

**SPEAK
FOR
YOURSELF**

**LANA
WOOD
JOHNSON**

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CHAPTER ONE

"I NEED YOU to accept Mrs. James's invite so I can configure the GroupHub before practice tonight," I say, loudly dropping my tray of salad onto my usual spot at the farthest table in the cafeteria. To make it seem like an excessively dramatic gesture, the sugar cookie decorated like a pumpkin jumps off and lands a foot away.

My best friend, Mads, looks up from her all-consuming conversation with Kaden on the other side of her and hooks her thin black bangs behind her ears. "You need what?"

Her mom finally let her dye her hair black this summer, and even though it's November, I'm still not used to it. Her equally darkened brows are furrowed at me. Her clothes match her hair, all blackness and lace—on which she spends every penny she makes doing art commissions as the goth queen LeBrat. One of her pieces sold for almost a hundred dollars last month.

The Mads in my brain has mousy-brown hair, a squeaky voice, and ink stains on her hands and usually the corner of her lip, too.

The Mads in my brain doesn't wear lace at school.

The Mads in my brain isn't dating Kaden.

I should be grateful they're not making out or something. Kaden used to be *our* friend. It's been the three of us at this same table since freshman year. But the two of them started dating last spring break—making me a third wheel in my own best friendship.

But while Mads has changed physically, Kaden is still Kaden: T-shirt, jeans, boots more suitable for a construction site than a school cafeteria. Like Mads and me and most of the school, Kaden is white, but unlike any of us, their hair has been buzzed out of existence. A choice made in ninth grade not long after they started sitting with us at the lunch table. But they're not just Kaden. Not anymore. Now Mads and Kaden are a defined object.

"I convinced Mrs. James we're going to need a private group on HubBub, which I can't get ready until there's more people in the GroupHub. So . . . I need you to confirm your invitations," I explain, sitting on the bench that is either too small or too big, but definitely digs into my legs in all the wrong ways.

"You're still active on that cesspool?" Kaden asks, judgment thick in their voice.

"Oh, come off it, you're still there, too," I say, settling into an argument that predates even their dating. HubBub may not be the only social platform out there, but it's by far the biggest. Nowhere else has apps, chats, and groups. It's definitely the only one that makes it easy for individual coders to create or publish at the level of a development company.

Which, I guess, is a thing I'm the only one in the whole school cares about. But still.

"Only because this bourgeoisie manufacturing facility known as our high school has sold out to the corporate overlords of the so-called social media site that's neither social nor media or even merely a site at this point," they say for like the fiftieth time.

"Corporations pay HubBub millions for access to the extra services our school gets for free," I say. "It would be ridiculous not to take advantage of all that the HubBub platform has to offer." Ever since Kaden discovered socialism they've become a real snob.

"Platform, like they're trying to lift us up. They only do it to turn us into drones, so addicted to their mind-numbing content that by the time we graduate we assume they're the answer for everything," Kaden says, leaning past Mads to glare at me. "Wake up, Skylar, this is the real world."

"We'll accept later, all right, Sky?" Mads says, laying a black-gloved hand on Kaden's arm.

I bite back comments that, intellectually, I know would lead to a shouting match on whether capitalism has any merits in the first place. Because that's how all our conversations go now. Instead I decide to focus on what really matters. "Please? I need at least three members to confirm before they'll let me install my app."

"Of course this is about the app," Kaden says under their breath.

“Does this mean we’re good to go for Study Buddy?” Mads asks, perking up a little bit.

Ever since HubBub opened up their Young Developers’ track to our school, Mads and I have been making apps. I handle the coding, and she makes the graphics. It started with a kitty puzzle game in seventh grade that used a basic template. It got five hundred downloads, which is no small feat for middle schoolers. But Study Buddy is on a whole different level. It turns class notes into flash cards for better group studying. People actually need it, and I’ll be the one who brings it to them.

“Yeah. I got the last of the bugs worked out Friday, and your new buttons finally loaded in this weekend. The HubBub team that approves education apps is normally slow—we’re talking weeks. But since I was just addressing the edits they sent me, they put me into the priority testing queue, so it’s already live.” I know I’m talking nerd at them, but they’re the only ones in the whole school who have half a chance of understanding what I’m saying. If I try to talk to my dad, he starts going on about what he’s working on, and my mom gets maybe half of it. She wants me to use smaller words and less detail, but the details are important.

Plus, I got into the priority testing queue!

Normally if you want to get an app on their site, you have to build tests into it and have it pass some quality checks. The priority queue is for big software companies with whole departments that do just testing. Before now I had to go to the “Young Developers Queue” so HubBub’s people could do

quality checks for me and then give me a list of things that didn't work so I could fix them.

At first they just sent me instructions, but as I progressed, they began to guide me through how they do the checks so I can do them myself. The better I get, the more areas of development they open to me. Study Buddy was so good I can now develop social apps—which aren't hard to create, they just require a new level of customer support and give me access to marketing training and a whole nightmare of unreadable reports.

“So the bigger size did work for the buttons?” Mads asks, her lips curling into the smile that only appears when she's been proven right, entirely missing the important part of what I just said.

“I still prefer the original ones,” I mutter, not ready to concede the point in what is now a months-old argument.

“I told you they were way too small, but you never listen.”

“I can't help that I have a lot of content to fit on a single screen.”

“You can,” Kaden weighs in while snagging one of Mads's Tater Tots and her attention, “since you're the developer.” I honestly don't know how either of them can eat the poorly fried nonsense that comes out of that cafeteria. The salad bar has the only halfway edible stuff in this place. Don't get me wrong, I like a good Tot, but there's nothing good about these.

“Hey, that's mine!” She scowls, taking one of Kaden's grapes in revenge.