

LOUISE O'NEILL

IRISH BOOK AWARDS  
NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

# ONLY EVER YOURS



“Deep, dark and frighteningly  
believable. This story will stay  
with you for a long time.”

—*Marie Claire*

**ONLY  
EVER  
YOURS**

**“In the beginning,  
Man created the new  
women, the eves.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> *Audio Guide to the Rules for Proper female Behavior*, the Original Father

# Chapter 1

**September**

**Ten months until the Ceremony**

The chastities keep asking me why I can't sleep. I am at the maximum permitted dosage of SleepSound, they say, eyes narrowed in suspicious concern.

Are you taking it correctly, freida?

Are you taking it all yourself, freida?

Yes. *Yes*. Now, can I have some more? Please?

No more can be prescribed. Not safely anyway, they say. They warn of muscle spasms. Internal bleeding. The corrosion of vital organs.

But I cannot see these "vital organs" in the mirrors. All I can see are dark circles under my eyes, a gray pallor like a dusting of ashes over my face. The hallmarks of too many nights spent burrowing a hole in my mattress, tossing

and turning, yearning to join the perfectly synchronized breathing of my sisters. I can hear them now, sucking artificial heat into their lungs greedily, oblivious to me, lying in my cot, buzzing like an exposed wire.

*I am a good girl. I am pretty. I am always happy-go-lucky.*

The robotic voice spills down the walls and crawls along the floor, searching for a receptive ear. And we eves are more receptive when sleeping. We are like sponges, absorbing beauty, becoming more and more lovely as we dream. More and more valuable.

Except for me.

Night after night I lie awake, nothing but the Messages to distract me from my clamoring thoughts. chastity-ruth says thinking too much robs you of your beauty. No man will ever want a companion who thinks too much. I do try to be more controlled. I try to shape my mind into nothingness. But when night falls in the dorms the demons stir, their eyes flashing white in the dark, looking for something to feed on.

*I am a good girl. I am appealing to others. I am always agreeable.*

It's the heat; I know it is. It's pumped in at night to detoxify our pores, rolling in waves through the dormitory, molding to my skin. The SleepSound can disguise the fire in my lungs only for so long before I jerk awake, gargling steam. I blink as my cubicle flickers in the subdued light. A single bed with snow-white sheets. A locker crouching beside it, the black paint peeling off in ribbons. It is a small house made of mirrors, every surface papered in glass.

And there I am. And there. And there. I am imprisoned in these walls.

I watch in the mirrored ceiling as I spread my body out like a starfish, bending my knees away from the sticky sheets. My hands hit the clammy mirrored wall behind my head, the black silk nightgown gathering around my waist. I turn onto my right side, my forehead pressed against another mirrored wall, a heavy sigh misting the glass. I etch my fingertips over my high cheekbones, watching as I trace circles around my almond-shaped eyes. My skin feels crepe thin, as if it's slowly dissolving into my bones.

Before us, they counted sheep to help them fall asleep. Before us, there were sheep to count.

I fumble under my pillow for my ePad, its square corners reassuringly solid in my hands. I update my MyFace status, whispering into the screen, "I can't sleep again. Anyone out there awake?" A shiver of satisfaction runs through me as the video-status uploads, as if this somehow proves that I'm real. I exist.

"freida?"

Am I dreaming of her again?

She's like an apparition, standing in the arched doorway between the corridor and my cubicle, her full-length pink bathrobe glowing in the shadows. She tilts her head, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, waiting for me to say something. I nod and her tense face softens as she creeps into my narrow bed, aligning her body with mine, our limbs interlocking like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. We are reflected in all of the mirrors, splintering into

parallel images, echoed from the ceiling to the walls and back, multiplied over and over again. Her milky-white legs entwined with mine, her white-blond hair bleeding into my dark brown waves.

*isabel.*

“I was afraid you were a chastity.”

“Sorry.”

