

CHAPTER ONE

Who Says Dung Can't Be Fun? First-years' final duty announced!

(You'll want to hold your noses for this one.)

I'm Gigi Lane and you wish you were me.

Oh my God, that has to be the most powerful affirmation in the history of the world. Dictators don't have affirmations that good.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel to its undeniable rhythm. *I'm Gigi Lane and you wish were me.* I could rule the world with an affirmation like this. But I think I'll start with Swan's Lake Country Day School for Young Women.

My head nods, my fingers tap, my butt muscles pulse to the music of my affirmation as I cruise the predawn streets of Swan's Lake. I stay on Pleasant Street, aptly named because,

adrienne maria vrettos

according to *The Guide to New England Private Schools*, it “winds its way up and down the wooded hills of Swan’s Lake, interrupted only by picturesque hilltop farms.”

It’s at the top of one of these hills that I pull over to the side of the road for a much needed moment of what my mom, in her bestselling self-help book *Meet Your Tweet: The Girlie Bird’s Guide to Finding Her True Heart’s Song*, calls an affirmation confirmation.

Turning off the car, I slip off my seat belt and get myself into the official Girlie Bird affirm and confirm meditation pose: legs crossed, arms bent to form the “wings that will carry you home.”

I close my eyes, steady my breathing, and listen to my heart. *I’m Gigi Lane and you wish you were me.*

I wake up when my head hits the steering wheel, and frantically look at the clock, relieved to see I was asleep for only two minutes. I yawn and rub the crust out of my eyes. Thank God for natural beauty. Otherwise I’d look a wreck after three nights in a row of just a few hours’ sleep.

I yawn again, rest my head against the steering wheel, and gaze out the window over the valley to the wooded hill on the other side. Rising up from the early morning mist, standing proud and tall and sure, is the reason I’ve spent the last seven months in a hamster wheel.

It is a mansion made of brick and marble and limestone, a gorgeous patchwork of architectural styles, its two turrets standing guard on either side of the steeped roof.

From here, in the dim light of dawn, I can barely make out

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

the stone steps leading up to the double doors. And above the front doors: a circle of stained glass, twelve feet in diameter, inlaid with the pattern of the Swan's Lake crest. I wait, holding my breath. Beyond the school I can see the sun inching its way above the horizon, and in just moments it is shooting through the stained-glass crest, glinting and sparkling, sending all the colors of those carefully cut pieces of glass spinning out across the valley, and straight into my heart.

I know that there are those who are bitter about their own academic experiences (gym class rejects, etc.), who think that my love for Swan's Lake marks me as a pitiable yet attractive creature who has gotten so caught up in the circus that is high school that I truly don't care about anything else.

I ask you this: What else is there?

And please don't bore me with "There is life *after* high school," that medicating sentiment clung to by girls who cry in the bathroom at school dances. Of course there's life after high school! There is college and all that's beyond. But I'm not in college, am I? No! I'm nearing the end of my third year of high school, and may I be stricken with cystic back acne and a lazy eye if I waste one minute of my high school career pining for the future like some pathetic nerd. If there's one thing I hate about nerds, it's their inability to live in the moment.

The future is *now*! Why is it only the pretty people who realize this?

I glance at the clock again. If I don't pick up my best friend, Deanna, and get us to school by five a.m., there'll be hell to pay.

adrienne maria vrettos

They hate it when we're late. Fiona says it makes her question her selection decisions, and she *hates* questioning her decisions.

Swan's Lake is like any other high school. We have the usual cliques: the Greenies, the Gizmos, the Deeks, the Bookish Girls, the Glossies, the Cursed Unaffiliated, and so on. And, like any other school, there is a top secret group of senior girls that work with an international network of alumnae to keep the Swan's Lake power structure intact.

Also like at any other high school, the Glossies and the Cheerleaders are top tier: You can't get any more popular. Until senior year, that is.

From your very first day of kindergarten at Swan's Lake, you hear the rumors. A whisper on the jungle gym, a low murmur on the story time rug.

As the years go by, the rumors gain traction. Details. There is a secret club, they say, and everyone knows its name, but only its members are allowed to say it out loud. You relish the danger of whispering it to one another in the last bathroom stall, the one marked OUT OF ORDER. "The Hot Spot," you whisper with gummy-bear breath, pulling the end of your braided ponytail out of your mouth.

