



## chapter one

I took a deep breath outside the door to Yearbook class and then sauntered—yes, I actually sauntered—into the room, doing my best imitation of calm, confident me. I was totally nervous. I had butterflies in my brain. But it was good nervous, excited nervous. I was one of the chosen people.

Have you ever had the feeling that you were destined for greatness? Not that you would ever admit that to anybody. But have you ever heard the all-in-your-head voice telling you that you're special, that the whole reason you're even on the planet is not just to annoy and bankrupt your parents, that it's also to do something unique and totally amazing?

I had that feeling as I sauntered into Yearbook on the first day of sophomore year. The soundtrack in my head was indie groovy and super danceable—and that was even before I saw Eric Sobel.

There he was, fiddling with the settings on his camera.

No way. Eric Sobel in Yearbook? Using my awesome power of deductive reasoning, I figured he was a staff photographer this year. Eric Sobel, the star of varsity soccer—*varsity*—sitting here in Yearbook. I was at the championship soccer game last year,

when he was just a freshman, and he scored not one but two goals in overtime. We won the game, and when they gave him the MVP trophy, his eyes got all watery, and he almost cried. I could tell. I had binoculars.

There's something irresistible about a guy who cares enough about something—even if it's soccer—to almost cry.

And just seeing him sitting there in Yearbook cranked the volume on my internal sound system way up. I pictured us studying together after school at Freddie's Pizza, leaning close over our homework, whispering dreamy words like *sine* and *cosine* and *tangent*. He'd laugh, and I'd lovingly push his dirty-blond bangs out of his eyes. Then he'd smile at me all sweet, and tenderly wipe a small piece of tomato-y pepperoni off my cheek.

I knew immediately that this year was going to be the best year of my life.

Then I walked into the side of a desk.

Ugh, embarrassing. OMG. I was such a high school cliché, and it was only third period.

"Take a seat, people," said the Yearbook advisor, Ms. Madrigal. She was perched on a stool behind the podium, starting to take attendance. I turned around in a full circle looking around for an empty seat. But every desk was taken. So I made my way over to the far side of the room and hopped up on the windowsill. Public school budgets—there are never enough desks for everyone.

I hadn't thought of Eric Sobel as a Yearbook type. But I

figured there were a lot of things I didn't know about him—yet. The classroom was filled with student leaders and arty-smarty types, cool brains, people who obviously had intelligent, informed opinions about things like hybrid cars and the best cafeteria food at Ivy League schools, people who went to foreign films on a Friday night and drank too much coffee on purpose. I was in heaven. I was going to learn so much from these people—but more importantly, my seven-point plan was falling perfectly into place.

See, I have this killer seven-point, college-application action plan. It's not like I'm totally neurotic or uptight or anything. I'm just very practical. I've got to have it all worked out if I'm going to be Yearbook editor senior year. I've mapped out the things I need to accomplish over the next three years so I can have a sick college application and lots of options for schools. Life is all about options, right? At least that's what my mom keeps telling me. I want options.

My seven-point action plan is not just about getting straight A's or being the best at soccer or joining Yearbook or running for sophomore class vice president. That would be insanely stupid and boring. My plan is to distinguish myself as a highly motivated, unique individual with quirky, creative habits, diverse goals, and quality personal values.

How did that sound? Did you buy it? Did it sound real? I don't want to lay it on too thick—just thick enough to stick in the acceptance pile at the admissions offices.

I checked out the other sophomores in class, assessing my

competition for Yearbook editor senior year. Yearbook is mostly seniors and juniors with only a handful of sophomores. You have to submit a writing sample and an application to even be considered for the class. Right now, my sophomore competition was Dwight Cashel, a brainiac, but so squeaky clean that he's kind of uptight and annoying. No one would want him to be editor. Then there was Bentley Jones—not only super smart but also a superior human being with so many different talents it pretty much made you sick. I couldn't imagine her wanting to be Yearbook editor when she could be playing the sax in the jazz honor band *and* running the anchor lap for the mile relay team at State *and* choreographing and starring in the spring modern dance show. Eric Sobel? No, he was way too shy to want to be editor. It had to be me. I could so feel it.

Ms. Madrigal had stopped talking. She poked at the air with her index finger, counting each student. “That’s strange,” she said. “Whose name *didn't* I call?”

I looked around the room a little confused, and cautiously raised my hand. And then you'll never guess who else did—Candy Esposito. What was Candy Esposito doing in Yearbook?! She already controlled all the popular categories at school. Wasn't that enough?

“And you are?” asked Ms. Madrigal, looking at me.

“Paisley Hanover.”

“Oh, right. Hanover? Hmmm . . .” She scanned her attendance list, shaking her head. “Candy, I don't see you on my list either. Well.” She looked around the room with an embarrassed

grin. “This is a little awkward, ladies. It seems that this class is over-enrolled by one student. Normally that wouldn’t be a problem, but this is an application and invitation only class. If I let both of you in, that wouldn’t be fair to the many other students who applied.”

