

Mango Delight

To all the “dramanerds” who give it their all
just because they love it. —F. H.



STERLING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

New York

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CHAPTER 1

Name Shame

It was an average school day. I arrived at my girl Brooklyn Minelli's house, rang the bell, and spent the usual five minutes waiting for her to finish chasing perfection and come outside so we could walk to school together.

Brook and I became friends by accident when we sat next to each other in homeroom on our first day of seventh grade. My family had just moved into the Trueheart Middle School District over the summer to be closer to my father's job. When the teacher took attendance and called out Brooklyn's name, I whispered that my mom was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and we just hit it off, especially when we discovered Brook's father owned the restaurant where Dada was chef. So our being friends was destiny.

When Brook finally met me at the front door, she asked, "Hey, Mango, how's my hair?"

I gave the same answer I gave every morning, "Perfect."

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Then we set off on our five-block walk to school, rehashing last night’s phone conversation—which boy is the cutest; which teacher is the most boring or the most fun; a five-minute “would you rather” session (Would you rather eat a pizza topped with live worms, or shave your head?). Finally, we got around to our greatest passion: the Queen Bee, aka Beyoncé! Brook and I lived for the Beehive. *Did you see what Beyoncé wore in her new video, in concert, on the street, at a photo shoot, in a magazine, on the red carpet, matching with her adorable kids?* We were OBBB-sessed with Bey! I mean, who isn’t?

Brook had long blond hair, and she was always trying to get it to look exactly like Beyoncé’s. (Come to think of it, that’s probably why she kept me waiting every morning.) My hair was nothing like Beyoncé’s; it was just brown, and I wore it in a big Afro puff, easy-peasy. Even though I didn’t look like Bey, Brook said I sang just like her, which was just totally cray-cray. I mean, yeah, I was always singing along to her songs, even the old Destiny’s Child hits, and I knew every lyric and could copy all of her runs *exactly*. My parents gave me a Beyoncé concert DVD last Christmas, and I practically wore it out. I played it over and over, learning all her moves. I even pretended to be Beyoncé in the bathroom mirror, singing my favorite song, “Halo,” while using my hairbrush as a microphone. The bathtub, shower curtain, toothbrushes,

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and shampoo bottles would fade away, and I'd be center stage in a stadium, fans all around me holding up their lighted phones, swaying as I sang the most beautiful ballad ever! LOL.

Anywho, as we arrived at school, we heard *tweet tweety tweet* and cringed. Brook and I looked behind us, and here they came: the Cell-belles, a super-clique of girls who thought they were better than everybody else just because they had cell phones. They constantly posted duck-face photos of themselves online and then immediately texted each other about it to get as many “likes” as possible, as fast as possible. They all had the same ringtone for text messages: *tweet tweety tweet*. I mean come on, how obnoxious is that? Brook rolled her eyes when she heard it and whispered, “*F* for originality.”

The leader slash queen-diva of the Cell-belles, Hailey JoAnne Pinkey, glided up to us, flashed a fake smile, and said, “Good morning, girls.”

I said, “Hi, Hailey Jo.”

The fake smile evaporated faster than a drop of cold water on a hot griddle. I could feel my face morphing into a grimace emoji as she glared, sucking the life out of me like a Harry Potter dementor. “My name is Hailey Joanne—not Hailey Jo, Betty Jo, Bobbie Jo, or Billie Jo. Got it, Tango, Mange-gro, Fango?”

I cleared my nettle-filled throat, “Sorry.”

Brook stepped up, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, “Her name is Mango, by the way.”

“Oh yeah . . . Mango Delight.” Hailey Joanne revived her fake smile. “Like the dessert, right? Sounds delicious. Did your parents make you themselves or just order you off a menu?” The Cell-belles giggled and started texting each other furiously, even though they were standing right next to one another.

As their thumbs went into overdrive, I felt myself melting into a thin puddle of humiliation. Why did my parents do this to me? What were they thinking when they came up with this fruity name destined to torture their only daughter? *Mango Delight Fuller!* I mean, imagine how many ways kids could make fun of a name like mine.

“Hey, Tango All Night!”

“What’s up, Mongo de Fright?”

“Man-Go From My Sight!”

“Hey, it’s Strange-o Uptight!”

The pain goes on and on. Parents should think twice before they come up with names. We aren’t babies forever. One day we’re twelve years old, and there’s lots of mean kids, bullies, and wannabe comedians who live to make fun of kids with names that stick out. If parents considered that, they’d be smart and give their babies normal, everyday names like Chloe, Khalia, or Brooklyn.