“If she catches us breaking Isolation, we’ll get in trouble.”

“It will be fine.”

“Still . . .”

“chastity-ruth isn’t on duty,” she replies, reading my mind as always.

We breathe in unison. I rest my head on her shoulder, inhaling lavender, counting heartbeats. She shifts, pulling her arm from under me, and my head drops onto the damp sheets. She inches back, away from me, until she’s hovering on the edge of the bed, one foot planted on the ground for support.

“Good idea. It’s too hot, isn’t it?” I say quickly.

She came in, after all this time, I tell myself. You didn’t ask her to. She came in by herself.

“Hmm.” She taps her toes against the base mirror, her neon-pink nail polish matching her robe. I seem to be the only person affected by the heat.

“So,” I blurt out. “Where have you been hiding?”

“I haven’t been feeling well.”

“I sent you chat-requests . . .” I trail off, thinking of her room, the corrugated steel door rolled to the floor and

bolted down like a portcullis. I've sent her countless messages in the last two months. All unanswered.

"I can't sleep."

"Nervous about tomorrow?"

She shrugs apathetically.

"Have you asked chastity-anne for more SleepSound?"

"It interacts badly with my other meds."

"What are you taking?" I prop myself up on my elbow to look at her. "I'm on the maximum dosage and I haven't had problems."

"gisele broke out in hives when they mixed her dosages. She looked ugly for a week," she says, as if I hadn't spoken, as if I don't exist. She's been doing that a lot lately.

"Can you *stop* kicking the mirror? It's really annoying," I snap, and her foot slows to a still. I feel guilty at the flicker of hurt on her face but somehow satisfied as well, savoring the sense of being seen by her.

"How do you know that about gisele anyway? You haven't been at Organized Recreation or the Nutrition Center all summer," I say, watching our reflection in the ceiling. I'm squashed against the wall, isabel skirting the edge of the mattress, a sliver of white flashing between us. Fat women are ugly. Old women are ugly. But gisele? Honey-hued gisele, with her honey-blond hair, honey-flecked eyes, honey-colored skin? Ugly?

"So that's where she was last weekend," I say when she doesn't answer. "She told us she was in quarantine with suspected flu."



"Hives," isabel repeats. "Hives the size of eggies all over her face."

"Pity it was during vacation," I joke weakly, tasting a bubble of nausea. "Her rankings won't be affected."

"Be nice."

"That's easy for you to say, Miss #1."

"You're #3. And we were all designed equally," she replies mechanically.

"Yes. But some eves were lucky enough to be designed better than their ugly sisters." I hold my breath, waiting for her to disagree with me like she always used to.

"You're not ugly, freida," she sighs. She's tired of me, tired of my constant need for reassurance. "None of us is."

"I am compared to you." I can hear the need stitched through my voice and I hate myself for it. "My skin is so tired looking." I stroke the contours of my face in the ceiling mirror, searching for cracks. "What if my ranking is affected?"

"Better tired looking than fat." Her voice is flat, as if someone has let the air out of her lungs.

I turn to face her, our noses almost touching. I breathe in deeply, as if I could suck in her mesmerizing beauty and steal it from her. I looked up her chart online once, hoping to find an easy formula to copy. PO1 Metallic Silver hair, the computer chanted, #76 Folly Green eyes. Muted gold-colored skin, frosted-pink lips, a few small freckles over a neat nose. *I wish I looked like you. Everything would be easier if I looked like you.* I've been thinking that since I was four years old. "What are you talking about, isabel?"

She rolls onto her back and points at the ceiling, waiting for me to copy her. I watch as she loosens the silk tie around her waist, unwrapping the bathrobe, laying her body bare. A thickening at the waist, a roundness at the thighs. In the dark, my sharp intake of breath sounds like a scream.

“I know.” She pulls the robe closed, hiding her sins.

“Have you tried throwing up?”

“Of course,” she says impatiently. “It doesn’t always work, you know.”

