

TAKING
UP
SPACE

ALYSON GERBER

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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ONE

I SPRINT TOWARD the basket and V-cut to get open, but the player guarding me, number twelve with the pigtail braids, is quick and no matter how hard I push myself, I can't break free.

Ryan dribbles up the court, weaving the ball between her legs. She crosses over left, then right, and dodges her defender before passing the ball to Ines, who's standing on the other side of the three-point line.

I need to get open. I try again—I cut in, sprint out, and manage to make enough space for Ines to hand the ball to me. I drive to the basket, shoot a layup, and score. *Boom. Two points! Yes!*

A few people in the stands cheer. There's a pretty big crowd today. It's normally just parents and siblings, but the girls' JV team and both boys' basketball teams stayed to watch our game, because we're playing our biggest rivals.

Benny is sitting in the front row wearing jeans, a gray hoodie, and his new thick-rimmed glasses that make him look cute and smart at the same time. He smiles at me, and I'm thankful that I'm already sweaty and red, so he can't see that I'm blushing.

Duke pushes his blond hair off his pale face and whispers something to Benny. They laugh. Duke is the kind of boy that everyone agrees is cute. His cuteness is a fact. He's like the chocolate chip cookie of boys. But I like the way Benny looks better. I turn away from them and take a deep breath. I need to focus. I can't get distracted by my crush when I'm trying to win.

I high-five Ryan and Ines and then sprint to the other end of the court. By the time I get there, I'm gasping for air. I never used to heave like this.

The game is tied. But there's still time for us to win, and I know we can. It doesn't matter that the other girls are taller and more athletic. We're a stronger team.

I stay on number twelve as she cuts in and out, and ignore

my achy chest and the cramp on my right side that's probably from not drinking enough water. We all need to play tight defense if we're going to beat this team, and I want to more than anything.

"Ry, screen right," I shout.

She maneuvers fast and dodges the pick.

There's something that happens to me when I'm on the court, when I'm cutting and guarding and working to win—I know for sure I matter, and that I'm important to our team. It's not hard for me to say what I need in basketball, because the rules are clear. Everyone has to speak up to support one another so we can play our best. I never want the game to end.

I don't stand too close to number twelve. I've already fouled three times since Coach Lemon put me in at the start. If I foul two more times, I'm out for the game.

Fouling isn't always a bad thing. It can be. But it happens when you guard close and play aggressively, which I do. Only something feels off again today. It's been like this since basketball season started five weeks ago, like my hands and feet aren't mine. Every time I try to block a shot I end up accidentally bumping into the shooter or stepping into where they're jumping, making it hard for them to land. Number twelve

shouldn't be able to outrun me, but it feels like I can't keep up. I need to get my head in the game.

I'm one of the strongest players on the team. My best friend, Ryan, and I both play hard and crush it on the court. Basketball is my number one favorite thing ever. It's Ryan's too. We've been practicing a lot, after school and on weekends with her older twin brothers, Max and Everett, who are getting college basketball scholarships. They're juniors now, and they already have a bunch of really good offers. All they have to do is commit to a school. Ryan and I both want to play in college one day too.

I shuffle across the court, watching number twelve and listening to my teammates.

When I step back, I drill into someone. My sneakers squeak against the floor, and I barely catch myself from falling over.

I didn't know she was there. No one called out the screen.

The ref blows the whistle and calls a foul on me—another one. One more and I'm out. I look over at Coach Lemon, because I know there's a chance she'll replace me. But she doesn't wave me over. *Everything is fine.*

There are only two minutes left in the game. And we have to win. The more we win, the longer the season lasts and

the more games we get to play, and I need as much basketball as I can get.

The girl I ran over inbounds the ball.

I play tight defense without fouling and make it impossible for number twelve to get near the hoop. My teammates are working as hard as they can too. We get a stop, but when we get the ball back, the other team starts face-guarding us.