Tweet tweety tweet filled the air. The Cell-belles looked at their phones and covered their mouths, pretending to hide their laughter. One of them must have written something nasty about me, because Hailey Joanne turned to her and

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crowed, “Oh no you didn’t! I just can’t, I just can’t even. . . . OMGZ! You are the Queen of Mean!” With that, she turned and strutted into the school, waving her hand in the air like she was testifying in court. Her clique followed after her in a row like ducklings, copying her every move. Ugh!

Brooklyn flipped her hair and said, “Forget about Hateful Jo and her iPhonies. Mango Delight is a beautiful name, and they were just being mean because they think having a cell phone makes them better than everybody who doesn’t have one. Like you. And me.”

It was true; not having a phone did make you feel like a glitch in the eyes of the Terabytes. Brook and I shared the same miserable fate. Both our parents refused to let us have phones until we turn thirteen! My parents were worried about the bullying that happens on social media. *60 Minutes* did a story about it one Sunday, and Mom kept nodding along with the reporter saying, “See? See? This is what we’re trying to protect you from.”

Guess what, Mom, I thought, You don’t have to be on social media to get bullied. You can just stand in front of your school and get bullied for being polite.

Both Brook and I had birthdays in the fall, so thirteen was months away. The months felt like years, because when you were in school, every day felt like a week and every week felt like a whole month. So here we were, both outcasts in a social media–obsessed world, sinking into the quicksand of digital irrelevance.

Brook flipped her hair and kept trying to find the bright side, “Actually, Mango, we’re better off. My mother says kids who get phones too soon stunt their emotional growth. They replace their feelings with emojis. That’s how come they’re so mean and treat girls like you so bad.”

“Girls like me?” I felt myself starting to melt again.

“I mean, nice girls like you. Like us. You know, we’re not flashy like Hateful Jo with her bedazzled zebra-striped phone case. Always bragging about having her very own personal stylist, the best phone, the best clothes, and the best human-hair weave. I mean, please—all of that stuff and she still has a jaw like a pelican!”

I couldn’t help myself; I laughed so hard, I snorted. When it came to throwing shade, Brooklyn was an eclipse.

“Seriously, I’ll pay them back for you at track practice. I’m going to leave Hateful Jo choking on my dust. She will be dominated *and* humiliated. Real talk. Watch me.”

Brook and I shared another obsession, Girls On Track, or GOT, as we called it. We met four times a week after school for an hour and a half of track training, running games, stretching, and sometimes just hanging out and having “girl talk” with Coach Kimble.

At the beginning of the school year, when Brook signed up for Girls On Track for extra-curriculars, I put my name on the list, too, so we could hang out more. We both grew to love GOT so much that we quickly moved up the ladder from “newly friends” to “friendly friends” to “besties,” which

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is short for BFFs, but still means you're Best Friends Forever.

The bell rang. Brook patted me on the shoulder and flipped her hair, and we headed into the building. I didn't feel much better, but at least I was able to scrape myself up from the sidewalk. I wasn't a puddle anymore. And as I imagined Brook sailing across the finish line far ahead of Hateful Jo, a little smile began to tease the corners of my lips. The idea of my bestie grabbing the win to vindicate me. . . . OMGZ! Just the thought of it gave me life!

The day flew by. All I could think about was how Brook was going to avenge my honor at GOT practice. Hateful Jo and I didn't have any classes together. The only time we were together was at GOT practice. The mango pit—that gross feeling that grew in my belly when I was nervous, or when I was watching a scary movie or felt like something bad was about to happen—started to grow heavier as school ended and GOT practice began.

As we were about to enter the girl's locker room, my jaw clenched, and I trembled with a sudden chill. I stopped so suddenly that Brook slammed into my back.

“Hey! What the . . . ?”

“Sorry. I'm freaking out. What if they start laughing and texting about me again?”

“So, what if? Who cares about those iPhones? We'll be the ones laughing when I humiliate the phoniest of them all

on the track. Now you listen to me, Mango Delight Fuller. You can't let those bullies get to you. *'You're a survivor!'*”

Brook knew just how to get through to me: by using one of my favorite Destiny's Child songs. I took a deep breath and let Beyoncé, Kelly, and Michelle sing their courage into me.

Yeah, I *was* a survivor!

While we were warming up on the field, we heard *tweet tweety tweet!* Coach Kimble's hawkish eyes darted around all the girls stretching on the grass, “Whose phone was that?” The phone went *tweet tweety tweet* again, and everyone's eyes shifted to Hateful Jo. Coach Kimble walked over to her with her hand out, “Give it up. No phones allowed at practice.”

Hateful Jo gave a deep sigh and held up her über phone, which she bragged had an app for everything. It was the newest, crispest model, and it could do practically everything but brush her teeth. As Coach Kimble snatched the bedazzled phone, it glistened so bright in the sun that I had to shield my eyes.

Hateful Jo said, “I only have my phone with me so I can listen to my Apps For Laps coach while I warm up.”