By the time you're in eighth grade, your braids abandoned for carefully brushed curtains of hair, your skin nicked and scabbed from newly gained permission to shave your legs, a precious few inches of actual cleavage pushing against your crisp, white triangle bra, by this time you know that every year the Hot Spot has a leader. She is called Head Hottie, and on the day you are

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

taken across the street to tour the Upper School, you see her. She is standing on the landing at the top of the grand staircase that stretches up from the main entrance to the first-floor classrooms. There is a girl on either side of her. Together, the three make up the Hot Spot. They are watching you, all of you, as you file through the front doors, trying not to gasp at the car-size chandelier hanging overhead. The Head Hottie watches as you're led into the front office. She studies each of you and then whispers something to the girl standing on her right. The girl nods and makes a note in the back of an oversize, leather-bound book.

It's called the Hottie Handbook, and there is only one copy, bound in black leather, handed down from Head Hottie to Head Hottie every year since Swan's Lake was founded.

If you're lucky enough to be one of those eighth graders whose name was written down in the back of that book, and if you're further lucky enough not to have your name crossed out later due to an unfortunately horizontal growth spurt or a sudden increase in ugliness, you will be like me. One of the chosen.

A Hottie Hopeful. Who cares that being chosen means spending your junior year proving your worth and your loyalty by performing maddening duties like using Wite-Out on any piece of paper in the recycling bin that has less than three lines of text on it? It's Fiona's right to make us do these things. She's Head Hottie, and Cassandra and Poppy are her second and third in command. We're their Hopefuls. We'll do whatever it is they want us to.

Exhaustion and paper cuts are temporary. The Hot Spot is

adrienne maria vrettos

forever. Once you're in, you're in for life. Like the mob, but with better fashion and less murder. As soon as you make the jump from Hopeful to Incumbent, you become part of the *Network*. It sounds so . . . classified. And it *is* classified. Fiona won't even tell me how exactly it is the whole *Network* thing works, except to say, "Shut your piehole, Lane! You'll know about the Network when I decide you need to know about the Network."

Want a Swan transferred to a vocational high school with a major in industrial plumbing because you don't like the way she laughs? Done. Freeze the family assets of a Swan who fouls you during gym, causing her tuition check to bounce? No problem. Have a Swan deported, even though she was born in Kansas? Enjoy your "native" Ireland, Katie Pretovka!

Head Hottie is always the most popular girl in school, closely followed by her second and third: in my case my best friend, Deanna, and our hanging participle, Aloha. There is no way someone with substandard social standing could handle, much less deserve, the sort of power we stand to inherit.

I am sure that I am not the only one who is sick and tired of the vulgar media backlash against popularity. Filthy propaganda texts like *Mommy*, *Why Don't They Like Me?* *How the Quest for Popularity Is Killing Our Daughters*; snuff films profiling the "evil" popular girl who ends up publicly humiliated at the hands of a vindictive nerd; photographs, collages, folk music, sculpture, dance . . . there is an *endless* list of tools "artists" use to slander, defame, and otherwise vilify popular girls.

And you know what I say to them? *You're welcome.*

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

Without popular girls like me, artists would have nothing to rail against, nothing to lament in whiny songs, no angst or anger or *feeling*.

At least art is benign. What's harder to handle is the myths.

Myth #1. Popular girls are the reason you're unhappy.

No. *You* are the reason you're unhappy. In my mom's best-selling self-help book *Chicken No More: The Girlie Bird's Guide to Facing the Truth* she says that what holds most people back from success is—get ready—themselves. She says if you can't face the truth about your shortcomings, you will never overcome them. I will give you an example: Daphne “Dog Face” Hall. She's a classic Art Star, one of those girls that wear Converse sneakers and are always crying in the art room. I have done my best to verbally hold the mirror of truth up to Daphne, and she still refuses to truly see herself for the horror show she is.

“Your eyebrows are taking over your face, Daphne.”

“I can see your panty line, Daphne.”

“You have weird man-hands, Daphne.”

“That bra makes your back fat stick out.”

“Here's some zit cream.”

“And deodorant.”