It's hard to make space. When Emilia tries to pass to me, number twelve intercepts it and starts up the court with her right hand, and then, *whoop*, switches to her left hand, runs around Emilia, and before I can recover, she goes cross-court to one of her teammates.

Ryan lunges forward seemingly out of nowhere and steals the ball back. She sprints toward their hoop, and before anyone else can catch up to her, she lays it in and scores!

Err. Err. The buzzer goes off.

We won!

“Yes!” I shout.

Ryan runs over and hugs me as hard as she can, then we high-five, low-five, pivot-turn, and fist-bump. It's our BFF-totally-not-bragging-too-much-just-celebrating victory handshake. I can't stop smiling.

“We’re so getting into the Hall of Fame!” She grins.

“You know it,” I say. And even though I feel a little weird about how I played, our team won, and that has to matter more than anything else.

After the game, Mom drives Ryan, Emilia, and me to our house for a sleepover. We usually go to Ryan’s on Fridays, which is the best thing ever, because the Martins have an entire refrigerator in the basement filled with snacks, and in the morning her dad makes fluffy-in-the-middle chocolate chip pancakes from scratch and scrambled eggs with multiple cheeses. Just one time, I wish Mom or Dad would make a big breakfast and that our house would smell like bacon and buttery French toast. But that’s never going to happen.

We couldn’t go to Ryan’s tonight because her parents took her brothers to visit a college in Connecticut. And Emilia isn’t allowed to have friends at her house. So, mine is the only option if we want to hang out, which we obviously do.

I’m still not sure why Emilia’s parents won’t let her have friends over. Her house is way bigger than Ryan’s and mine put together. They probably wouldn’t even notice us. I just feel sort of weird asking her to explain. Emilia doesn’t talk about her family. Not that we sit around talking about our

families or anything, because we definitely don't do that. *Boring.* But it seems different with her, like they're off-limits. I'm not exactly sure, because we're new best friends. Emilia moved to our town outside Boston from Minneapolis at the beginning of the year. On the first day of seventh grade, she sat down next to Ryan and me in homeroom and started talking about the WNBA playoffs, and we clicked, like we were all totally meant to be besties.

Most of the time, it's like Emilia has always been in our group, but right now, it seems like I'm missing important pieces of information about her, which makes me feel like I don't actually know her at all. I guess new best friends are different than best friends you've known your whole life.

Usually, I hate having sleepovers at my house, because the whole time I'm worried my friends will notice how weird Mom is about food or they'll ask for snacks when there aren't any. But I'm excited for tonight, because I already know we won't have that problem. This morning, I gave Mom a shopping list. **Sarah's Sleepover Snacks: 1. Doritos 2. Cheez-Its 3. Oreos 4. Popcorn 5. Potato chips 6. Honey Nut Cheerios 7. Chex 8. Frosted Flakes.**

Mom goes to the grocery store every day. And now she knows exactly what to buy. So, no weird food stuff today.



Once we're at my house, we drop our bags in the den and then go into the kitchen to grab water. We all need to hydrate before we head outside to shoot hoops. My stomach cramps up when I see the groceries on the counter—one bag of Doritos, a box of Chex, almonds, apples, milk, and eggs.

Most of the stuff on my list is missing, and there's no chance Mom already put some food away. The only thing that's ever in our cabinets is coffee, spices, a box of pasta that expired in September, and candy.

I mean, I'm lucky. We have money for food. Not everyone does. I know there are so many kids whose parents would remember to follow their lists but can't always afford to, and that's unfair and hard in a much bigger way than what happens to me. I think maybe I feel extra bad, because I know what it feels like to be hungry at home.

I don't say anything to Mom when she walks back into the kitchen, because I don't want Ryan and Emilia to notice I'm upset. But it doesn't make sense. This time, I wrote down exactly what I wanted. She didn't need to guess or think or remember. I used to just ask Mom for generic categories of food, like chips and cereal. I thought that would be easier than asking her to look for specific brands. But she barely ever bought what I wanted then either. And when I told her I

needed snacks for after practice, because it was hard to wait for dinner, she started serving dinner earlier, which was great, until there was nothing to eat when I got hungry before bed. I've tried everything. But there's never enough food.

