

CHAPTER 1

“Okay, okay, next question. Would you rather be a mongoose or a platypus?” Adam Davies, my tall, green-eyed, only slightly goofy Best Friend in the World, gazed up at me intently from my dorm room floor, as if my answer to this question were a matter of earth-shattering importance.

I took a sip of the beer that I’d gotten from the keg down the hall and pretended to mull it over. “A mongoose . . . Well, that’s a bit weaselly for me. A bit too much on the rodent side of things. But honestly, what is a platypus anyway? It has a bill, it lays eggs, but apparently it’s a mammal. I mean, how does that work? What does it do with its life?”

“I’m not really sure.” Adam rolled over so that he was peering under my bed. “God,” he said, “have you ever heard of a broom? You’ve got dust balls the size of cats under here.”

I threw a pillow at him and it landed on his broad chest. “Hey, I’ll be out of here any day now,” I said. “I’m done with cleaning. I leave that to the paid employees of Clarendon University.”

He picked the pillow up and tossed it back but missed me. He threw worse than a girl; he always had. “So a mon-goose, then?” he asked. “You’d be a mongoose? You’d have to fight snakes. That’s what mongooses do. Or is it mongeese?”

We’d been playing the Which Would You Rather Be? game for fifteen years, ever since we were seven years old and swinging next to each other in Jackson Park in Glendale, California, while our babysitters gossiped on the nearby benches, drinking Cokes and eating M&M’s (which they wouldn’t share with us because they claimed the sugar made us crazy. Which it did). You’d think we’d be bored with it, and maybe we were. But it was so familiar that we couldn’t help it. It was something to say when there was nothing else to talk about, for one. Something to calm our nerves before an exam or a blind date—things like that. We just fell into it.

Lately our game seemed to focus not on the animals themselves so much as on what they did. For instance, you wouldn't want to be a dog, because you'd have to do what people told you all day long. You wouldn't want to be an ox, either, because those yoke things looked really heavy. And you wouldn't want to be a monkey, because you'd have to pick bugs out of your friends' hair all the time. And then you'd probably have to eat the bugs so as not to seem rude.

This focus on the animals' activities was because we were seniors in college, and graduation was less than eighteen hours away, and we had our whole lives in front of us. We could be anything. That's what we told ourselves, anyway. We could be mules—forced by other people to do what they told us—or we could be tigers. Needless to say, the latter sounded much better.

Of course right now I'd have to pick platypus, since that was the question. And because I'm not afraid of being weird. I mean, just look at my family. They make an egg-laying mammal that looks like a duck seem completely normal. But I'll get to them in a minute.

Adam frowned at me playfully. "You still haven't answered."

"Well, you got all distracted by the dust cats. Which do *you* think I'd be?" I said.

“Platypus, of course,” he answered instantly, leaning back and propping his feet up on my hamper (which, unsurprisingly, was overflowing with laundry).

See? He knew me, unlike the other 472 friends I have—or that Facebook says I have. The truth was that hardly any of those people meant anything to me, but I wasn’t going to delete them from my friend list. I liked seeing their little profile pictures on my home page, and I enjoyed procrastinating on my English papers by reading their status updates. (“Sarah Adams is walking on sunshine!”; “Brad Adkins is super stoked about his new wheels!”)

Except for one. Jessica Bard. I have to admit, I didn’t like seeing her on my Facebook page. You know Jessica’s type: pretty, smart, supermotivated. Like, she’d stay up all night to study for a test and still show up to class freshly showered, her makeup perfect, with a plate of homemade muffins for the teacher. Barf. Of course she was valedictorian. (And her status updates were the worst. “Jessica Bard got an A! Again!” Double—or make that triple—barf.)

But I hadn’t done badly for myself in school at all. I’d be getting one of those nice little Latin phrases on my diploma: *cum laude*. “With praise.”

So I’d been planning for tomorrow my entire life. I was about to enter the real world, about to get a job where someone paid me to do what I love, which was not, contrary to how it might seem, drinking flat Budweiser from a

keg and trying to figure out what sort of animal I should be. It was *reading*. I wanted, more than anything, to be an editor of big, wonderful books.

I devised the plan years ago. It was called, very cleverly, “the Plan,” and it was pretty straightforward. One: I would do really well in high school. Two: I would get a good scholarship so my parents wouldn’t have to bankrupt themselves sending me to college. Three: I’d limit my games of beer pong and Never Have I Ever at said college so as to keep said scholarship. And most importantly, number four: upon my graduation with a B.A. in English literature, I would land a sweet job at the finest publishing house in Los Angeles (Happerman & Browning, FYI), so I could discover the next Great American Novel and marry Jonathan Micah Miller, who had become a literary prodigy at the tender age of seventeen with his bestselling novel *I Love Everyone and Everyone Loves Me*.

Adam downed the last swig of his beer and sat up. “You want another?” he asked, holding up the cheap plastic cup that said TIJUANA RULES, a souvenir all the way from our freshman-year spring break. (It was my only souvenir from that trip, and for that I was thankful—my friend Julie had returned with a tattoo of Mario Lopez on her butt. Needless to say, she’d been very, very drunk when she picked it out.)

I shook my head. I didn’t want a hangover and bags

under my eyes on graduation day. “No on the beer, thanks. I need my beauty rest.”

“You’d have to sleep a really long time to get beautiful,” Adam countered. “I mean, you’d have to miss commencement and everything.” But then he smiled. Because actually he thought I was pretty, and he told me so every time I needed a little ego boost. Because long auburn hair and blue eyes and good skin and a decent figure are nice, but everyone needs a little reassurance now and then.

“Well, good night,” he said. “See you in the A.M., cum laude.”

Adam let himself out, and I fell back onto my bed. I picked thoughtfully at the Ernest Hemingway poster on the wall and let moments of the past four years flicker in my mind in the form of a nostalgic film strip: getting lost in the library stacks, eating nachos in the dining hall, writing papers on Shakespeare and Faulkner, staying up late with Adam as we gorged ourselves on pizzas we’d microwaved in the dorm kitchen. College had been great. But I was ready for it to be over; I was ready to live on my own. And I was as certain about the Plan as I’d ever been.

Granted, I was eleven when I came up with it, so some of it had changed. For instance, I no longer wanted to marry Jonathan Micah Miller because, in the words of one book critic, “*two* names is enough for the rest of us, you dick.” And he would be twenty-eight by now—no longer

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a prodigy! But anyway, I was three for three on my goals, and, as I prepared to be shot from the cannon of my higher education into the battlefield of the real world, I felt sure number four was a given. I was ready for the world. So the question was: was the world ready for me?