“And mouthwash.”

I've given that girl a whole drugstore's worth of product, and she still insists on coming to school looking like a “Before” picture of an ugly-girl magazine makeover.

adrienne maria vrettos

Myth #2: Popular girls are secretly anorexic cutters cracking under the pressure of having to be perfect.

To this I say, “Ha!” Pressure just makes popular girls get better grades and grow bigger boobs. Anyone who can’t handle the pressure doesn’t deserve to be popular and will be weeded out by those who do deserve it soon enough.

Myth #3: Popular girls will peak in high school.

They will show up to your ten-year high school reunion and have back fat, a bartending job at Chili’s, and a smoker’s cough. Aw, the sweet lies whispered at bedtime by parents of sobbing loser children.

Myth #4: Popular girls are just like everyone else. They get pimples, have fat days, and feel misunderstood.

We don’t get pimples. And we don’t have fat days. Or gas. Also, we look pretty when we cry, we never get athlete’s foot or gingivitis, and we always ace pop quizzes.

Myth #5: Popular girls are heartless wenches that delight in the degradation and humiliation of other people.

We are not monsters. We don’t kick kittens or trip blind people. If we’re mean to you, it’s because you deserve it. It’s

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

because you've shown a lack of respect, forgotten your place, forgotten *us*. Keeping you down is part of our duty, just like keeping us up is part of yours. The underclass are not expected to have the aesthetic gifts and natural fashion sense that popular people have, so they don't have to strain themselves popping zits or trolling the Internet for sales on fashionable clothing. For all their whining, they are *happy* with the way things are. They have their place, and so do we.

By the time I flash the peace sign to Max, the overnight guard at the entrance of the gated community where Deanna lives, the sun is rising, lighting up what looks to be a perfect early spring day.

I pull into the driveway of Deanna's humongous house and thank God for small favors the ass-ugly Jones Family Minivan is in the garage. Ugly is contagious, even for cars.

The minivan was a gift from one of Deanna's sponsors during her superstar gymnast days. The Jones Family Minivan, as it was officially called, or the JFM to us, got a little rickety after being driven all over the country to get Deanna to her competitions. But Deanna's mom couldn't afford another car when she had to go back to work selling paper products, so the JFM is still limping along.

I give the horn a quick tap. The light in Deanna's room is on, and so is the one in the kitchen. I honk again, louder this time.

"DEANNA 'DEAR HEART' JONES, IF YOU DON'T GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE, I'M GOING TO KICK YOU IN YOUR ONE GOOD KNEE! Good morning, Mrs. Jones!" I call

adrienne maria vrettos

sweetly as Deanna's mom opens the front door and waves to me. I blow her a kiss and then flip down the sun visor so I can check out my bangs in the mirror. I look back to the house, ready to raise holy hell if Deanna doesn't get outside, when I see her giving her mom a kiss good-bye.

Deanna "Dear Heart" Jones.

My best friend, and the girl formerly known as America's New Olympic Hope.

She walks gingerly down the steps and limps across the front lawn toward my car, her feet making trails in the morning dew. She's wearing an adorable but dangerously short cream-colored baby doll dress with gray knee-highs, a pageboy cap perfectly askew over her signature short pixie-cut hair. She looks like a sexed-up version of Tiny Tim. Without the crutch.

"What's wrong, gimp?" I say out the window. "Run out of horse tranquilizers?"

"I showed the neighborhood kiddies how to back-handspring, and my knee went all wonky on me," she chirps, getting into the car. "It'll be good once I'm busy enough to ignore the pain."

I open the glove compartment and pull out a Shake It Cold chemical ice pack, which features a picture of eleven-year-old Deanna in her leotard giving the thumbs-up sign. I shake it up and hand it to her.

"Are you all right to go to school?" I ask, eyeing the swell of her right knee. Seeing the scar still makes my stomach go sour.

She slaps the ice pack on her knee. "Ohmygosh, this is nothing! Once, during a competition, I sprained my ankle so bad it

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

swelled up bigger than my head!” She gives a half-second shudder at the memory and starts dancing in her seat. “*Whaddup, Gigi, let’s go to school, got to get educated, don’t be a fool!* I brought Pop-Tarts, is Aloha meeting us at school?”

