

“Yo, Johnson,” Tanith approaches me with a smirk. Shiloh is right behind her, sucking on a slice of watermelon. It’s been a joke between Sasha and me to call Tanith and Shiloh “The Watermelon Girls” behind their backs. But if they’d hear us say that, we’d be dead meat. They have pink and green highlights in their short, spiked up hair, and three piercings on their left ear. They also have spiky accessories, which freak me out.

“You SEE THIS, Johnson? My wallet is empty, meanin’ I got no lunch money on me. And we want some lunch, right Shiloh?” Shiloh nods while she throws away her watermelon.

“Yeah, Mackenzie. So if you wanna keep your face I suggest you hand over some money,” Shiloh sneers.

Tanith moves closer and I move back a few steps.

“Aw, look, Shiloh. Little Johnson is scared!” she laughs at me. I see Shiloh pop a piece of bubble gum in her mouth. “She think she gonna get away!” I reach into my be-dazzled pink wallet and pull out a five. My hand trembles as I give it to Shiloh before I get hurt. Then I bolt for the door, hearing their laughter after me. I nearly bump into Sasha.

“Mackenzie, what happened?!” Sasha frantically says.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just those watermelon girls again.” I respond. Sasha’s eyes grow wide as I tell her about the incident, and how they took my lunch money. She offers to buy me lunch, but I say I’m not really that hungry. I had a big breakfast so I would have energy for a math test in eighth period.

“Oh my gosh! I should walk home with you today. Sasha slaps as we sit at our table. “Oh, I forgot. I have violin lessons. But I promise I’ll walk home with you tomorrow, that’s for sure.”

“Thanks, Sasha. You’re the greatest best friend ever!” I exclaim. I reach over and hug her.

After the bell rang, my whole day flew by in a blur. I was in a daze until eighth period, where I was completely sure I would ace this test, unless The Watermelon Girls did something.

They looked a little mischievous today. And I was right. I tried to focus, but they kept tossing spitballs at me and it's a wonder they never got caught. I somewhat finished the test, and after the teacher handed them back out I was shocked. I got my first C on a test. I was mad. After class ended, I ran to Sasha, next door in sewing class.

“Sasha! Sasha! You won't believe what happened!”

“What? You look fine to me,” she answered with a smile.

“Thanks, but I got my first C on a math test because of The Watermelon Girls! I couldn't focus because of them!” I practically shouted. Sasha's smile instantly drops. She pushed her purple-rimmed glasses up her nose. I automatically push mine too.

“That sucks! Those girls mess with us all the time. You look like you need a hug!” she said as she rubs my back. She was right. I felt much better. Sasha pulled at my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Be careful when you walk home today. I'll call you the minute I finish violin to make sure you're alive,” she stated with a nervous laugh, “Hopefully Mr. Sanchez will let us out a few minutes early.” And with that, she was off, and I was alone.

I start running. I didn't want them to see me. I began to wheeze and I slow my pace to a walk as I reached the corner. No one is in sight. And I sang. I have been in chorus since the third grade, but stopped in fifth grade. My teacher would always say that I should be a soloist, but with my shyness, that would never happen. I freeze up, my palms start sweating, my knees knock against each other and I just can't stand it. I like to sing alone.

So I just sang an easy song I remember all the words to from fourth grade. I heard a rustling in the bushes behind me and turned to see a squirrel behind me. I keep walking. More rustling, except there were cracking branches, so I thought there were footsteps. I was freaking out in no time. I feel a shy tap on my shoulder and that's when I lost it and screamed.

“Yo, Johnson, calm down!” Tanith exclaimed.

“Ha, we scared her like crazy! Right, Tanith?” Shiloh smirks.

“No, seriously, hold up. This girl is having a seizure!” I take the second puff of my orange inhaler and zip up my fuzzy green jacket. It was getting chilly.

“I’m not having a seizure, Tanith. It’s my medical condition. Asthma is an inflammatory disorder of the airways, which causes attacks of wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and coughing,” I raised my head up high, feeling smart as always. I look at them, and I start wheeze-laughing. They have the same glazed expression as the ones they have in language arts class.

“Whoa. That was too much smartness for my brain to learn,” Tanith mumbled. Shiloh just nodded.

“Anyways, why were you guys following me?” I asked.

“Well, we were planning to scare you but—“

“we hear you singing and it’s just that we—”

“wanted to hear the rest of the song.” Tanith finished for Shiloh.

“So what you’re saying is you actually liked my singing? That has got to be the first compliment from you guys since like, forever!” I said with a sly grin.

Tanith stared at me with another blank face. “Imma have a lil’ talk with Shiloh, ‘k?”

“Okay.” I leaned in a little closer to catch what they’re saying.

“...but she’s a little sixth grade nerd! It will ruin our reputation!”

“Shiloh, it’s our only choice! Amanda dropped out of school and ran to live with her boyfriend, so we don’t have a singer. Johnson, or no more band!”

“Fine, but you gotta tell the girl. I no like her,” Shiloh whispered. Ouch. I walked away as soon as they come closer.

“Look, Johnson, we got some news for you.”

“And some bad news for us,” Shiloh mutters under her breath. Tanith punched her arm. “K, sorry.”

“You can be in our band—“

“But no looking like that!” Shiloh smirked. I looked down. I don’t see what’s wrong. A nicely ironed school shirt tucked into my pressed pants and my polished shoes. I looked pleasant. “For performing, you need to look cool, like us.”

“Really?!” I was still in shock. My eyes got huge. But I tried to shrug it off and act cool. I crossed my arms. “Er, um, I mean, sure, but only on one condition.”

“And that is?” Tanith hands me a grin.

“Stop harassing my friends.”

“Deal.”

“Tanith!” Shiloh muttered.

“Shiloh, we have a gig next Saturday. Final decision.” Shiloh shrugged her shoulders. Tanith spoke again. “So tomorrow, follow us to my house and we’ll play Punk-Barbie on you.”

Still trying to act cool, I said, “Looks like we got a deal.”

But I lost it and exclaimed, “Thanks, you guys!” I hug them, and they actually hug me back. I was not expecting that at all. I even saw Tanith smile for the first time, and with a warmth in her eyes. I couldn’t have been happier.

I have got to tell Sasha about this.