Brook and I rolled our eyes at each other. We were so sick of hearing Hateful Jo go on and on about her training app and how, “it's like having my very own personal trainer in my ear pushing me to go faster and harder! Seriously, it's just so crisp!”

Brook called it “Apps For Saps,” but deep down we both

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wished we would hurry up and turn thirteen so we could have our very own personal coaches right in our ears.

Coach Kimble blew her whistle and said, “All right, ladies. Let’s get on the blocks for the four hundred meter.”

Brook said, “Want to hang out tonight?”

“Sure!” I responded. “Can you come over for dinner?”

“Mm-hm. I’ll check with my mother.” We headed for the starting blocks on the track.

I remember the first time I invited Brook to our apartment. It was just two weeks after we started GOT practice, and I was excited to show her Mom’s old college track-and-field trophies, medals, and ribbons. Mom had been on the way to qualifying for the Olympics until she got in a horrible accident and lost her leg. I hadn’t told anyone about Mom’s false leg before Brook—not because I was ashamed or anything, but you really can’t tell she has one because she always wears long pants; and anywho, since she never talked about it, why should I? But now that I had a true bestie and we ran track together and told each other everything, why not?

Brook always said I was born with natural track-and-field talent because of my mom. Still, Brook was a much better runner than me. Actually, Brook and Hateful Jo were the best runners at Trueheart. Brook despised the fact that Hateful Jo was just as good as she was. Their records were tied. Hateful Jo had won just as many sprints as Brook. They were guaranteed to come in first and second place. I was a third or fourth place kind of girl, but I didn’t mind.

Running was fun for me. I did it for the rush that came when I got in the zone. It's like my whole body and even my brain floated way up high above the trees and I could see and feel everything around me, but at the same time, I felt a deep peace and happiness. I guess I got pretty Zen.

I set my feet on the blocks and placed my hands on the asphalt track. I looked over at Brook, who was two lanes over. We shared a quick smile, and I gave her a thumbs-up, happy knowing she was running this race for me. Hateful Jo rolled her eyes and shook her head, like she was saying "Give it up, loser." I looked away and focused on the track. I was not going to let her get in my head.

I'm a survivor. Just as I thought it, the song started playing in my head again. I could feel the beat. My muscles relaxed. I was ready to run!

Coach Kimble blew the whistle and we were off. The beat. The lyrics. Beyoncé's voice. The harmonies with Kelly and Michelle. They were all driving me, pushing me to run harder than I ever had before.

I felt like I was moving so fast, time couldn't catch up to me. I was so focused on the finish line that I didn't even peek to see if Brook was beating Hailey Jo. I powered through the finish, dipping my head just like Coach taught us. I felt great—loose and powerful. I finally turned my head to see if Brook won, when suddenly, Coach Kimble blew the whistle and pointed at me. Had I fouled? Did I take off too soon? Why

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was Coach pointing at me? I looked around; everyone was staring.

“Congratulations on your first victory, Fuller,” Coach said, breaking the silence. “Looks like we have a new star on GOT!”

I had won the four-hundred-meter sprint. For the first time, I had come in first!

CHAPTER 2

Girls Off Track

I threw my fist in the air, leapt off the ground, and yelled. I turned to look for Brook, who I knew would be running to hug and congratulate me. But I was wrong; Brook was walking away. She swiped her towel off a bench and headed for the locker room. Weird to the extreme. I was about to run after her when Hateful Jo came up and gave me a high five.

“Good job, Mango,” she said. “You were flying.”

This surprising acknowledgment triggered the rest of the Cell-belles to do the same. I have to admit, the unexpected props and attention felt really, really good.

Brook was already dressed by the time I made it to the locker room, and things got really suspect on our walk home. Brook was unusually quiet. She limped on and off, saying she must have pulled her hamstring doing Frankenstein kicks during warm-up. That’s why she hadn’t run her best during the four hundred meter. It put a little ding in how great I felt about winning, but she was probably telling the truth. I mean, I had *never* beat her or Hailey Jo before. I explained

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about how I was hearing Destiny's Child's "Survivor" in my head while I was running, but Brook said, "Seriously, Mango, that's silly. Songs don't make you run faster. Hateful Jo and I were just having an off day, that's all."

I got quiet on the rest of the walk home. But that didn't stop me from noticing how Brook's limp would come and go as we made our way down the tree-lined streets of her neighborhood. I was going to make a joke about it but decided against it. I made a crack about Hateful Jo and her Apps For Saps coach, but Brook didn't even pretend to laugh or smile.

When we got to her house, I said, "I'll wait here while you ask your mom."

"Ask my mom what?"

"If you can come over and have dinner at my house?"

Brook kind of squinted at me, flipped her hair, and said, "Uhhhh . . . no, I can't. My leg. It really hurts. I might have to go get it checked out so . . . bye."