“What about the extra meds you’re taking? Are they helping?”

“They did at the start. They don’t seem to be working anymore,” she whispers.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad.” I want to sound consoling but I don’t know how. That’s always been Isabel’s role in our relationship. “Maybe you won’t be the only one. Lots of eyes gain weight over the holidays.”

We both know this isn’t true. Not this year.

“I don’t understand how it even got this far. Surely someone must have noticed in your weekly weigh-ins? You haven’t even set foot in the Nutrition Center for—”

She holds her finger to her lips to forbid me from speaking further and I swallow my thoughts. Just one more secret between us. I close my eyes but all I can see is her flesh spreading, threatening to engulf her bones.

“I was thinking the other day about your obsession with monkeys.”

isabel's voice is so low that for a moment I wonder if she said anything at all, if my desire for us to be close again is so desperate that I have started imagining her speaking to me.

"Remember?" she says, reaching her hand out to touch mine. "The monkeys?"

"They were a fascinating species."

"I'm sure they were. Did you have to pretend to be one though?"

"I was four!"

"No excuse."

"That's exactly what chastity-ruth said when I fell out of a tree in the garden and broke my leg. What a witch."

She clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles.

"Excuse me. It was extremely painful," I say in indignation, but I'm smiling too.

"I thought she was going to kill you when you had to take your Monday foto with that massive cast," she says, her voice rising.

"Shh, isabel, you'll wake the chastities."

"Who cares?"

"Ah yes, princess isabel never gets in trouble!" I tease, bowing my head in mock salute. "It must be nice to be so special."

I wait for her to laugh, to tease me back, but there's nothing. Her body stiffens beside me. The silence is overwhelming, jamming into my eardrums, and I search blindly for the trail of our conversation.

"But the thing about the monkeys was—"

“I’m tired,” isabel cuts across me and the words fizzle in my throat. I always take it a step too far, chastity-ruth says.

We shift apart in the bed, space yawning between us again.

*I am pretty. I am a good girl. I always do as I am told.*

The Messages continue, as if nothing has changed.

Dawn slowly pours out of the light-lamps, chasing my dreams away. Unfolding my body, I stretch out, claiming the entire mattress. isabel has gone.

I get out of bed, tossing my hair back to scan my face in the mirrored wall. I do this every morning, a part of me hoping that I’ll have been magically transplanted into a different body during the night—isabel’s, or megan’s maybe. That I’ll wake up and be paler, thinner, different. *Better.*

On the wall opposite my bed, an outline of a handprint is etched into the glass in pink plastic. I press my hand to it, feeling heat prickling my palm until the glass coating thins to transparency and I push through, grimacing as what feels like thousands of sticky fibers dissolve against my skin. Inside, mirrors cover every surface again, even the floor. At the front of the room there is a narrow steel changing room with gray rubber tubes curving from the top into the ceiling. I slump in the fuchsia armchair beside the changing room, drumming my fingers on the onyx marble vanity table. A semicircle of coral light bulbs around the mirror casts my face in a rosy glow. I tap the glass and it turns milky, then opaque, dissolving to reveal

a computer screen, a cartoon graphic of a woman laden down with shopping bags popping up.

“Good morning, freida,” the Personal Stylist Program says in a staccato voice. “How are you today?”

“Nervous.”

“I believe that is to be expected on the first day of term,” it says. “How do you want to improve yourself today?”

“A complete redesign would be nice,” I mutter, chewing on my lip until I catch a glimpse in the mirrored wall of how unattractive it looks.

“How do you want to improve yourself today?” None of the PSPs understands sarcasm.

“Maybe something in white? Stream Fashion TV. I need some inspiration after the holidays.”

A catwalk appears on the screen, a long strip of wood suspended midair in a black vacuum, pounded by a torrent of fashion models. They have been designed primarily for this purpose, hundreds of them falling off the factory line with their gaunt bodies and featureless faces.

