

Finally
heard≡

ALSO BY KELLY YANG

Finally Seen

New from Here

Finally heard!

KELLY YANG

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

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To the Mrs. Carters of the world

Finally
heard≡

Chapter 1

Mom!" Millie, my sister, protests, banging on the door. "Lina's locked the door again!"

I search through my closet, frantically. *How can T-shirts that fit me perfectly a week ago, now suddenly not fit?*

"I didn't lock anything," I insist, glancing at the doorknob. Definitely locked. "It's probably just stuck again. . . ." I tell my sister to jiggle it harder, to buy myself some time.

I sneak a look back at the mirror. I've gone through growth spurts before, but this one feels different.

I seem to be growing in all kinds of places, *places I'm not ready for!*

"Lina, c'mon! Your sister has to change too," Mom says in Chinese, walking over and knocking on the door. "Can you guys change together?"

Definitely *not*. I grab a blanket and cover myself with it. For a second, I seriously consider cutting a hole in the blanket and wearing *that* to school. At least then I wouldn't feel like microwave popcorn, exploding out of the kernel.

"Seriously, Lina, spring break is over. We're going to be late for school!" Mom says in her *I mean business* tone.

I know I have exactly five seconds before they both come flying in here. I stare at the mirror one more time, closing my eyes, hoping, praying for everything to just go back to the old days.

Days when I could walk into school with a thin white shirt, and not even think twice if anyone stared. When I didn't tower over the boys. When I could play hangman, without freaking out. Last night, when Millie and I were playing, and Millie wrote _ O O _ S, I got so upset, I almost threw a slipper at her. When *actually* her word was *books*.

I felt like a real dope when she added the *K*. Like now, after I opened my eyes. Still the same. Nothing's changed.

I make a final attempt to appeal to Mom.

"Do I *have* to go to school?" I ask through the door.

"Of course you have to go to school today," Mom responds. "Is it the photo? Are you still worried about that?"

I glance at the picture my mom's talking about, taped up on my desk, next to all my doodles. Right before spring break, Catherine Wang, my favorite author in the whole world, came to speak at my school. As her #1 all-time biggest fan, I was the first in her signing line. But as Mrs. Hollins, my librarian, snapped the picture of me and her (I was so worried and self-conscious about my . . . er . . . books), I panicked and put my hands up in front of my chest at the last second.

The result? Catherine looking amazing, and me looking like I'm trying to block a basketball.

"A lot of people have photo anxiety," Mom says through the door. "It's not a big deal."

I *wish* it were photo anxiety. Cringing, I walk over to the photo. I fold it in half. There. Now at least I don't have to look at myself.

But then I think of my immigrant mom, tidying up my room later and seeing the folded picture. She works so hard for me and my sister. Every day she wakes up at 5 a.m. to make

bath bombs, which she sells online to support our family, so we can live here and go to a great school. And it really *is* a great school! I'm finally doing well in my classes. I've learned English, thanks to my teachers and my wonderful librarian. And I've made great friends, like Carla and Finn.

I unfold the picture, because I don't want Mom to be sad. I'll just . . . keep looking at my basketball pose.

One day, I tell myself, I won't be an awkward mess. I'll stand tall and proud, with my chest out and my arms down and a smile on my face. It'll happen. Just not . . . today.

"LINA! I'm coming in!" Millie exclaims.

I lunge for the closet and grab a sweatshirt, even though it's ninety degrees in LA and my socks are already sticky. Still, it's better to be baking than to be sorry.

"You look like Lao Lao, with her gazillion layers!" Millie giggles in the car as she moves her arms. My sister is always dancing, even when she's sitting. I frown, envying her cutoff jean shorts and orange tank top. Our grandma loves wearing two puffy vests, even when she's inside her warm and toasty room in her retirement home in Beijing.

"Yeah, are you sure you're not too hot, sweetie?" Mom asks as she drives.

I yank at the neck of my sweatshirt, wishing we had air-conditioning in the car. "Nope, I'm good. Let's call Lao Lao!"

My grandma and I spent five whole years together in China, while my parents and Millie came to America first to get things settled. It makes me sad that she lives all the way on the other side of the world now, but she's recently made some good buddies in her retirement home. And we're able to "see"

her all the time, since she finally caved and got a smartphone!

“In a bit. I’m expecting that call from Bella Winters any minute, remember?” Mom asks.

“Explain, again, why we have to pay some influencer to make videos about our bath bombs?” I ask. “And how much are we paying her?”

“Hopefully it’s not something outrageous. Her manager said she liked our *vibe*. We absolutely need her. We’re getting crushed. All everyone wants to do is buy from the popular brands they follow online. You’ve seen our sales lately.” Mom sighs, holding up her phone to show us.