A fizzy wad of nervousness ricocheted around my stomach. Was my seven-point master plan already about to collapse into a wimpy, wobbly six-point plan? Eric Sobel looked over at me and kind of smiled. Or did he wince? Oh God, I think he winced.

Ms. Madrigal called the main office on the phone by the door and tried to sort things out. While she talked, Candy Esposito shot me an excited can-you-believe-this? expression, like we were suddenly bonded by this disaster and the best of friends. I gave her an I’m-so-excited-and-confused! look right back. I mean, she’s Candy Esposito. What else could I do? I struggled to hear what Ms. Madrigal was saying, but everyone was being extremely selfish by yakking away.

“Okay people,” Ms. Madrigal said as she hung up the phone. “Listen up! Paisley and Candy,” she said, giving each of us this intense look, “you both submitted excellent writing samples. But apparently there was some clerical error.” She swept her gaze around the room. “Now, I could make an arbitrary decision here, but I have a much better idea.” As she spoke, she weaved her way between the desks trying to make a personal, Oprah-ish connection with everyone. “Being a member of *The Highlander* staff requires collaboration. It requires teamwork, probably more than any other class at this school. It also demands the

ability to work under pressure, often on a deadline with not nearly enough time to do your best work but having to deliver your best work anyway.”

A few seniors laughed. “Don’t remind me,” said this year’s editor, Max Chapin. He was probably going to Stanford.

“There is a space for either Candy or Paisley—but not for both, I am sorry to say.” Ms. Madrigal actually looked sorry, which made me feel kind of hopeful. Candy already had enough wins. “But I don’t think this should be my decision,” she said with a glint in her eye. “I think it should be *your* decision.” She paused, looking around the room.

Oh no. Oh please no.

“Are you in? Are you with me, people?”

The room erupted in hoots and cheers. Oh no, no, no. This was not good. My fizzy wad of nervousness morphed into a bubbling blob of nausea.

“Candy, Paisley, come on up to the front. You’ve got a quick assignment. I want each of you to come up with a headline that best describes you and your personality.”

What?! Clearly, Ms. Madrigal had been watching way too many episodes of *Survivor*. Everyone groaned, except for all of the people who laughed nervously, including me.

“Think pithy, think clever,” she continued. “Don’t be shy, be precise. Have fun with it. And then, in a well-crafted sentence or two, summarize the unique talents and skills that you, and only you, would bring to the Yearbook staff. Then we’ll take an anonymous vote. The person with more votes gets the

last spot in this class. The other person gets to take Drama instead.”

Drama?! No way! I am not getting stuck in Drama with the socially disabled and hair-impaired. I felt my nose break into a sweat.

Candy Esposito is not only a junior and a varsity volleyball and track star, she’s super cute and super popular, and the worst part—she’s super nice! Everyone likes her, everyone! She’s impossibly pretty with these pouty lips and a cute, perfect nose that look like they were sculpted by like Michelangelo. And she has this little scar under her right eye that’s beautiful like body art and somehow makes her even more unique. And she has sparkly brown eyes, and dimples, and long shiny hair the color of sun-kissed honey. (I know that because certain girls are always trying to get their hair to be the color of hers, and the closest color in a box is called sun-kissed honey.) And if that wasn’t horrible enough for me, her father used to be a professional baseball player and now owns a bunch of Burger Kings, so Candy’s always treating her friends to free Whoppers and inviting them to games where they get to sit in her family’s box seats.

I looked around the room searching for allies I could count on. Bentley Jones stared at me, shaking her head. She looked really sorry for me. And she *likes* me.

I’m doomed. I’m so totally doomed. How did my seven-point plan turn into a razor-sharp seven-point weapon that’s about to obliterate me in front of my peers?! I blinked my eyes trying to focus. Get it together, Paisley. You can do it. You can do it!

I realized that if I had any hope of beating Candy Esposito, I would have to swing big and knock one out of the park. My headline would have to dazzle and delight with unexpected wit and genuine confidence. My well-crafted argument would need to seal the deal, letting everyone know how dedicated I was, how much fun I could be, how much I loved hard work and words of all sizes.

I can do this. I can do this, right? Yes! I *can* do this! What does my terminally positive Dad always say? “Visualize success!”

Candy came over to me and shook my hand. “Good luck, Paisley. I know you’ll do great.” She had this big smile on her face. God, why did she have to be so *nice*? After that, I didn’t have any trouble visualizing success. Unfortunately it was Candy’s.

“Okay ladies. Remember, have fun with this. You’ve got three minutes—”

Three minutes?! Now I know why Ms. Madrigal has a reputation for sadistic, subversive forms of student torture.

“—starting right now.”

My butt puckered. I flipped past the doodles of Eric Sobel to a blank page in my notebook. I stared at it. Headline, headline, clever headline describing me. Headline, headline, three-minute deadline? Lifeline! Help! Okay, okay, stay calm. Breathe. Breathe. I looked up in a bug-eyed panic just as Eric Sobel snapped a few pictures.

