

girls acting catty

leslie margolis



BLOOMSBURY

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chapter three

terrible t

When I got to PE on Monday, I sat down on the blacktop for roll call, as usual. We always line up in alphabetical order, which means that I sit right behind Taylor, because my last name is Stevens and hers is Stansfield. Usually I smile at her and she smiles back.

But ever since Halloween, I didn't know how to act. I wasn't going to *not* be nice to Taylor, just because Rachel and my other friends didn't like her. That wouldn't be fair. Sure, Taylor had been pretty mean to Rachel, but Rachel had been mean right back. I didn't know who started the whole thing, and I didn't want to get stuck in the middle or take sides.

Plus, Rachel was wrong. Taylor isn't ugly. She's actually really pretty, with shiny dark hair and wide-set green eyes. Also, she's super outgoing. In chorus, she's always the first one to volunteer to do solos. She wants to be a pop star when she grows up, and she talks about it all the time. Rachel thinks this makes

her obnoxious and snobby, but I think it's okay to have something you really, really want to do.

Rachel should agree. She's the one who wants to be a drummer in a rock band. So how is that any different? I'd asked her about it on Saturday night, but she didn't explain and I didn't push it.

To smile or not to smile—that was the question. Before I could decide, Taylor turned around and looked at me with a blank expression on her face, like she was just noticing I existed for the first time. That seemed a little weird, but then she did something really crazy. She panned my whole body, looking me up and down like I was a secondhand bike she was thinking about buying. When she finally finished she looked disappointed, and frowned like she thought I was used and damaged goods.

“What?” I shouldn't have asked, but the question came out before I could stop myself.

She scrunched her eyebrows together, as if she were thinking pretty hard, which got me all panicky. Like, maybe she found so many things wrong, she didn't even know where to begin.

When her gaze finally met mine she asked, “Your mom won't let you shave your legs yet, huh?”

I looked down at my legs, and she did too. I didn't know what to tell her, or even if I was supposed to give her an answer.

True, my legs are a little furry, but my hair is so pale you can hardly see it. There's no point in

shaving. But what if every other sixth-grade girl at Birchwood already does? Maybe I'm the only hold-out.

I'm not sure if Rachel or my other new friends shaved. We'd never talked about it before. Maybe they all did and thought I was weird and babyish for not doing it. Although they were my friends, and too nice to think of me that way. So maybe they didn't bring up shaving on purpose because they didn't want me to feel bad, which was worse.

I sat there dumbly, looking at my legs. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Each agonizing second felt more like an hour.

Taylor stared at me, waiting for an answer. She didn't even blink.

Finally I said, "No." But even as the word came out of my mouth, I wished I'd had a better response.

Like, "I'm not sure, because I don't want to shave my legs yet, so I never bothered asking. But if I did, my mom would probably say go ahead, because she's cool about stuff like that."

That was the truth. But the truth didn't seem good enough. Of course, neither did the lie. Taylor turned back around and didn't say anything else to me for the rest of class.

Probably, she'd never speak to me again.

At this point, I kind of hoped not.

PE is my last class of the day, but I couldn't go right home when it ended because I had to meet

Tobias and Oliver in the library after school. We're in the same lab group in science, and we'd spent the last two weeks growing mold spores on bread. Now we had to write up a lab report about the experiment. It was due on Wednesday, and these reports counted for a big part of our grade, so we really had to get it right.

I just wished I had long pants to change into. I'd worn shorts to school and tennis shoes with no socks. Now I worried that everyone would notice my hairy calves and think I was a freak. It was entirely possible that I was the only girl at Birchwood Middle School who didn't shave. And until I knew for sure, I'd just have to be careful to keep my legs hidden.

When I got to the library, the boys were already there. Oliver is cute, with dirty blond hair shaved into a buzz cut, green eyes, and skin that's kind of dark because he's half black. He has a nice accent, which I never noticed before, because he hardly talks. But ever since he told me he was born in Jamaica and only moved to California four years ago, I always hear it. Tobias is pale, with shaggy dark hair and glasses and a big nose and pimples that creep from his cheeks down to his neck, and disappear into his shirt collar. Basically, he's not so cute, but he seems to think he is.

Even though I was feeling lousy after the whole Taylor/leg-shaving thing, I stood up tall and

swaggered over to them, throwing my backpack on the table and saying, “Hey, what’s up?”

Then I pulled out my notebook and doled out the work before they had a chance to argue with me. “There are six sections in a lab, so let’s split them up and each do two. Tobias, you can write the introduction and hypothesis. Oliver, you list the materials and supplies and then explain the procedure. And I’ll write up our observations and the conclusion.”