My sister and I stare at the sad, tiny number. Only three orders yesterday.

It’s hard to imagine that just a few months ago, Mom was getting interest from real, physical stores that wanted to carry her bath bombs. Then, overnight, twenty more bath bomb stores opened up on Etsy—all with slick social media accounts. And our numbers fell through the floor.

No wonder Dad had to get a second job, parking cars for the restaurant valet after he’s done at the lab. Now he looks like a raccoon when he finally gets home in the middle of the night.

“It’s a whole other skill, social media, and I just don’t have it. Those videos take *hours* to put together—” Mom’s phone rings as she’s explaining. Mom screams and shushes me and my sister. “It’s her! She’s FaceTiming us! Everyone be quiet!”

Mom clicks accept. Bella comes on the screen, smiling and fluttering her extremely long lashes, like a burst of sunshine.

“Hi! Bella!” Mom says, switching to English, pulling over

the car. “We’re sooo excited you’re interested in working together—”

“About that,” Bella says, holding up her Pomeranian, whose rainbow coat matches her eyelashes. “So I talked it over with my manager, and he says I can’t go lower than five thousand dollars a video.”

Millie and I lunge forward, our heads almost falling off. *No, Mom!* We gesture wildly in the rearview mirror. Forget the video. For that price, we can buy an entire bath bomb *car*.

“Five . . . Wow, that’s a lot,” Mom takes a second to find the words. “We don’t have that kind of money. We just a small business, just me and my daughters. Only five sales a day—”

“And without social media, that’s where you’ll stay,” Bella says. “Five sales a day, dead in six months.”

Dead? I frown. She doesn’t know that! I poke Mom not to listen to her; I don’t care how colorful her eyelashes are.

“Look, I’m offering you a pretty good deal, considering . . .”

“Considering?” I chime in, crossing my arms.

“Considering you don’t have *any* social media presence. I’d literally be making a video about a company NO ONE’S ever heard of—”

“I’ve heard of it!” I remind her.

Bella repeats, to my great annoyance, “NO ONE’S ever heard of, and asking my followers to believe me that it’s legit—not some gross, moldy ball of baking soda that’s going to crumble in your hands like vacuum dust.”

My sister’s and my jaws drop.

“Well, it’s definitely not *that*,” Mom responds sharply.

“Course. I believe you. But the internet? It’s a harsh place. And who knows what they’ll believe, unless you have

someone like me vouching for you. But it'll cost some dough," Bella says sweetly. Before we can say another word, she waves her long manicured fingers and says, "Text me your answer. Ciao!"

The call ends.

"So much for liking our vibe," Mom mutters, switching back to Chinese.

"Mom, you *cannot* pay five thousand dollars for a video!" I blurt out. "You could buy a whole bath bomb factory with that!"

"We could buy a new air conditioner!" Millie says, fiddling with the vents in our car.

"We could buy eighty thousand new shirts for me!" I add. *That actually fit.*

"First of all, no one's getting any new shirts in these circumstances," Mom says, starting the car again. My hopes sag along with my thick sweatshirt. "And there is no way I'm giving her five thousand dollars. If I *had* that kind of money, then I wouldn't need her help. Business would actually be good!"

I shake my head. It's so unfair. How can Bella charge so much for *one* video, when my parents grind away for just pennies?

"What if we did it ourselves?" Millie asks. "I could dance to your bath bombs!"

"That's actually not a bad idea!" I add. We can totally do this ourselves. "Millie, remember when you used to make dance videos? How many followers did you have?"

"Fifteen . . ." Millie says.

"Fifteen!" I beam at Mom.

"And I can juggle the bombs to show they don't crumble!" Millie says.

“And I could . . .” I pause, trying to think of something I can do that wouldn’t involve showing my awkward . . . er . . . books. “Stack them on my head?”

Mom gives me a funny look as the phone rings. It’s Lao Lao calling.

“Lao Lao!” Millie exclaims. “Tell Mom to let us make videos for her for social media! C’mon, it’ll be so good!”

“The girls, on social media?” Lao Lao asks, putting her comb down. She stares into the camera at Mom. “Oh no, they’re way too young. All my friends here who have grandkids, they never let their grandkids on WeChat,” Lao Lao says, referring to China’s largest social media platform. “I thought you were hiring someone.”

“We were, but she wanted to charge five thousand dollars,” Mom tells her.

“Oh, that’s ridiculous! For five thousand, you guys can fly over and see me. I’m so lonesome in my room, all by myself. . . .”