Oh great.

I started scribbling frantically.

Paisley Hanover-  
 Something clever  
 Something clever  
 Something cleverer  
 Anything!  
 Welcome to Never Clever Land  
 Clever is Crazy Being Polite  
 Paisley Hanover-Crazy in Polite Ways  
 Ugh.  
 Brainy Babe  
 Quirky Turkey  
 Strange but True  
 Hope on a Rope  
 Dork on a Fork  
 Fun for All, All for Fun!  
 A Punny, Funny Friend  
 Funny Weird  
 Funny Ha Ha  
 Funny Weird and Funny Ha Ha  
 More Laughs than a ...  
 More Fun than a Barrel of Sophomores  
 Sophomore of the Good Stuff  
 Sophomore of a Good Thing  
 Paisley-Not Just Those Sperm-Shaped Thingies

Help. Help! Brain freeze. Can't think. Can't think! Dear Uni-

verse, please help me think! I should get up and walk out of here right now.

I looked over at Candy. She was slowly tapping her pen against her naturally soft, pink lips. I could tell she was thinking of something really amusing just from the look on her face. OMG! She's cracking herself up. Crap! Focus. Focus. You can do it! Candy doesn't love words as much as you love words. She loves everyone and everyone loves her, but that is not the same as being a good writer. Right? Focus!

Focused on Fun

Focused, Fun, Fabulous!

Little Miss Funshine

Freckles and Funshine

Freckles Are Fun

One of a Kind

Fun of a Kind

Fun of a Kind Girl

Fun for Your Life

Tickled Think

The Sizzle and the Steak

Functional and Fashionable

Smart, Stylish, and . . . totally stupid!

Shigoogley!

What?

Irony. Irony. Try irony.

Paisley Hanover—I Should Have Overslept!

That's good. That's kind of funny.

No, not so funny.

Paisley Hanover—Write On!

Will Write for Clothes

I'm Dying Here!

Not as Popular as Candy

Will Write for Candy

I'd Vote for Candy

“Okay, time’s up!” called Ms. Madrigal as if that was good thing. I looked up in a panic.

If only I’d known then what I know now, I definitely would have thought of Sidebra\* and Panties, and I would have owned the whole situation with total supreme confidence. But then this would be a very different story.

“Who wants to go first?” Ms. Madrigal asked, looking from me to Candy.

“Paisley does,” said Candy all cheery and nice. Thanks a not, Candy.

I wish I couldn’t remember exactly what happened

#### \*SIDEBRA

Okay, I should probably just explain this right now. No, that’s not a typo—that’s a sidebra. I admit it was a typo the first time. I’m kind of a bad typer. But I’ve learned that sometimes it pays not to use spell-check or look in the mirror before leaving the house. I mean, some of your best stuff can come from your quote-unquote mistakes. Trust me. I know. It’s called a happy accident.

So, what is a sidebra? No, it’s not for women with three boobs. And it’s not like an under-arm-holster-purse-thingie. Although that would be kind of cool. I should doodle that one. Anyway, no, a sidebra is actually one of my best happy accidents. It’s one of the weird things I’m known for at school. But that’s all I’m going to say for now.



next. I mean, isn't your brain supposed to be your friend and protect you from the pain of horrible trauma by forgetting it? My brain is definitely not my friend.

I don't know why I chose the headline I did. It just jumped out at me from the list. And then it popped out of my mouth. I do know that I believed in it at the time. It was sort of clever (I thought) and informative (I guess), and it seemed like me (whoever that is).

There I was, standing in front of the class, clutching my notebook, looking around the room at all of these dying-to-judge-me faces. I tried to visualize success. But all I could visualize was pain. I could feel it in the air. I could feel my pain, I could feel everyone else's pain, and I could feel everyone else feeling my pain. Stop. You can do this. *You can do this!* cheered my all-in-your-head, personal rah-rah. Believe it. Just believe it. Sell it to the back of the room! Then I set my notebook down on the podium and went for it.

I jumped out toward the class like some demented clown. "Paisley Hanover—*Fun of a Kind Girl!*" And then I punctuated my headline with some bizarre manic gesture that could only be described as spastic jazz hands.

A camera snapped like crazy. People laughed. A lot of people laughed, actually, including Ms. Madrigal and Candy. For a second, I thought it would work. I really thought I could win. Some people even took notes when I read my well-crafted supporting sentences.

But I was no match for the tantalizing possibilities of

“Sweet, Nutty, Mouth-Watering Candy” delivered with Candy Esposito’s irresistible blend of cute and confidence. And when she mentioned free Whoppers, onion rings, and golden-brown french fries on every work weekend? It was all over.

How embarrassing. How—ugh! What an idiot. I never had a chance against someone as popular as Candy Esposito. What was I thinking? Everything was over—the assignment, our little competition, the vote, my love connection with Eric Sobel, my shot at being Yearbook editor, my seven-point master plan, my hopes of getting into the college of my dreams, and the best year of my life.

And it was *still* only third period.