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**MICHELLE QUACH**

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USBORNE



# CHAPTER 1

I share a bedroom with my older sister, Kim, which wouldn't be a problem except she has this habit of making a face whenever I walk in.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” She points her mascara wand at me, the disbelief thick enough to flake off.

“It’s fine.” I push up my sleeves and they fall right back down again. “Don’t worry about it.”

To be fair, what I’m wearing is a big polyester sweater the exact grey of parking-lot asphalt, and it isn’t anybody’s idea of a good look. But I don’t care. In fact, this is basically how I dress every day. I read once that a lot of important people have a “uniform” to save their mental energy for things that actually matter, so I’ve started doing it, too. Kim thinks this is a horrible way to live.

“Isn’t today supposed to be a big deal for you?”

I flop onto my bed with a book, an Eileen Chang novel I found by chance at the library. I like it because the main character is a Chinese girl who’s smart but a bit prickly,

which is a combination the world could really use more of. Just a personal opinion, of course.

“Well?” Kim asks, after I’ve turned a page.

I bite into the chewy flour of my Cantonese-style sachima, which is sweet and sticky, like a Rice Krispies treat without the marshmallows. Then, because I can sense Kim’s impatience practically forming condensation on my silence, I take a long sip of tea and turn another page.

“Sure,” I agree. “It’s a big deal.”

Today is the day that the staff of the *Willoughby Bugle*, my high school paper, will select its new editor in chief for next year. It’s a hallowed ritual, occurring around the same time every spring – and this year, being a junior, I finally get to be in the running.

“So, shouldn’t you try to look better?” Kim has switched over to pencilling her eyebrows into the thick, horizontal style of K-drama heroines. “Don’t you want people to vote for you?”

Now, I don’t believe in self-aggrandizing, never have. You’re only as good as your facts, that’s what I like to say, in journalism and in life. Here are mine:

For almost three years, I’ve been the most prolific, hardest-working, most no-nonsense staff member the *Bugle* has ever seen. I can write a quality 750-word article in thirty minutes flat, I pitch half the stories that make

it onto the front page every month, and I'm already the current managing editor – a position they normally give to a senior. So, no, I don't need people on the *Bugle* to vote for me just because I clean up nice. They're going to pick me because I'm the most sensible option. Because literally no one else will do a better job.

And also, as it happens, because there is no one else. I'm running unopposed.

"Since I'm the only candidate, I just need enough votes to be confirmed," I explain, finishing off the last bite of sachima. "It's really more like, you know, a Supreme Court appointment than an election."

Kim is unconvinced. "Do you want me to at least curl your hair or something?"

Sometimes, I swear, my sister's perseverance rivals only her denseness. "The *Bugle* isn't like that, Kim. It's a meritocracy." I crumple the crackly sachima wrapper into a ball. "If I wanted to participate in a farce, I'd be running for student council."

"Well, you did, once."

It's an unexpected prick, sharp and inconsequential like a paper cut. "That was a long time ago."

Kim is only two years older than me, so she used to go to Willoughby, too. Last year, when she was a senior, I thought I'd finally be free of her when she graduated, but then of course she ended up at UC Irvine. "So close!"

Dad said. “You don’t need to stay in the dorms. Waste of money.” So here we are. Like old times.

“It wouldn’t kill you to look prettier, Eliza. I mean, in general.”

I scrunch up my face – one eye squinted, nose wrinkled, tongue lolled out sideways. “You don’t think I’m pretty?” I joke, trying to talk and hold the expression at the same time.

Kim answers like I’ve asked a serious question. “No.”

There goes my amusement, dripping down the side of my neck in a cold trickle. I watch for a moment as she dabs on a coral lip stain, and then, half-heartedly, I lob one more shot: “Don’t buy into the male gaze, Kim.”

But she totally has. See, Kim is one of those girls with the misfortune of thinking she should be pretty. It’s not really her fault: she *is* pretty. She has nice eyes, big Fan Bingbing affairs with the kind of double eyelids you might, if not kill for, certainly consider acquiring under a knife. When we were younger, people would exclaim (usually in Cantonese) about how lovely she was: “Gam leng néuih ā. She could be in the Miss Hong Kong pageant!”

“Why the hell would you want that?” I’d asked once, and Mom had to shush me: “No one’s telling *you* to!”

Mom’s at the door now, waiting to see if I’m ready to go. “*Đi được chưa?*” she asks in Vietnamese. That’s the other language, besides Cantonese, typically heard in our



household. Mandarin, in contrast, only makes an occasional appearance, usually in the form of a wise saying. My family is what Cantonese people call wàh k'uh, or “overseas Chinese”, which essentially means that despite spending three generations in Vietnam, we never quite gave up on being Chinese. Kim and I understand everything, but we, being lazy Americans, often respond in English.

“Yeah, sure,” I say to Mom, as I climb off the bed and start gathering up my books for school.

She takes this opportunity to inspect my outfit. “Are you—”

“Let’s go.” I leap up to barrel past her, books clutched to my chest, backpack still half unzipped. “Bye, Kim!”

Outside, the air is still cool, as if the sun is up but not quite itself yet. The sprinklers have just kicked off, leaving patches of darkened pavement alongside the lawn. As Mom and I trek past the familiar rows of apartments, I breathe in the evaporating mist. It smells like damp concrete and warm mulch – morning in a stucco wasteland.

We’re following the long driveway to our carport when my phone buzzes. The text is from James Jin, the current editor in chief of the *Bugle*:

You might like to know that Len DiMartile  
emailed me last night.

This is random. Len is this half-Japanese, half-white kid on the *Bugle* staff who's been assigned to the News section this month. James and I have never talked about him before.

Me: Why, is he quitting or something?

James: Actually, he's decided to run for editor in chief.

"Eliza, I told you not to wrinkle your forehead so much," says Mom. Our car is a couple of yards ahead of us, and she unlocks it with a disapproving beep. "You want your face to stay that way? Just like pickled cabbage!"

I fall a few steps behind Mom so my eyebrows can rise in peace.

Me: Is he an egotist or a masochist?

James: Aw, come on, Quan. Be a good sport!

"You definitely get it from your dad." Mom is still pontificating on my facial calisthenics. "It's such a bad habit."

I ignore her and get into the passenger seat, drawing the door shut with one hand so I can keep texting with the other.

Me: I'm a perfectly fine sport.

James: Oh yeah? So you're okay with our boy Leonard giving you a run for your money?

Now my forehead really goes to town. Seriously? "Our boy" Leonard just joined the *Bugle* last year. I don't know what he's thinking, pulling this move, but it doesn't change the very obvious fact that he's greener than an apple Jolly Rancher.

Me: I don't care what he does. A boy can dream.



James: Okay, good. Glad to see you're not afraid of a little competition. 😊

"Eliza, are you even listening?" Mom frowns at me as she starts the car.

"Yeah, definitely."

But my shoulders are tensed up with possibility, the way they get when I'm about to clinch a triple-letter score in Scrabble, and I'm busy typing out my response to James:

Bring it on.

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