White looks good with my skin tone. I picture megan in something similar, her complexion turning like spoiled milk, and I feel a brutal thrill.

“Wait. That one’s perfect.” On my VoiceCommand the screen freezes on a model wearing a sheer white round-neck tee embroidered with appliqué lace flowers, a white lace skirt falling in ruffles to knee length.

“Is that okay?”

“Yes,” the PSP concedes. “I will request the appropriate items from the fashion closet now. Step into the changing room.”

The screen snaps back into a mirror. S41 Delicate Iced Chocco hair. #66 Chindia Yellow eyes. *That’s me. That’s what people see when they look at me.* I peel off my nightgown and throw it into a trapdoor set in the wall underneath the vanity table. The changing room opens, beeping loudly until I step in, the steel trap closing like a greedy mouth around me.

“You have gained weight.” The voice fills the room. “You are now 118.8 pounds. I will recommend in your weekly report that you are to take extra kcal blockers until your weight stabilizes between 115 pounds and 118 pounds.”

“Do I have to take more?” I hate the kcal blockers, which always leave me doubled over with stomach cramps. I guess I should be grateful they’ve improved since the early days when exploding colons were reported. “It’s embarrassing.”

“You are the only person who is informed of your medication requirements.”

I snort rudely at this. In theory, yes, our prescriptions are private, but nothing stays that way for long in the School. By breakfast my sisters will know that I’m weak, that I’m greedy, that I can’t control myself. And I thought I had been a good girl last week.

The lasers crackle to life, scraping against the steel walls of the room as the infrared hoop descends from the ceiling, tickling as it inches down my body. The box then

inhales, a whooshing gulp of air, sucking up any dirt and pumping it Underground to be disposed of. The lasers rise again, spraying makeup onto my naked skin, and gently pulling my hair into a bun at the nape of my neck. We are only allowed to use this machine twice a day, in the morning and at bedtime. It's too expensive, chastity-ruth says, so the maintenance of hygiene and makeup is our own responsibility during the day. Within two minutes I'm spat out, today's outfit and matching accessories left in the open trapdoor at the base of the wall. I grab them, the portal disappearing as soon as I do so.

"This doesn't look like it did on the model." I pull at the faded T-shirt, the floral embellishment crumpling beneath my fingers.

"It was as close a match as I could find within the School's fashion closet."

Back in my cubicle, I examine my body from every angle in the mirrored wall, swallowing disgust.

"Let's go."

It's freja at the doorway, her collarbones spiky in a beige crocheted top and canary-yellow skirt.

"I'm ready," I say, pushing my feet into the faux snake-skin slingbacks and falling into line, hurrying to catch up with daria in front of me.

The dorm is bursting with the sound of thirty pairs of high heels scraping against the black-and-white diamond tiles. We march together in silence, the same as we do every morning.

Outside the main entrance of the dormitory, a free-standing fotobooth has been reassembled for the start of the new term. daria forces the rickety sliding door open, her toffee-colored hair artfully disheveled, indigo-blue eyes sparkling with pleasure. Why is she pleased? Did she take the perfect foto? A better foto than mine will be?

“freida.”

freja prods the small of my back with her knobby fingers and I stumble into the empty booth, sliding the door shut behind me.

1. Turn partially to the camera, one foot in front of the other.
2. Weight on the back foot.
3. Left hand on hip.
4. Dazzling smile.

There is a flash of light, my foto uploaded instantly to the School website for the Euro-Zone Inheritants to judge, determining my opening ranking for the year. I'm left in the darkness. I should leave, but just for a moment I want to stay in here. I want to hide, fold into the shadows and become invisible so no one can *look* at me anymore.

I hope the foto was perfect.





# Chapter 2

“Our new classroom,” freja announces, throwing her arms wide open. I waited in the Nutrition Center for her to finish pretending to eat her breakfast so we could go to class together. I didn’t want to walk in alone.

