

# Chapter One

I put my math workbook into my black bag. Dad bought it for me a year ago, but it looks brand-new. I clean it regularly. And I empty it as soon as I come home from school. I watched that show about tidying up. And how tidying up is magic. I think to myself, *Tidy bag, tidy mind*. I put two fingers on my wrist and count my heart rate. My heart seems to be beating normally.

Good. I slide my laptop into my bag and then close the silver clasp.

I call out to my sister, Nia. There's no answer. Weird. I wonder where she is. I text Jay to let him know that I'm on my way.

I grab a protein bar from Dad's pantry. I helped him organize things in here. Everything is labeled. All the dry goods are in glass jars. At least this space is tidy. The rest of his place is a complete mess. I glance over at the laundry basket. It's overflowing. I will run a load later tonight. My dirty running gear is in there. I am not going to think about the race earlier today. I check my heart rate again. My heart has sped up. Of course it has.

I go out the front door, closing it behind me. Outside it's warm. Fluffy, white clouds float in the sky. I check that I've locked the front door, then make my way to Jay's house. I put in my earbuds to listen to a short podcast—*Winning at Life*.

My phone rings. It's so loud that it hurts my eardrums.

"Hey, Pia, are you nearly here?" Jay asks.

"You know I am. I just told you I was on my way," I say into my cell phone. "Why are you being weird?" Jay and I have been best friends since we were four and in preschool.

"I'm not being weird," he says.

"Have you got everything ready? I don't want to waste any time."

"Everything's ready." He still sounds like he's being weird. He says, "I'm your best friend, aren't I? So, um, yeah. The books are out. Snacks are on the table."

I smile into my phone. "Perfect." We have a big math test every week for the next four weeks. I'm so stressed about it.

"But you've already studied loads for tomorrow," says Jay.



“Not enough. I really need tonight’s study session.

Thank you.”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. But how are you doing?” he asks.

“I’m okay.” I sigh. I want to tell him that I’m not okay, not really. But saying it doesn’t change what happened today. There’s no point in telling him I feel terrible.

“I can’t believe Panda B. won your race,” he says.

Panda. That’s really her name! She’s the only Panda I know, but everyone calls her Panda B. Anyway, earlier today she won the Star track meet 400 meters. My race.

That’s not the worst part. In the history of our school, the person who wins the Star track meet always wins the Aces track meet. It’s destiny.

Except it’s supposed to be my destiny to win. Not Panda’s.

“I know,” I say. “But, as they say, ‘Aim to win next time.’” It’s something I just heard on the podcast.

“Who says that? It seems intense.”

“It is intense. But you do what you have to do. There’s no way Panda B. is going to win the Aces race.”

“I don’t know, Pia. You know how it always goes. Panda B. won the Stars today. So maybe the next race...” He trails off.

I grit my teeth. “I’m never going to let her win again,” I say.

“Okay, relax, Pia. You’ll rock the math test tomorrow. But, um, well, maybe I should tell you something.”

“You can tell me face-to-face,” I say as I turn toward his house. “I’m here.” I end the call.

Jay lives in a really cute house. It reminds me a bit of a box of chocolates. It has red wooden walls and white window trim. As I get closer I notice that the paint on the front door needs a touch-up. I should offer to help them get it all tidied.

Just as I knock I hear a strange noise coming from the backyard. Kind of a *shushing* sound. I frown.