“How come you get to do the conclusion?” asked Tobias.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared. “Do you want to do it? Because I don’t really care.”

“No, whatever. It’s fine.” Tobias pushed up his glasses, bent over his notebook, and started writing.

I had to smile. If someone didn’t know better, they’d think I was pretty bossy, but I’m not. Really. It’s all an act.

At the beginning of the school year, Oliver and Tobias hogged all the lab equipment and they never let me do anything, but then I used some of Pepper’s dog-training lessons on them and things have been okay ever since. For everyone, I think. We finished writing up our lab in less than two hours. Then Oliver’s mom drove us all home.

I was so glad to be back. At least until I walked through the front door and heard loud voices coming from the kitchen.

“This isn’t a big deal,” Dweeble said. “I’m sorry,

but I just assumed that you'd want to change your name when we got married. Traditionally—"

"When have I ever been traditional?" Mom asked. "And what about Annabelle? I can't have a different last name than my own daughter."

"You didn't let me finish. I was about to say that I never thought about that, but—"

"Well, you should have."

"There you go, interrupting me again."

Yikes. I froze, just inside the front door, not wanting to eavesdrop but too curious to move. I'd never heard Mom and Dweeble fight before, and wondered if they were breaking up. They'd have to call off the wedding. Then Mom and I might have to move back to North Hollywood. I'd just gotten used to things here, and I didn't want to move. Not even after the humiliation in gym class.

I opened the door again, and slammed it shut as hard as I could, yelling, "Hi, I'm home!"

They stopped talking immediately, and then a few seconds later my mom came into the entryway with a tight, forced-looking smile on her face. "Hi, Annabelle. Did you finish your book report?"

"It's a lab report," I replied. "Um, can I ask you something?" I needed to talk to her about shaving. Not only because of what happened in PE today, but also because I was curious. I wasn't *only* asking because of Taylor. "It's important," I said, making my way upstairs and hoping she'd come too.

“What is it?” She glanced toward the kitchen, distracted. I wasn’t going to ask her out in the open, when Dweeble could walk in at any second. But she wasn’t following me to my room. So instead, I asked her if I could go over to Rachel’s.

Mom glanced at her watch. “That’s fine, but don’t stay for too long. Ted and I are making lasagna and it should be ready in about an hour.”

I felt like asking her if “making lasagna” was some new term for “yelling at each other,” but I didn’t want her to know I’d heard anything. So instead I said, “Okay.” Then I dropped my backpack off in my room, changed into jeans, and headed across the street.

Jackson answered the door a minute after I knocked, asking, “What do you want?”

For once, I didn’t blame him for being rude. He was probably still mad about Halloween. “Hey, Jackson. I just wanted to see if you needed to borrow my shampoo.”

“Huh?” he asked.

“So you can wash all that rotten egg out of your hair. Remember? Or did Claire hit you too hard and give you amnesia?”

“Very funny,” Jackson grumbled, and tried closing the door in my face.

I held it open. “No, wait. Sorry. I’m just kidding. Is Rachel home?”

Jackson rolled his eyes, but still turned around and yelled for her. “Hey, pizza face!”

I cringed. Poor Rachel. It was bad enough having bad acne, probably, without having some mean older brother making fun of her all the time.

Not that Rachel was going to sit there quietly and take it. “Shut up, egghead,” she said, running downstairs. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why, are you going to tell on me?” Jackson asked, in a fake-whiny voice.

Rachel pushed past him. “Hey, Annabelle. Come on in.”

She grabbed my arm and led me upstairs to her room.

“You are so lucky you’re an only child,” she said, slamming the door so we could have some privacy.

“Except I won’t be for long. Pretty soon I’ll have a stepbrother.”

“But he’s not going to live with you,” said Rachel.

“He is for six weeks,” I said. “Dweeble bought new sheets for the bed in the extra bedroom. In fact, he doesn’t even call it the extra bedroom, anymore. Suddenly it’s Jason’s room. And guess what else? When mini-Dweeb stays with us, I’m going to have to share a bathroom with him.”

“Mini-Dweeb?” she asked.

“That’s his new nickname. It’s easier to say than ‘son of the Dweeb.’”

“Good point.” Rachel nodded. “But I really don’t think you have to worry. Mini-Dweeb is in college, which means he’s too grown up to make fun of you.”

This made sense, but I hadn't come over to Rachel's house to talk about brothers—real or step. "Hey, do you shave your legs?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Rachel. "I started to this summer. How come?"