“Wow. It’s so different,” I say dryly. Like last year, and all the years previous to that, the majority of our classes will be held in a large room painted entirely in black, the obsolete windows boarded up with black wooden panes. The wall at the front of the room is sheeted in mirrored glass from floor to ceiling. In front of that is the chastity’s desk, a weathered oak with dull brass knobs, two upstanding glass boxes flanking it, one on either side. Rows of tiered seating and desks with mirrored tops are squeezed into the center of the room, a narrow set of steps covered in threadbare black carpet running up the middle. The summer holidays feel like a distant dream already.

“freida! You look amazing!” cara squeals, her dark blond hair fanning around her face as she rushes to hug me. freja, waiting in vain for a similar compliment, falters for a second, then smiles at me with disproportionate enthusiasm and says, “Totally.”

“No, I don’t,” I reply automatically. We throw our handbags onto the broad windowsill on the far side of the room before climbing up ourselves, the perfect position to observe everyone else coming in.

“Don’t take all day,” cara jokes, brushing dust off her plaid cotton shirt and acid-wash skinny jeans as freja and I struggle in our heels. Once we’re sitting, freja takes out a pocket mirror from her clutch and scans her face, as if she’s afraid it might have disappeared. Snapping it shut with a sigh, she leans back against the wooden board and clucks with disapproval as heidi walks in, her cerise halter-neck dress slashed to the navel. heidi’s head snaps in our direction. After sixteen years in School, we have all developed a sixth sense for judgment.

“freida, you look great.” daria has floated over to join us, her eyes skimming over my body.

“Totally,” freja says, far more convincing now that she has had time to prepare. “I love that skirt.” I dip my head, smiling. “Did isabel pick it out for you?” she continues sweetly, and my smile freezes. “She has *such* good taste.”

“Where is she, by the way?” cara asks, her thick eyebrows knitting together. They have asked me this every day for the past two months. “Her VideoChat has been off all summer.”

“She’s not feeling well,” I reply yet again. I don’t want to admit that I know as little as they do.

The room is filling up. gisele swaggers through the door in a draped navy vest top over snug white jeans, her hips swaying as she walks toward us and links her arm through daria’s. The twins, jessie and liz, follow her, exact replicas in matching turquoise playsuits, moving as if their limbs are attached to one body. Golden-blond hair frames heart-shaped faces, aqua-colored eyes staring vacantly at us.

“Where’s isabel?” gisele asks immediately, setting my teeth on edge. Her skin looks perfect. She’s obviously fully recovered from that allergic reaction.

“Her door was still down this morning,” jessie says. “And locked. I checked.”

“Are you sure?” liz gasps, pretending that she doesn’t already know. If jessie checked the door was locked, then liz was there with her, checking it too. “Our doors are *never* locked.”

“Weird,” they say together, as if the rest of us are unaware of this fact after sixteen years in School.

“She hasn’t been at the Nutrition Center,” freja says. She has complained about the injustice of this at every meal for the past two months.

“I haven’t seen her at the gym either,” gisele offers, placing a hand on her toned stomach. freja, watching her closely, sniffs and draws her shoulders in toward her chest to make her razor-sharp clavicle even more prominent. “And I’ve been at the gym a *lot*.”

“megan’s here,” daria interrupts, running her fingers underneath the frayed edges of her bleached denim cut-offs and pulling them down her tanned muscular thighs. “megan! Over here!” She waves her over to us. “Now *she* really looks amazing.”

I look at her sharply. Is that supposed to mean I don’t?

“megan, you look beautiful!” daria says as megan air-kisses the twins, smacking loudly, her painted red lips inches away from their skin. “Beautiful,” I mutter, wishing I was lying. A thin sheath of sea-green silk clings to her perfect body, a one-shouldered full-length toga. 3.0 Brown Black hair is styled in coiled braids at the crown of her head, #214 Arsenic Green eyes seared into her luminously pale skin. She’s perfect.