I open the fridge and take out three water bottles. There isn't much of anything on the translucent shelves, just a few plain, nonfat yogurts, salad dressing, a shriveled lemon, and what's left of last night's dinner—salmon and vegetables.

Mom always buys exactly what she thinks we need for breakfast and dinner. If she were cooking tonight, there would be fish or chicken and some kind of vegetable. But we're ordering pizza for the sleepover, so there's even less food.

When Dad is here, things are different—less empty. But he's not here.

I close the fridge before my friends have a chance to see.

“What are you girls doing to celebrate your big win?” Mom asks.

“Shooting around,” Ryan says.

Mom smiles and then picks up the milk like she's about to put the carton away.

“I'll meet you outside,” I say to my friends, because I want them to leave before Mom opens the fridge.

“Cool,” Emilia says.

“Is it okay if we take these?” Ryan points to the Doritos on the counter.

“Totally,” I say, like it’s no big deal, and that’s definitely not our only bag.

“Thanks,” she says, taking the chips with her.

I wait until I hear the door close before I turn to Mom and say, “I made you a list.”

“The store didn’t have everything, sweetheart.” She opens the fridge and puts the milk and eggs away. “I got what they had.”

“But you could have bought other snacks, instead of no snacks. It’s just not enough food for a sleepover.” My words come out too loud.

“I’m sorry.” Her eyebrows knit together, like she really doesn’t know how to fix the problem.

It feels good to hear she’s sorry. But it doesn’t actually make this better for me. Snacks aren’t going to magically appear.

“I got us two new books at the library.” Mom changes the subject.

“Agatha Christie?” I ask.

She nods. “I found out about another mystery author I think we’re really going to like. She’s British too. Only new and modern. Sharna Jackson. There’s a short waiting

list for her books at the library. I added our names.”

I smile. “I can’t wait!”

Mom and I both love detective novels. They’re sort of our thing. Well, mysteries were my thing and then Mom got into them too—for me. When I was little, we used to read them out loud before bed. We started with Clubhouse Mysteries, the Boxcar Children, Encyclopedia Brown, and eventually worked our way up to Nancy Drew and Agatha Christie. Somewhere along the way, stories with puzzles and clues and problems to solve became both our favorites. We read two books at the same time and switch off, trading back and forth.

“Peter at the library recommended *The Clocks* and *The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side*. Which one do you want to start with?”

“Who are the detectives?”

“Poirot is in *The Clocks* and Marple is in *The Mirror*.”

“*The Clocks*,” I say.

Mom grins. “I already started reading *The Mirror*.”

“How did you know?” I ask.

She rubs my shoulder. “You always pick Poirot.”

I don’t understand why Mom is so good at getting me books and so bad at getting me food.

I meet my friends outside. It’s warm for January, and we

haven't had any snow yet this year, so Ryan and Emilia don't have to clear off the pavement before they draw lines with chalk.

Ryan opens the chips and starts eating. She's long and lean, like a beanpole, even under her puffy coat.

"You're up first." Emilia passes me the ball.

I stand at the top of the makeshift perimeter. I won the last round of H-O-R-S-E, which means I get to start. I usually win, unless Ryan's brothers decide they want to play too. I don't let myself think too hard. It's going in. I can feel it. I spin, dribble twice—*thump, thump*—shoot, follow through. *Swish*.

"Woo-hoo!" Ryan shouts. "There she is—the real deal Sarah Weber! We're going to take home the championship and make the seventh-grade Hall of Fame."

I force myself to smile. The Hall of Fame is a glass cabinet outside the gym with pictures of all the teams that have won championships. Our picture from last year is there. Ryan's brothers won three seasons in a row, and she's determined to do the same. I am too. Only after the game, I'm sort of scared that can't happen.

"Something's wrong." Emilia looks at me, like she's worried I'm not okay.