

AS LONG
AS
WE'RE
TOGETHER

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CHAPTER 1

*S*o, we're going to Salinger's right after the volleyball game? I'm just about to hit send in the group chat when I realize my bio teacher has paused midsentence to stare at me.

"All of you. Phones, now," Mrs. Simion says, stalking toward the second row, where my three best friends and I sit. "You can get them back *after* class."

"Has anyone ever told you that auburn's for sure the hair color for you?" I say sweetly. This is the second time today Mrs. S has caught me texting, and I'm not above trying flattery if it means I can keep my phone.

"Novah's right, Mrs. S," Kedijah backs me up, trailing a hand over her maroon hijab. "That shade is giving . . . Met Gala 2015 Rihanna."

Mrs. S is unmoved and takes the phone from my hand. I just have time to catch a glimpse of the text from my big sister:

Ariana: I need you to cover for me tomorrow night

I scoff at the request, then smile quickly at Mrs. Simion so she knows no disrespect was aimed at her.

“Yes, Novah, my wife tells me every day auburn’s my color. And thanks, Kedijah, that’s exactly what I was going for.” Mrs. Simion collects Kedijah’s, Oma’s, and Monae’s phones too, then takes a step toward Hailee, who was trying, oh so discreetly, to slide her phone into the pocket of her jeans.

“You too, Ms. Triplet. Phone.”

Hailee stares at Mrs. S with huge puppy-dog eyes. “Oh, c’mon, Mrs. Simion. This is the third time this week.”

“You really want to remind me of that right now?”

“But I promise I was listening.” She nods at the mitochondria graphic on the board. “You asked the five functions of the mitochondria, and I can tell you they are calcium homeostasis, programmed cell death, production of ATP, stem cell regulation, and, uh . . .” She trails off, looking stumped.

“Regulation of innate immunity,” I chime in, hoping that’s correct.

Hailee shoots me a grateful smile before turning back to Mrs. S. “See? We were *both* paying attention!”

Mrs. Simion shakes her head with exaggerated disappointment. “And here I was *so* close to letting you keep your phone. Welp, maybe next time,” she says, holding her hand out.

I chuckle at Hailee’s pout as she hands over the phone. But I’m rewarded with a smile from her and feel my insides rise. Mrs. S may not have thought that Hailee’s sad attempt to keep her phone was funny, but I do. Hailee’s only been at Hamer High for three months, and I’ve never had the confidence to say more than “Hey” outside of convos about class assignments. I find my eyes glued to the smirk on her full lips now, and I want to say something clever, but the sound of our phones landing in the confiscation drawer at the front of the room makes me cringe, and I snap out of the trance.

I turn forward, scooping my sisterlocks into a ponytail, and mouth “I’ll be there” to my friends. I can see the disbelief on their faces—it’s been ages since I’ve had time to hang out after school—but Mrs. Simion clears her throat, and all eyes turn forward.

“Now, class, please pull out your homework on reproduction and cell division and pass it down.”

I grab what’s supposed to be a finished three-page worksheet and scribble a quick “I’m sorry, please don’t fail me. I’ll have it completed tomorrow” apology out at the bottom.

I would’ve finished it last night if I hadn’t had to help Korey and Dante with their math homework before going over Bailey’s reading-comprehension assignment with her last minute. All Ariana had to do

was what she said she would—come home after volleyball practice to give Miles a bath and put him and Bailey to bed. But she called Mama with some flimsy excuse and wiggled her way out of helping as usual.

“Honey, you got straight As, and you got your Howard acceptance last night. A full volleyball scholarship deserves a break,” I heard Mama say into the receiver in the kitchen as I watched, leaning on the doorframe. Ariana will be milking the full-scholarship thing for a while. And it’s not that I’m not happy for her too. With a family of nine and a “just making it” dog-grooming business, I know this scholarship was a dream come true for my parents. But why does it feel like I have to pay for all of Ari’s failures *and* successes? Why am I the only one ever upset that she constantly bails on us? Especially when Mama and Daddy drilled into us that “family comes first.” Somehow that rule applies to everyone but Ari? She gets great grades and a scholarship but fails at helping with the house, the shop, or the kids, and all of that slack falls on me.

But when Mama waved me over with that bright, hesitant smile and apologetic eyes, I already felt myself giving in. She still had bills to pay and lunches to make. And Daddy was still at Lively Pups, on cleaning duty. The least I could do was not be a huge brat about giving Miles, who’d hidden all his string beans in his underwear, a bath. Even if that meant staying up late to crank

out a two-page paper on the three branches of government and complete my bio assignment.

Except I only finished one of those assignments before I woke up at 4:30 a.m., hunched over my desk, to hear Ariana's fresh snores coming from across our room. At least one of us was well rested.

Thirty minutes after Mrs. S confiscates my phone, I'm stuffing my bio books in my locker when I hear "It's detention if you're late to my class again, Wilkinson" from Mr. Lane, my US History teacher, as he zips down the hall with a green coffee mug in hand. I fully roll my eyes, but he's already turned to greet someone else. He breaks into a grin as Ariana bounds down the hall with half of her volleyball team.

"Can't wait to see the team bring that championship trophy to Hamer tomorrow," he exclaims, raising his hand.

Ari reaches up, meeting his high five, and then separates herself from her friends. I give her a side-eye when she leans on the locker beside mine.

"Can I help you?" I ask through my teeth. I have no clue how my sister became Hamer High royalty, but it's annoying. Mr. Lane only hates me as a student because of how much he adored Ariana. It's the same for a lot of our teachers and schoolmates. I simply don't possess the ability to kiss ass like she does. And because of her, I don't have the time to either.

“Why aren’t you answering my texts?”

“My phone got confiscated in bio. I just got it back.”

She shakes her head. “You got caught on it in class? Do better.”

“You were literally texting me in class when Mrs. Simion took it.”

That superior look I hate settles on her face as she sings, “Yeah, but I didn’t get caught.”

I’m about to walk away when I remember what she wants and smirk. She can find someone else to take her shift at Lively’s tomorrow. “I’m not covering for you.”

Ariana shakes her braids out of her face, giving me an exasperated look. “Novah, you and Zion are so selfish!” she starts. I’m happy to hear our brother refused her request too. Hearing two *nos* in a day must be driving her crazy. I like it. “This is my last senior game. You know how important that is to me.”

“And despite what Mama and Daddy and everyone else has made you believe, other people have things that are important to them too. For example, I’ll be with my friends after the game because I’ve covered shifts for you twice this week already and I’m not doing it again.”

Ari narrows her eyes at me, but I close my locker with a shrug and walk in the opposite direction. She’s at my side before I can blink, probably readying to beg, when I see Hailee walking my way with a textbook clutched to her chest and stop in my tracks.

“I hear everyone’s going to Salinger’s tomorrow night,” she says as she passes. Her voice is light and eager. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah, right after the game,” I say, nodding. I stare at her back as she walks away, my chest filling with the butterflies that were just in my stomach a moment ago.

“What was *that*?” Ari asks, looking confused, before shaking her head. “You know what? I don’t care. Novah, you have to cover for me! Please? I’ll give you—”

I raise a hand, cutting her off midsentence. Usually she’d wear me down . . . or use Mama to guilt me into things, but not this time. I watch Hailee turn a corner and then see Ari pouting. “It’s not happening.” I’d already intended not to let my friends down, but there is no way in hell I’m letting anything come between me and seeing Hailee tomorrow night at Salinger’s.