Brook and I had this silly hand-jive thing we do whenever we reach her house, which is eight long blocks before the apartment building I lived in. Our moves consist of four patty-cake claps, two snaps, a double shoulder bump, air kisses on each cheek, and a rib tickle on each other's left side. But that afternoon, Brook just turned abruptly and jogged to her front door, her limp and our hand-jive routine completely forgotten.

As I walked down Brook's block, which was shaded by huge Jacaranda trees, I began to wonder if I had done

something wrong to make Brook act the way she had after practice. Could it be that my bestie was jealous just because I won one little race?

To get to my neighborhood, I had to cross Martin Luther King Boulevard, the widest, busiest street in town. It separated Brook's community, which only had single-family homes, from mine, where people lived in two-family brownstones or apartment buildings.

The trees on my block were scrawny, planted in dusty squares at the curb of the sidewalk and braced with sticks and wire to keep them upright. The one in front of my building was the scrawniest of all, probably because it was the first pit stop for all the dogs in our apartment building when they went for a walk.

As the elevator *galumphed* to a stop on my floor, groaning as the door slid into its pocket, I tried to shake the idea of Brook being jealous from my head. Brook was just having a bad day. Everybody has bad days, and everyone has the right to be cranky now and then. I mean—hello, I had my cranky days, too. I was sure that when I called Brook after my dinner and homework were finished, everything would be back to normal. On school nights, we'd always hang out on the phone watching our favorite TV shows together and gabbing for at least an hour or two. Imagining that I was to blame for Brook's bad mood was giving my little once-in-a-lifetime GOT win way too much credit.

Mom was in the middle of her *Muscle Torture* workout

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when I walked into our apartment. She doesn't like to be interrupted when she's working out, but I couldn't resist.

"Mom, guess what?"

"What?" she gasped between sit-ups.

"I won the four-hundred-meter sprint this afternoon."

Mom stopped mid-sit-up and turned to look at me. "You won?"

"Yep!"

As surprised as she looked, I was even more surprised when she paused the exercise DVD and opened her arms to give me a hug. "Baby, I'm so proud of you! I told you that you were just as good as those other girls."

"Well, it was only once . . ."

"Don't give me that. You do it once, you can do it again. Start a trend. Believe and achieve!"

I laughed. She reached for the remote saying, "Let me get back to this before I cool down. Want to join me, champ?"

"No way. I don't know why you put yourself through this 'torture' anyway."

"I have to get back in shape."

"Dada says he likes you thicker." I said, giggling about the way Dada flirted with Mom when she refused an extra helping of rice and peas or dessert.

Mom blushed, "Oh please, I don't pay him no mind. If I don't get rid of this baby weight, my leg will never fit right again."

Right on cue, the toddler alarm came blasting on. Jasper,

my baby brother, was awake. Mom sighed and started to get up from the floor.

I stopped her, “Go on back to your torture; I’ll get him.” I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with the cuddliest, most fuzzy-wuzzy, Winnie the Pooh-looking baby brother on the planet. I took him for a long walk in his stroller while Mom did laundry. After dinner, I washed the dishes, did my homework—math, science, social studies—and read two chapters from my book about Anne Frank.

I had a report on Anne Frank due in a few weeks, and I was right on track with finishing the book. I even left myself enough time to write a first draft and a rewrite to polish it before handing it in.

About five minutes before our favorite sitcom, *Cupcakery*, came on, I dialed Brook’s number and settled in for a nice long chat. Her mother, Mrs. Minelli, answered and said, “Brooklyn’s not at home tonight. Her father drove her to the mall to do some shopping.”

“Really? Brook didn’t say anything to me about shopping with Mr. Minelli.”

“Well . . . Brooklyn”—Mrs. Minelli really stressed her daughter’s full name to let me know she disapproved of my chopping it in half—“doesn’t tell everyone every little detail about her life or plans, and neither should you, Mango.” Before I could apologize or even pretend it was nice speaking with her, Mrs. Minelli cut me off with a swift “I’ll let Brooklyn know you called” and hung up.

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By the next morning, I forgot all about the tension between Brook and me. It was a beautiful day, made even more gorgeous by the Jacarandas on Brook's street, which were in full bloom with their lavender flowers. When a breeze blew, the blossoms floated down from the trees. It was like walking through a lavender snowstorm.

When I walked up the path to Brook's door, I didn't even have time to ring the bell and wait the usual five minutes before she joined me. The door flew open immediately and Brook shouted, "Guess what? You'll never guess! But guess what?"

"What?" I squealed, because her excitement was like super-flu contagious.

Brook turned her back to me, reached into her pocket, and turned back around holding *it* in the palm of her hand. "Ta-da! I got a cell phone!"

And that was the beginning of the end of our forever friendship.