She sounded so casual about it, I almost regretted bringing it up. But it was too late. I had to know. I took a deep breath and asked, "Does everyone shave their legs? All our friends, I mean."

"Um, I know Emma does, but I don't think Claire and Yumi do. How come?"

"No reason," I said. "I was just wondering." And since she was looking at me kind of funny, I told her about what happened in PE.

Rachel freaked. "I can't believe Taylor said that to you! She's so horrible!"

I nodded. It felt good, having Rachel leap to my defense so quickly. But at the same time, I didn't want to make *too* big a deal out of it.

"The thing is—I'm not positive she said it to be mean. She just sort of asked me, like she was wondering, but I don't know. It was weird . . ."

"Of course she said it to be mean," said Rachel. "That's what she's all about. Other people play instruments, or collect puffy stickers. Taylor's favorite pastime is making people feel bad about themselves. It's, like, a hobby for her. As if she's so perfect. Did you see her jeans today? They probably cost two hundred dollars, because she only wears designer

clothes. But they look terrible. She should not be wearing low riders with her body because when she sat down, her shirt rode up and she had a total muffin top.”

“Muffin top?” I asked.

“It’s when your hips sort of swell and hang out of your jeans, like the top of a muffin.”

I laughed. Sure it was mean, but it was still funny. And anyway, why should I feel bad when Taylor made me feel lousy on purpose?

“Her muffin top shows in her PE clothes too,” I said. “And the other day, her underwear was sticking out of her shorts.”

“No!” yelled Rachel.

“Seriously. They were pink with white stars.”

“Stars?” asked Rachel. “Think she wore them because she’s so convinced she’s gonna be this huge star?”

We both giggled.

“She probably had them showing on purpose,” Rachel said. “You know, to get attention. All her friends are like that. Don’t you hate how they walk around school like they own it? They’re the biggest snobs in the entire sixth grade and, like, proud of it.”

I didn’t know any of Taylor’s friends except for Hannah, who I’d always liked. She and I sat next to each other in French. She’s tall, with big brown eyes and straight, shoulder-length dirty-blond hair that

she constantly tucks and re-tucks behind her ears. Whenever we have to switch papers for grading in French, we choose each other. Last Tuesday, I got a hundred percent and she put a happy face by my score.

Snobby girls do not draw happy faces. It's a fact. "Hannah seems okay," I said.

Rachel groaned. "Hannah is the worst! She pretends like she's all sweet and quiet, but it's just an act. Trust me. If she were nice, she wouldn't be friends with Taylor. Haven't you noticed how she follows her around and does whatever she wants like some clueless, pathetic little puppet?"

I shrugged. "I guess I never really paid attention."

"Well, now that I pointed it out I know you'll notice. And you cannot start shaving now, just because of what Taylor said."

I didn't know when I'd start shaving, but it didn't seem like the kind of thing Rachel should be able to decide for me. I mean, I'm glad she was on my side and everything, but she was acting weird—too angry for something that didn't even happen to her.

"But what if my legs are too hairy? People are noticing, obviously."

"Let's see."

I rolled up my jeans and Rachel leaned closer to inspect my calves. "Your hair is so pale, you can hardly see it."

“That’s what I used to think.”

“You know, once you start shaving you can never stop. Your hair won’t be all soft and smooth like it is now.”

“It won’t?” I rolled my jeans back down and crossed my legs.

Rachel shook her head. “Nope. The razor cuts it at a different angle, so it’ll feel all stubbly. My mom waxes, but waxing looks like torture.”

My only experience with wax involved wax lips, but somehow I doubted that’s what Rachel was talking about. “What’s waxing?” I asked.

“It’s when they brush hot wax on your legs and then cover it with cloth. When the wax cools down it sticks to your hair and then they rip the cloth off really fast and it takes the wax and all your hair with it.”

I gasped. “No!”

“Seriously. It’s totally painful, because it rips the hair out from the follicles,” Rachel explained. “But it lasts longer, for the same reason.”

“It doesn’t take your skin off with it?” I asked.

Rachel shook her head. “Nope. But I’d still never do it. Shaving is much better.”

I didn’t want to admit it out loud, but shaving didn’t seem so much better to me. I know it’s not supposed to hurt, but it still involves running a razor blade up your leg, and I just don’t get how that can’t be painful.