“Yes, you spaz, she’s meeting us. God forbid she actually does what Fiona tells her to. She *knows* Fiona wanted us to come to school together for the rest of rush.”

“Blah, blah, black sheep,” Deanna groans, handing me a strawberry frosted Pop-Tart and taking one for herself. “Be nice, you know you love her.”

I hold the breakfast pastry in my hand, feeling its weight. “Do you know how many calories are in this?”

“Zoink!” Deanna plucks the Pop-Tart out of my hand and takes a huge bite out of it. She hands it back. “There, now it’s half the calories.”

“Thanks?”

“Did I ever tell you how I wasn’t allowed to eat enough food to grow boobies?”

I take a bite of the Pop-Tart. It is ridiculously good. “Really?”

“True story.” Deanna stuffs the rest of her Pop-Tart in her mouth. “Now I’m trying to eat my way to double-Ds. How am I doing?” she asks, sticking out her still very flat chest.

“Wow,” I deadpan, “those are huge.”

“You lie and I love you for you it,” she squeals, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek, before twirling her bangs into a perfect point hanging between her eyebrows. “Oh! Did you read the *Trumpet* yesterday?”

adrienne maria vrettos

“I could never find it!” I smack the steering wheel, remembering my frustration. “And I wanted to look after school, but . . .”

I trail off, sighing, and finish my Pop-Tart.

“But you had a special top-secret meeting with Fiona?”

I try for a noncommittal shrug.

“Wait,” Deanna says, “you didn’t even call me last night. How late were you out with the pretty little fascist?”

“Late,” I grumble.

“Why?”

“You know I can’t tell you—”

“Can it with the goody-two-shoes bit, sister, and spill. What’d she make you do this time?”

I sigh. “She had me stealing toilet paper from all the rest-stop bathroom stalls between here and New Hampshire.”

“She’s a freaky deeky!” Deanna howls with laughter. “Did she tell you why?”

I shift in my seat, trying to stretch out the knot between my shoulder blades. “To try and get me arrested? I don’t know. She barely said two words to me the whole time.”

Deanna reaches over and digs her fingers into my back. “So you just drove around all night, not talking?”

“Oh, she talked. Ow! Not so hard!” I try unsuccessfully to move from Deanna’s reach without letting go of the steering wheel. “She just didn’t talk to *me*. She sat in the backseat and whispered on the phone. Ow! I said not so . . . uuuggggghhhh.”

The knot releases, I turn into Jell-O.

“That’s the spot, right?” Deanna giggles, the fingers of one

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

hand knuckling deep between my shoulder blades. “Could you hear what she was whispering about?”

She pats me on the back, the massage over. I give a happy shudder. “Paint color, I think.”

“Score!” Deanna punches the sky. “I bet they’re painting the DOS for us!”

“I hope not. She kept talking about the color red, and I’d like to picture the DOS awash in a creamy beige.”

“For *real!*” Deanna agrees. “Very relaxing. Speaking of, I heard there’s a giant fountain in the DOS with a statue of Ms. Cady as Poseidon in the middle.”

“Just how big do you think the DOS is?” I laugh.

Deanna grins. “If it’s big enough for a pool, how could it not be big enough for a fountain?”

“You have a point.”

“Did Fiona buy you snacks at least?”

I snort. “She made me buy them. I think I got a chemical burn from eating too many Atomic Fire Balls. Where was the *Trumpet*, anyway?”

The Trumpet of the Swan is our school newspaper, run by a clique called the Voice of the People, otherwise known as the Vox Foxes. They dress in pencil skirts, silk blouses, and pumps, with sheer stockings. They tend to move only as a group, and cruising down the hall wearing coordinating matte red lipstick, they look like a formidable army of secretaries from a 1960s typing pool.

“In Ms. Cady’s coat closet. The one next to those wooden

adrienne maria vrettos

telephone booths at the end of the second-floor science wing. It was down in the left toe of her trout-fishing waders.”

Every morning the Vox Foxes hide the one and only copy of that day’s *Trumpet* somewhere on campus. They stopped printing out the full circulation after the Greenies climbed up the south turret, housing the Vox Foxes offices, and chained themselves to the roof until the Foxes agreed to save the earth by cutting their circulation down to one. Since the *Trumpet* started out as a paper venture, tradition dictates that it stay that way. Publishing online just isn’t an option.

