also empty. I've arrived way too early.

*Now what?*

I feel my pulse accelerate and the stomach knots claw back up. Standing here alone, like I'm on display, only highlights that I'm an unwelcome intruder. I'm fair game for another encounter with Splenda, or worse, the Queen and her Things. I need to do something...fast.

I spot a small group who've started a pick-up game on the sandy volleyball court to the left side of the concrete pool deck. I can't make out any of their faces, but at the moment they seem to be my best bet.

As I approach the net I call out, "Hey, can I play?"

A boy from my Spanish class dressed in orange Hawaiian-flowered swim trunks glances over his shoulder and says, "Sure, go on that side. They can use some help." My eyes follow his pointer finger across the net.

"We really don't need any help," a short girl with glasses on the other side objects. "But if you want, you can play over here."

"Thanks," I say with a smile, grateful to be out of the spotlight.

The players all wait for me to move to an open spot in front of the net before resuming their game. I recognize most of them from school, but to my delight, no one questions my presence at this Class A event. They all just hit the ball over the net and move through their rotation, making me part of the lineup.

After about half an hour of playing, a loud rap song bursts from the clubhouse speakers and it begins to feel more like a party. With Eminem's lyrics hammering the air, we play through the deepening twilight. Several more kids join the game until there are nine players on my side and ten on the other.

Some of my teammates joke around and a few side conversations pop up, but the first time anyone talks to me is when I score four points in a row on my serve. Then a tall girl in the center cheers, "Woo-hoo!" and another in the back row gives me a high five. Other than that, I'm left alone, which is totally fine with me.

When it's too dark to see the ball and we're smacking at shadows, we call it quits. I'm both nervous and excited to re-join the rest of the party. The volleyball games have given me new confidence that I can fit in here, and the once empty grounds are now bustling with partygoers. Maybe Hunter Hartman is here too.

As I follow my teammates back to the main area, I notice that the strong halogen beams radiating off the clubhouse roof illuminate most of the patio and pool but leave the grassy section behind the deep end in total darkness. I derive some comfort in knowing that I can slip away to the back field if I need quick camouflage.

The hip-hop beats pound more intensely as I make my way toward the food and beverage tables lined up under the rear awning of the clubhouse. I'm happy, kind of dance walking

along, almost forgetting where I am, until I have to instantly sober up: The Shape Shifters are on a collision course right for me. There's no way to avoid them.

The Shape Shifters are two awful girls, Meryl and Christina, who transform themselves into whatever will make them popular or look good for college. Starting in middle school, if a girl was having a bat mitzvah, they'd be her new best friends to get invited. When yearbook volunteers were needed, they were suddenly photography buffs so they could buddy up with the cool kids by taking their pictures. They became avid environmentalists when a high school science teacher was looking to start an ecology club, and they were diehard soccer fans when the boys' varsity soccer coach needed stat girls to operate the scoreboard. They just finished a stint as the backstage managers for the spring musical so they could get invites to all the cast parties. *Sickening!*

"Blair!" one of the Shape Shifters says to me, her eyes round with surprise. "Didn't expect to see you here."

I try to match her level of astonishment. "Didn't expect to see you here either!"

The other Shape Shifter jumps in. "Well...we were invited."

"So was I!" I exclaim.

"Uh, who invited you?" the first Shape Shifter has the nerve to ask.

"Sple...Alyssa. Who invited *you*?"

"Same."

I nod. "What a coincidence."

The first Shape Shifter eyeballs the second, then says, "We've gotta go. See ya."

I force my lips into a smile. "Yeah, see ya."

*That was so awkward!*

When I reach the food tables I'm thrilled that they have

two six-foot heroes and some large bowls of macaroni salad, otherwise I'd be eating potato chips and Cheez Doodles for dinner. The amazing smells of the fresh bread, deli meats, and onions practically make me drool.

After I help myself to a healthy wedge of an Italian hero, I slide over to the drinks. As I pour a raspberry iced tea, I glance around to see who else I know and whether I have to watch out for more trouble. Although I haven't spotted Hunter yet, I'm happy that the people around me are busy in their own little groups and no one is paying attention to me.

No one except Thing 2. "Is that a new purse Blair? I didn't know Walmart was having a sale this week," she mocks as she comes from behind, delivering a sharp elbow into my side as she reaches for a diet soda from an ice-filled plastic tub.

I whirl around, relieved that there are no other Things in the immediate vicinity. Thing 2 is alone. I'm very tempted to dump my iced tea over the rotten girl's head as payback for the nasty jab, but I decide not to waste my drink.

She and her group of Things have gotten increasingly meaner over the years and whenever they see me they take aim and fire. The nicest comment a Thing ever made to me was on one winter morning when there was no humidity and my hair actually looked good. The Thing said, "Where's the rat's nest Blair? You must not have had time to put your finger in the socket today."

I never respond to any of their taunts, but at the moment my ribs hurt from the elbow strike and I'm in hyper-defensive mode from the other ugly encounters. My mind is blank at first and I can't think of a fitting comeback, but then I catch a glimpse of her fluorescent lime-green eyeshadow.

"I thought you always knew when Walmart's sales are since that's where you get all your makeup. Maybe you should

hurry over there right now and get some more flattering shades.”

“You’re such a bitch Blair!” Thing 2 wails. “I’m going to call the exterminator to get rid of all the rats!” She storms away, no doubt in search of backup.