Ever notice how commercials for razor blades always feature some woman shaving in a gigantic tub filled with bubble bath? Well, bubble bath makes me sneeze. So what happens if I sneeze and slip and cut myself with the razor? I'd start to bleed, probably, and blood makes me squeamish. What if I'm bleeding and the sight of it makes me pass out? I could drown in my very own bathtub. That is not a good way to go. Not that there's any good way to go, but drowning in your own bathwater has got to be one of the worst.

I guess Rachel could tell I was stressing, because she said, "You don't need to shave. Just forget about Taylor. I wish we didn't have PE with her. I wish she didn't even go to our school."

"Yeah." I agreed because it was easier, but to be honest, Taylor hadn't ever really bugged me much before. Well, except for today. And on Halloween, I guess.

I wondered why Rachel hated Taylor so much, but that wasn't something I could just ask her straight out.

On my way home, I had this weird thought. Maybe Taylor made me feel bad on purpose just because I was a part of Rachel's crowd. And as for all those times she'd been nice in the past? Maybe she hadn't noticed who my friends were.

Dweeble was just taking the lasagna out of the oven when I walked inside. He and my mom acted

normal for the rest of the night, so either they'd made up or they were really good at faking getting along.

As I got ready for bed, I realized I'd forgotten to ask Rachel not to say anything to our other friends. About the whole Taylor/shaving thing, I mean. I didn't want it to turn into a big deal, nor did I want to advertise that I hadn't started shaving, but it was too late to call her. And by the time I saw her again, she'd already spilled the beans.

At school the next morning I found all my friends huddled around my locker. As soon as I was close enough, Emma said, "I can't believe Taylor said that to you."

I looked from her to Rachel to Claire to Yumi. "What's going on?" I asked, although I already had a pretty good idea.

"I told them how Terrible T made fun of you for not shaving," said Rachel.

"She didn't make fun of me exactly," I said as I worked the combination on my locker. "It was more like, well, more like she just asked me but it was weird."

"No, she did it on purpose," said Rachel. "And that's just like her."

"Rachel's probably right," said Emma. "But don't worry about it."

"Yeah, I don't shave my legs yet," said Claire.

"And neither do I," said Yumi.

“I just started last summer,” said Emma. “But it’s not a big deal.”

I was glad to have everyone on my side—but I still felt self-conscious. I wore jeans to school, and socks with my tennis shoes, even though it was pretty hot out. I told myself I wasn’t hiding my legs. But deep down, I knew the truth. Hopefully my friends wouldn’t make the connection, though. Of course, it would be even worse if Taylor realized it. But what other choice did I have?

“Does her underwear really stick out of her gym shorts every day?” asked Yumi.

“Not every day.” I glanced at Rachel, who looked away. “I never said every day.”

“Still, it’s pretty gross,” said Emma.

“*She’s* gross, so it’s fitting,” Rachel said with a huff. “Sure she thinks she’s all that, but she’s really just a giant muffin top wrapped in designer clothes.”

“Oh, so fierce!” said Claire. Claire had been calling lots of things fierce, ever since she heard the word on *Project Runway*, her favorite show. As far as I could tell, it could mean awesome, nasty, or way harsh, depending on the context.

Just then I noticed Hannah and Taylor walking toward us. Yumi saw them too, and told us all to shush, which we did.

As soon as they passed us by, Claire whispered, “Fierce!” and the rest of us exploded into laughter. We just couldn’t help ourselves.

I guess we were pretty loud because both Hannah and Taylor glanced over their shoulders. Obviously, they knew something was up, but I figured I was safe. No way could Taylor know we were laughing at her.

Still, our eyes met for a brief second and this look of anger flashed over her face. Like somehow she'd figured it out. The thought gave me the chills.

Later on I tried smiling at Taylor in the hallway, like everything was still cool. She just looked away, as if she didn't even know me.

Then when we had to exchange homework in French, Hannah traded papers with Morgan Greely instead of me. I had to switch with Jeremy Lundy, who marked my mistakes with gigantic red x's, leaving my paper a huge mess even though I'd only gotten two answers wrong.

I felt nervous walking into chorus, but I told myself there wasn't any need to. No way could Taylor and Hannah suddenly not like me just because they assumed my friends and I were laughing at them. Okay, true, we were. But they had no way of knowing that. They couldn't have heard our conversation or anything.

Still, as soon as I headed to my seat, Hannah and Taylor looked at each other and laughed. Then when I glanced at them they grinned, but in this evil "we know something you don't know" kind of way.

An ice-cold, icky feeling spread through me.

Obviously Hannah and Taylor had been talking about me. But were they saying something about my legs? Or my friends? Or worse?

Half of me was dying to know.

And the other half was scared to find out.