I lean in, concerned. I thought things were going better for Lao Lao there. My grandmother had been telling me her arthritis was improving.

“Is everything okay?” I say in a soft voice. “Is it your friends? Are they not being nice?”

“Oh no, it’s not that. They’re fine,” Lao Lao says. “I just get a little sad, that’s all. The ambulance comes at least once a day. Put it this way, we’re all painfully aware that this is the end of the road.”

“It’s not the end of the road. Hang in there,” Mom says to Lao Lao emphatically. “We’ll be back to see you soon, I promise. I’ll . . . figure something out.”

“I hope so,” Lao Lao says as Mom pulls up to our school.

My sister waves to Lao Lao and jumps out of the car, shooting off across the yard. I wave at Lao Lao too, but linger for a second, staring out at all my classmates. How come *their* buttons don’t look like they’re about to pop off? *Their* pants don’t look like they were chopped at the ankles by a woodpecker?

The questions multiply in my head, until five whole minutes have gone by.

Mom turns to me and pulls her sunglasses down. “Don’t worry . . . we’ll find a solution, sweetie.”

I know she’s not talking about my shirt situation at all, but I imagine she is, and it helps.

I put on my bravest smile, as I get out, so Mom knows I’ll be all right.

And I will be. I think.

Chapter 2

Across the schoolyard, Carla's unicorn backpack stands out in a sea of black Lululemon backpacks. It's a bigger version of a backpack Millie has, but Carla's is ten times shinier. I love how it glitters in the sun every time she moves, and it is so much more interesting to look at than the boring designer ones all the other girls are carrying.

I don't know exactly when the black backpack trend started.

I think it started with Jessica. Then it spread to Tonya. Then Nora and Eleanor. Before long, nearly every fifth-grade girl swapped out their colorful backpacks for funeral ones. Even the boys got in on it.

I gaze down at my own maroon one, the same one I've been carrying since third grade. Sure, it's a little tattered around the edges, but who has the money to switch backpacks *midyear*?

That's another thing about all this growing. It's so *expensive*. Thankfully, I've only had to ask Mom for new shoes once.

I bounce in my secondhand Vans, skipping over to Carla. I pass by Principal Bennett, with his bright Lego tie. It's thick and colorful and looks like the whole tie's made out of little plastic squares. I wave to him as I skip.

"Welcome back, Lina!" he says, smiling.

For some reason, the sidewalks in America are so much

wider, making it ten times more fun to skip on. I'm soaring through the courtyard, when Jessica—my classmate and the drama queen of fifth grade—looks up from her phone, flips her silky straight hair, and makes a face, like she's just seen a snail blow his nose.

I stop midskip.

Is there gum in my hair?

Is there a bee on my sweatshirt?

Is it *me*?

The last thought makes me want to grab one of my classmates' phones and record myself skipping in slo-mo, just so I can analyze myself.

On second thought, maybe not.

I tell myself to not let Jessica get inside my head. After all, she was the one who tried to get my favorite book by Catherine Wang banned last year. And guess who got it unbanned. *This girl*.

That's right! Boy, did I show her!

I smile at the memory as I speed-walk the rest of the way to Carla. My best friend listens with rapt attention as I tell her word for word what Bella said.

"Boo! Ditch her! She sounds so rude!" Carla says, unzipping her backpack and pulling out an old Popsicle-shaped Pop-It. She hands it to me. I channel all my frustrations into popping the Pop-It in record time as we walk over to the library.

"She was totally rude. She wouldn't even let my mom talk. And she called our bath bombs vacuum dust," I add, popping.

"Why would anyone in their right mind pay her anything?" Carla asks. "Especially since it's so easy to make good videos by yourself. I've been studying more movies—listen to this!"

Carla stops walking and, with all her enthusiasm, pitches

me a new movie she's cooked up over the break. Ever since Carla and her mom moved out of Old Man Pete's—a terribly grumpy and exploitative employer that Carla's mom and my dad used to work for—Carla's been obsessed with watching Netflix movies. Especially romantic comedies.

"It's called *You've Got a Package*. It's like *You've Got Mail* but about two people who fall in love when an Amazon package gets delivered to the wrong house."

I giggle. I love how unselfconscious my friend is when it comes to romance. Me? I still wriggle when I get to the scene when Elastigirl tells Mr. Incredible that he's flexible.

"What do you think?" Carla asks.

"I'd watch it," I say.

"I've already started writing the script!"

"Really?"

"All day Sunday, when my mom wouldn't let me finish watching *Runaway Bride*!"