Usually, the first-years find the *Trumpet*, running around before homeroom yanking open closet doors and crawling under the sagging armchairs in the library, giddy and brimming with innocent joie de vivre. Once they find it, word spreads, and usually at some point during the day everyone takes a few minutes to read it, standing with their head inside the shade of a floor lamp or holding themselves up as long as possible on Ms. Cady’s chin-up bar, the *Trumpet* taped to the ceiling above.

“So what’d the *Trumpet* say?” I ask.

Deanna bounces up and down with laughter. “It announced the final duty for the first-years! Holy guacamole, those poor pooper-scoopers are going to *stink!*”

“Wait, what are you talking about? What’s the duty?”

First-year duties are the other tradition at Swan’s Lake. It may seem a bit coarse to have first-years do things like find and clean *only* the windows shaped like triangles, or have a contest as to who can find and dust the longest line of uninterrupted chair

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

rails, but it really teaches first-years the ins and outs and ups and downs of Swan's Lake.

"So," I ask again, "what's the duty?"

"It's doodie duty!" Deanna shrieks. First-years always work from basically the same list of duties all year, supervised by the sophomores. But the last duty for first-years is one the sophomores get to think up, and it's traditionally something absolutely ridiculous and seemingly impossible. "They have to fertilize all the flower beds with cow poop! *And* it's BYOP—they have to bring in the stinky stuff themselves!"

She howls with laughter, slapping her good knee. "Oh, and the *Trumpet* also said that the ballot box for Founder's Ball queen is up outside Carlisle's office."

"Why do they even bother with a ballot box? Everyone's going to vote Fiona as queen, and Cassandra and Poppy as her court."

"Tradition, I guess." Deanna shrugs and then turns her shrug into a shimmying dance. "*And that's gonna be us next year! The queen's court, baby!*"

My cell phone rings, and when I see it's my dad, I hand the phone to Deanna.

"Hi, Dr. Bruce!" she chirps, and then, "Oh! And hi, Dr. Lane!" She moves the phone away from her face to whisper, "It's both of them." She listens and says, "I know, it is an early wake-up! Student Council, you know. Oh yes, she's right here, but she's driving, so she can't talk." Deanna laughs. "I *know* you approve, Dr. Lane!" She lifts the cold pack off her knee and

adrienne maria vrettos

pokes at the scar with her free hand. “It’s fine, hurts a little in the morning.”

A minute later she’s off the phone, reporting to me what they said. “Okay, so your dad is stuck at the hospital working a double. He’ll be home around three and will most likely pass out, but you should wake him up when you’re ready for him to cook dinner.”

I look at Deanna.

“To which your mom said, ‘Oh, honey, you don’t have to pretend you two aren’t going to order out again. Just try to at least nibble a piece of lettuce along with the pizza.’ And then your mom said she misses you guys so, so, so much. She’s in Vancouver, it’s beautiful, and she thinks you should all go there next winter break for some snowboarding. And she thinks you should bring me. Well, she didn’t say that exactly, but it was, you know, inferred. Even if all I do is sit in the lodge, show off my scar, and have cute board dudes buy me cocoa.” She thinks for a second. “Let’s see, I think that’s all they said. Oh”—she bats her eyelashes at me—“they both love you, and are proud of you, and want you to affirm and confirm before you start the day, because you’re their little Gigi Bird, and they want you to fly.”

I laugh. Deanna is the only person allowed to indulge in some light teasing about the fact that both my parents have bought into my mom’s self-help theories big-time. My mom says when you tell someone your power statement, it takes away its power. But Deanna says she doesn’t need her gymnastics power anymore, so at this very moment she giggles, presses her index

THE EXILE OF GIGI LANE

fingers to her temples, and murmurs her old affirmation, “Super gymnastic powers . . . go!”

“You know you need a new power statement,” I remind her. “My mom can help you come up with one if you want.”

Deanna shrugs. “High school is cake compared to gymnastics. No special powers needed.”

“If you say so.”

I'm Gigi Lane and you wish you were me.

We crank up the stereo and are on our way.