“Is there room for one more?” She points at us perched up on the windowsill and smiles again, her eyes watchful as cara, freja and I look at each other in unspoken challenge. Finally freja, the lowest ranked of us three, jumps down, proclaiming she was “tired of sitting there anyway.” megan flicks her hands and cara and I move apart to make space for her. She springs up as easily as if she was wearing sweatpants and sits between us.

“freida!” Her shriek pierces the din of chatter, causing heads at the other side of the classroom to turn around. “Look how dark you are compared to me!” She grabs my arm and presses it against hers. “Isn’t she so dark?”

“Yeah, but your skin is beautiful, megan,” the twins say on cue.

I jerk my arm back and huddle it into my chest, grinning to show how little I care.

“And so smooth,” cara says, rolling up the sleeve of her shirt to compare.

“They should be. I got a full-body wax from chastity-hope in Beauty Therapy yesterday.” A shadow passes over her face. “I don’t understand why we can’t have laser treatment like the eves in the Americas do.”

“Or better yet, be designed without body hair at all, like in the Chindia-Zone,” daria says, fiddling with a hole in her black crepe T-shirt.

“Hmm, yes,” megan replies, her eyes drifting toward liu, sitting with christy at the other side of the room. “I suppose *some* good things have come out of Chindia.”

“It was worth it. You look great,” cara says, and megan tilts her head, accepting this compliment as her due.

“Where is isabel?” Obviously our opinion is not enough. She needs to compare herself with the #1 eve, see how she measures up. “Why wasn’t she at breakfast again?”

“I told you this morning.” And the morning before that, and the morning before that again. “She’s sick.” But megan’s not listening to me, she’s staring at the entrance to the classroom.

“Sick?” she repeats gleefully, and I follow her gaze, my heart sinking when I realize what is causing her such delight. An ill-fitting striped T-shirt tucked into high-waisted flares only emphasize isabel’s weight gain, her tangled hair pulled into a high ponytail away from her makeup-free face. She walks slowly up the central steps, as if the extra pounds of flesh are weighing her down. Heads are turning to stare,

watching as she takes a seat in the back row on the left-hand side, as far away from the rest of us as she can get.

"Clearly being sick hasn't affected her appetite," megan says. "And there we were, worrying about her missing meals."

liz and jessie giggle again, but a bit nervously this time. I've never heard megan say anything overtly nasty about isabel before. I've never heard *anyone* say anything nasty about isabel.

"Quiet down, eves."

At the sound of that voice the three of us jump down from the windowsill. cara and I stumble, grabbing hold of one another for balance, but megan lands gracefully, smirking at our clumsiness. chastity-ruth waits behind the wide oak desk, her hands lost in the cavernous depths of her black robes. The recessed ceiling lights are bouncing off her shaved skull, her ash-gray eyes narrowed at us, traces of prettiness fading away in her fine-boned face. We didn't hear her come in. We never do.

"Take your places. You may choose your own seating arrangements as a privilege of being in 16th year," she says, and we hesitate, fearing a trap.

"Now," she says, her voice chillingly quiet.

The others scramble for position. cara calls me, patting the empty chair next to her in the front row. Before I would have refused without thinking, my natural place being with isabel, but now I don't know what to do. I wait for a second too long and gisele claims the seat, stretching her long legs out in front of her as cara makes an apologetic

face at me. I climb the steps toward isabel, burrowed into the corner of the room.

“Here are your new rankings for the first week of final year.” chastity-ruth taps the board behind her and the mirror dissolves to expose a huge computer screen as she gives VoiceCommands to upload our rankings.