"Why wouldn't she let you finish watching *Runaway Bride*?" I ask. I've never seen it, but judging from the title, it sounds like a movie you want to stick around to the end for.

"She says it's too mature, even though it's rated PG. *And* she's let me watch *Red Notice* before, and that's rated PG-13!"

"I love *Red Notice*," I say.

"I think she just doesn't like rom-coms for some reason . . .," Carla says, sad for a second.

"Because . . . of your dad?" I ask softly. Carla lost her dad about three years ago. I could see Mrs. Munoz not wanting to be reminded that the love of her life is gone.

"Maybe. Or maybe she thinks I'm not ready . . .," Carla says, glancing down at her petite body.

At five feet one, Carla's body is not popping out of any kernels yet.

I used to envy her, until I learned how she felt about it.

"I just wish my body would hurry up," she whispers. She glances up at the sky, throwing her hands together. "Just give me one boob. Doesn't even have to be two."

I laugh so hard. Carla can be ridiculous sometimes, and I love her for it. Finn comes running over to us. Carla and I both press our lips together, trying to be all serious.

"There you guys are!" Finn says. "You going to the library?"

We nod.

"Good, because I have to return this to Mrs. Hollins," Finn says. He holds up a copy of *Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life*.

"Is it really the worst years of your life?" I ask.

"No, but I want to be prepared. This kid! You wouldn't believe how much trouble he gets into!" Finn says.

"Like what?" Carla asks.

"Well, the book *starts* with him sitting in the backseat of a police car," Finn says.

Our jaws drop.

"Yeah. He breaks so many school rules." Finn starts listing them. "He pulls a fire alarm and vandalizes school property—"

"Vandalizes school property?! Pulling a fire alarm? That's not going to happen to us," I tell Finn.

"We're student librarians!" Carla adds. "The only thing we're pulling are library cards."

I bump Finn's shoulder. "Stick with me and Carla, and everything will be fine."

Finn gives me a faint smile.

"I know. I'm not *really* worried. But it was like he was possessed. He just kept making bad decisions, one after another. And I couldn't stop reading about them. I was so intrigued and horrified at the same time. It was like watching my mom fake laugh for endorphins."

"Wait, what?" Carla and I both blurt out.

"She just starts laughing sometimes."

"For no reason?" I ask.

"She says it's good for when you're feeling down. Something about our brain and serotonin."

Finn demonstrates, bursting into laughter. He laughs so loud, two of his friends—Preston and Nate—walk over.

"Finny, my man!" Nate says, jumping off his skateboard and giving him an elaborate handshake. "Haven't seen you all break! Wanna see a cool trick? Dude, I can jump off the benches now!"

Preston barely looks up from his phone while his friends talk. Another trend that has suddenly swept through our grade—everyone getting their own phones. It started with Preston, who convinced his mom that he needed it in case she was running late to pick him up and he couldn't find her after school. *And* he definitely needed it for soccer practice once he was in middle school. Even though none of us actually go to middle school yet, T-Mobile was running a big family promotion. One by one, all the parents caved, even Finn's . . . making me and Carla the only two holdouts.

"What kind of trick?" Finn asks.

"I'm calling it the dragon flip! C'mon, I'll show you!" Nate says.

"Here?" Finn asks. I can see him fretting—there's a strict

no-skateboarding-on-school-grounds rule, which Principal Bennett is always reminding us of. Nate nods.

“C’mon, it’ll only take a sec . . .,” Nate says. “There are no teachers around!”

Finn nervously glances down at his *Worst Years* book and says, “Actually, I have to go and return this. . . .”

“You and the library, man,” Nate mutters, shaking his head.

Finn’s face turns red. “What?” he asks.

“Never mind.” Nate smiles, exchanging a look with Preston. “The library’s cool.”

I study Nate. Something about the goofy grin on his face makes me wonder what he really thinks. I hate that even though I know English now . . . there’s still so much I don’t *know*. Like when people say, “Yeah no”—do they actually mean “No” or “Yeah”?

Preston slaps Finn’s shoulder as Nate turns toward the benches. “See you online later?”

“For sure . . .” Finn nods, fist-bumping Preston.

Finn waits until both of them have skated away, before turning to me. “C’mon, race ya!”

As we hurry to the library, I glance over at Nate and Preston, envying that they have this whole other life with Finn online. I wonder what they all do on there. Maybe online, Preston and Nate are completely different. Maybe they’re kind and sensitive and don’t just say “the library’s cool” with a sarcastic grin. Either that, or Finn is a dragon-flipping rebel who breaks all the rules.

I’d love to find out. Hopefully soon.