Part of me is proud for standing up for myself, but another part regrets sinking to her level. I should’ve just ignored her like always, and not let her see she got to me. My friends and I decided long ago that our best approach to dealing with all the rotten girls was to brush them off, pretending we just didn’t care what they said and they weren’t even worth responding to. Tonight, I’d broken our golden rule, plunging into their meanness right alongside them, and I’m mad at myself for it.

But no time to self-reflect. I need to get out of here fast before the whole swarm of Things comes looking for me.

I slip away to the farthest picnic tables, wandering around for several minutes, struggling to eat while balancing my cup and plate. I don’t dare sit down. If Splenda, the Ice Queen, or Things find me sitting alone in the dark, I’ll be instantly dropped to Class D—the only level worse than mine, reserved for derelicts and drop-outs.

Once I get rid of my plate and can hold the second half of my hero sandwich with one hand, I make a wide circle around the pool deck looking for a friendly face. I come up empty. My phone rings in my bag, and since I have nothing better to do, I answer it.

“Are you there yet?” Kayla shrieks in my ear, her voice brimming with excitement.

“I’m here,” I say, trying to sound more enthusiastic than I feel.

“Tell me everything! Who’s there? Have you talked to anyone? Did you see Hunter?”

“Not yet, but the party’s just picking up now.” I’ll fill her in later on Splenda, Thing 2, and the Shape Shifters.

“So, are the Queen and Things there? Who are you looking at right now?”

It would be so much easier to just FaceTime her so she could see the party for herself, but that would be social suicide. Instead, I report, “Arty the Ass Grabber is chatting with Brad Wallington near the pool steps, and—”

“Is Brad still as inflated as ever?”

“Yup.”

“I guess there’s a reason people call him HGH. He’s either on human growth hormones or he sticks an air pump in his mouth every day and switches it on high.”

I giggle. “He really does look that way.”

“Who else do you see?”

“Bonnie Landau. She’s on a lounge chair stabbing at her phone like she’s in the middle of a fight.”

“Ugh, she’s so annoying. Rachel started calling her Enema this year because she’s in all her classes and she says she sucks up to her teachers so badly she might as well live up their butts.”

That makes me laugh out loud. I’ve seen Enema in action myself.

“Is there anybody good there? You haven’t named one person I’d want to talk to,” Kayla remarks.

I do a three-sixty, but there’s no one I want to talk to either.

*What am I doing here?*

I can’t help asking myself the same old questions that have plagued me on innumerable occasions: What makes these kids think they’re better than me? How did they get to be popular? Do you have to make yourself popular, or do other people make you that way? Can a nice person be



popular, or is being mean a prerequisite?

“Hi, Blair,” a male voice beckons from behind. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Kayla, I’ve gotta go,” I say, whirling around to see who’s actually talking to me.

It’s Lucky Lenny Krazinsky, wearing his usual lopsided grin.

“Why are you surprised?” I ask.

*Is everyone going to give me a hard time tonight?*

“I thought you of all people would be studying every minute this weekend.”

He thinks *I* study all the time? *He’s* the one who’s tied with Rachel for class valedictorian. “What do you mean by *me* of all people?”

“I just meant that you’re one of the few people I know who has as many AP classes and finals as I do next week.”

I roll my eyes and blow out a loud breath. “I’m going to be catatonic by Friday.”

Lucky Lenny chuckles. “Sometimes I wonder how some of the teachers can be so idiotic. Like in physics, how does he expect us to know such an obscene amount of material in such a short time?”

“Or US history,” I add. “There’s going to be three new chapters on the final.”

He adjusts his wiry glasses and slants his neck. “Have you found *anyone* who understands those calc problems in Chapter Twenty?”

I shake my head.

Although Lucky Lenny isn’t very appealing to look at—with his stringy hair and pointy features—he’s non-judgmental and easy to talk to. Basically, a welcome relief from the earlier hostility I’ve encountered.

Still, Lenny is about as uncool as you can get. My friends

and I know without a doubt that he would never be allowed anywhere near a Class A party if he didn't let the Things cheat off him in school. That's one of the reasons we call him Lucky. The other is that the scrawny little guy is a natural-born long-distance runner. In the fall he won the state championship in boys' cross-country track.

We chat it up for about fifteen minutes—long enough for me to finish my sandwich and check out the action in the pool. The Ice Queen and her Things are all flitting around the shallow end, surrounded by oodles of adoring guys, everyone giggling and flirting like mad. The girls all sport skimpy bikini tops with their long hair swept back in matching ponytails.

*Nauseating.*

Why would I even think the abominable group might not be here? It would be like Brie Larson or Jennifer Lawrence missing the Oscars.

The boys are splashing the girls relentlessly now, lunging for their waists, hoisting them in the air then tossing them into the water. High-pitched squeals and girly cries for help pierce my eardrums. Splenda and the Mullet jump into the Queen's cauldron to aid the "helpless" females and immediately begin flailing their arms and screeching the same sickening way. The Shape Shifters are in there too, of course, but what really turns my stomach is seeing Shape Shifter Meryl try to climb onto Hunter Hartman's shoulders.

I was hoping this party would give me the chance to hang out with Hunter outside of school, but clearly that's not going to happen. He seems pretty content with this annoying girl latched onto his back like a bloodsucking leech.

If I stay here any longer my hero sandwich is going to come back up the wrong way. My girlfriends asked me to

take pictures, but not of this...

“Excuse me Lenny,” I cough out. “I’ve gotta go.”

Then I head as far away from the pool as possible.