“In first place, we have . . .” chastity-ruth clears her throat twice and takes a sip of water from the plastic cup on her desk—“eve #767.”

megan’s face fills the screen. *megan?* I stare at the foto, her green eyes triumphant, as if she knew her time had finally come. This is the first time in twelve years that isabel hasn’t been #1. I don’t dare to look up. I’m afraid that megan will see my doubt and remember it. I’m afraid that isabel will somehow see *within* me, see my secret regret that I wasn’t the one who finally beat her, the embers of resentment over sixteen years of living in her shadow smoldering inside me.

“In second place . . .”

*Please let it be me. Please let it be me.*

“ . . . eve #701.”

jessie’s foto flashes on the screen and I smile to hide my disappointment.

“At #3 . . .”

liz’s face where mine should be. And I forget how to breathe.

cara is at #4.

“And, dropping two places, I see, we have eve #630 in fifth place.”



My fingers tighten over my kneecaps, boring into the bone. I stare at my reflection in the desktop, willing my face not to betray me. My eFone vibrates against the desk, a foto of megan appearing on the screen. I crouch out of view to listen to the message.

“You look so tired in your foto. I can lend you some of my new concealer if you’d like. It’s supposed to work miracles.”

I straighten up. She’s watching me from the first row, patting imaginary bags under her eyes.

“. . . And, finally, in last place, we have eve #700,” chastity-ruth finishes, agyness coming last as always. The tabletops shimmer to form an updated grid, our faces displayed in order of rank.

“isabel, will you please accompany me to my office?” the chastity says, baring her teeth in a facsimile of a smile. I half stand in my seat to allow isabel to pass, whispering to her, “Good luck.”

She gives no sign of having heard me and fear prickles in my stomach. Is she angry with me? Did she see my momentary regret that it wasn’t me who had beaten her? The chastity waits until isabel reaches her before escorting her out the door, barking back at us, “Make your way to your next class immediately.”

Everyone filters out slowly, chatting loudly about the new rankings, a jumble of words with “*isabel, isabel, isabel*” like a drumbeat underneath the chorus, until it is only our group remaining. I grab my bag and walk down the steps

toward them, pushing past liu, standing at the edge of our seats.

“Bye, liu-liu,” megan says sweetly, wiggling her fingers in farewell. “Didn’t you hear chastity-ruth say to get to your next class?”

“Did you see?” daria bursts out once liu has slouched out, closing the door behind her with a bang. “There are only twenty-nine faces. isabel isn’t ranked.”

I scan the grid on the table before me, tracing a crack in the screen that is scratching into cara’s foto. She’s right. isabel is missing.

“That is *weird*,” liz and jessie chorus, scrunching their faces up.

“How is that even possible?” gisele asks.

“It’s probably because of her weight gain,” daria says.

“But christy gained weight as well,” gisele points out. “I’d say at least 2.4 pounds, if not 2.7.”

I wrap my arms around my stomach, trying to hide that extra pound of flesh with which my body has betrayed me.

“Not as much as isabel,” daria argues, ignoring freja dry-heaving at the mere thought of weight gain. “There is no way they would want anyone in the main Zone seeing that. Standards must be upheld. What will the Inheritants think when they arrive?”

“But who knows when their visits will start? They might not come for months!”

They start arguing among themselves, their voices getting louder and louder. Only megan and I are silent.

“This is boring,” megan snaps, her face pinched with annoyance. “Why are we wasting our time talking about her?”

“Totally,” the twins say, sensing danger.

“Congratulations, megs,” daria says smoothly, draping an arm around megan’s shoulders. “You deserve to be #1. You’ve always been the prettiest in our year.”

“Yeah, the Zone has always been biased toward blondes. It’s stupid,” freja says, delighted at this excuse for her lower ranking, ignoring the twins as they hiss simultaneously.

“Well, I have a feeling that isn’t going to be the case for much longer,” megan says, stretching her arms into the air in a V for victory, shrugging off daria’s arm roughly. daria simpers with embarrassment but she doesn’t say anything, not like she might have before. I feel as if something is shifting beneath my feet, disturbing my balance.

“Welcome to final year, girls.”