



MEAN GIRLS

A novel by

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Based on the screenplay by

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CADY

My parents were acting like chickens with their heads cut off. Or hummingbirds, buzzing so fast they might explode from the effort. Which would be messy, among other things.

“This is your lunch in here, okay?” Dad was saying in his *don't-frighten-the-newborn-cubs* tone. He held out a brown paper bag. “And I put a dollar in there for you to buy some milk. One of the older kids can show you where to do that.”

Mom chimed in. “Do you remember your phone number? What about your address? 1217 Dempster. I wrote it on this piece of paper for you, just in case. Put it in your pocket. I don't want you to lose it.” She pushed a stray frizz of mom-hair out of her eyes and handed me the folded piece of paper.

“And if you get scared today,” Dad added, “just go up to your teacher and say, *My name is Cady, and I'm feeling a little scared.*”

“Just like we practiced!” Mom forced a wavery smile. It wasn't very convincing. “Okay? You ready?”

She leaned in, close enough for me to smell the eco-friendly detergent she used on our clothes clinging to her shirt. Her eyes welled up. She squeezed me hard enough to crack a rib as Dad whipped out his camera.

“Okay, smile!” he commanded. “It’s Cady’s big day!”

Click.

Right on cue, Mom burst into tears.

I patted her on the back of that wash-faded shirt. I wasn’t sure what else to do. I mean, I guess it’s natural for parents to cry on their kid’s first day of school. But that usually happens when the kid is five.

And the thing is, I’m not five, I’m sixteen. And until today, I was homeschooled: That means my mom was my only teacher, and my dad was the only sub.

I know what you’re thinking: *Homeschooled kids are freaks.* But my family’s totally normal! I swear.

Except for the fact that both my parents are research zoologists, and we’ve spent the last twelve years in Africa. So, you know, for the most part, my “classmates” were lions, cheetahs, monkeys, snakes, birds—*totally normal.*

I learned all the same stuff you learn in normal school:

- Spelling (*Rhinoceros*, complete with live visual aid!)
- Science (What other kid gets a monkey as a lab assistant? They’re so cute in their little goggles and lab coats.)

- Multiplication (If you've never seen breeding season among jungle cats, I'll tell you: It gets real crowded, real quick. It's a good thing lion cubs are adorable.)

I had a great life. But then my mom got offered a full professorship at Northwestern University.

There went my lion-cub math lessons and my lab-coated monkey. Two weeks later it was *Good-bye, Africa*—with your zebras racing across the dusty Savanna—and *Hello, Evanston, Illinois*.

In Evanston, the only “wild animals” you saw racing were the frenzied morning commuters. (Although, in their white-button-down-black-pants business-casual uniforms, they did kind of remind me of the zebras.)

I didn't want to admit it to my parents—they were clearly both stressed out enough for me as it was—but I *was* a little nervous. I'd never set foot in an American high school. I had no idea what to expect.

Then again, I'd survived the *African wilderness*. The Savanna. The jungle. The mosquitoes. The mating season.

I mean, high school couldn't be much worse than that, could it?