Chapter 3

Lina, Finn, Carla, welcome back!” Mrs. Hollins, our librarian, says when we walk in. “I’ve been dying to show you what I’ve been working on!”

Finn pops his book back into the check-in slot. Then we join Mrs. Hollins behind her desk. She points at her computer. It’s a neon green website with the words *Winfield Reads* flashing in giant Comic Sans.

“What do you think?” she asks. “I made it myself!”

“It’s . . . nice!” Finn volunteers.

Bless Mrs. Hollins. She tried so hard to make it look fun and lively. But in the process, she might have gone . . . a little overboard. Every neon font color on the planet is splashed across the page. If highlighters could make a website, that’s what it would look like. Still, it couldn’t have been easy to set up, and I give Mrs. Hollins an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“Great job!” I say.

“I worked all spring break on it. Look, there’s even a section for student book recommendations! I was thinking maybe you guys could each give a book talk, and I could record it for the site—”

“Like a video?” Carla asks excitedly.

Mrs. Hollins nods. “It’ll just be for our school. What do you think, Lina? You’ve been loving that new graphic novel *Frizzy!*”

I do love *Frizzy*. But a video? I wriggle in my sweatshirt. I can already feel it getting too small, my neck too sweaty, and my hand freaking out at the last second and doing that basketball thing again. “I don’t think so.”

“I’ll do it!” Carla throws her arm up. “Can I do *Love Double Dutch*? There’s a dreamy middle school dance scene!”

“Sure!” Mrs. Hollins says. “And, Finn? What about you?”

Finn looks eagerly over to his book, lying in the check-in box. But then his eyes drift to the window . . . to Nate and Preston skateboarding, and he shakes his head shyly.

“I don’t know, Mrs. H. But I can definitely help film with my phone!” He holds up his shiny phone.

I eye it enviously.

“Great!” Mrs. Hollins says. She goes to grab *Love Double Dutch*.

As Carla sits down to write her speech, I see Eleanor and Nora walking by. Eleanor is my fellow graphic-novel-loving classmate. I dash out to say hi. Right before the break, I’d set the latest Babysitter’s Club book aside for her, before I even had a chance to read it.

“Hey!” I say to Eleanor.

“Oh, hey, Linal!” Eleanor says. She and Nora stop walking. Nora, who holds the longest record for gum chewing in our class, smiles at me, then goes back to chewing. “How was your spring break?”

“Good! Did you read the book? What happens?” I ask. “No, wait, don’t tell me!”

Before Eleanor has a chance to respond, Nora cuts in. “Can I just say, your English is so good now. It’s almost kind of terrifying.”

My tongue turns scorching hot. I wish I could answer: *Well . . .* when you go to a nearly all-white school like me, you have no choice.

Instead, I mutter, “Thanks. I guess it’s from reading a lot.”

“The book was amazing,” Eleanor says, pulling her copy out of her black backpack. “It saved me from a completely boring break.”

“You stayed home too?” I ask, maybe a little too hurriedly. Because Nora and Eleanor both stare at me, like I’m some sort of bedridden lizard.

“No, we went to Palm Springs . . . but the resort was really packed,” Eleanor says. “And my parents were working the whole time.”

Finally, something I can relate to. “Mine too!” I say. “My mom’s *always* working.”

“I mean we’re supposed to be on vacation! Can’t she take a break?” Eleanor asks.

“Exactly!”

Jessica walks over and joins us.

“You should have FaceTimed me,” Eleanor says to me with a smile.

“She can’t,” Jessica butts in. “She doesn’t have a phone.”

I glare at her. *Thanks a lot!*

“Anyway, here’s the book back,” Eleanor says, handing it to me, gazing distractedly at Nate doing his skateboard tricks. I flip through the moist pages. “Sorry I got a little water on it!”

“It’s okay. I’ll just . . . dry it with a fan.”

“You’re the best, Lina!” Eleanor says, flashing me a smile.

Jessica gives me a little wave as they head over in Nate’s direction.

“Maybe we can talk about it later, when I’m done reading . . . ?” I ask, but Eleanor is already halfway across the yard.

I head back to the library, where for the next fifteen minutes—while Carla makes her funny and captivating book talk video—I sit in the corner fanning Eleanor’s book for her. I try to cheer my friend on, but all I can think about is the way Jessica said it—*she doesn’t have a phone*. Like I’m a character in *The Wizard of Oz*, and she’s explaining to Dorothy that I don’t have a brain.

I wish I could do something to show them, in my terrifying English and lumpy sweatshirt, that I’m just as good as them. As Carla wraps up and Mrs. Hollins casts a hopeful glance at me, my heart thumps in my chest. Slowly, I stand.

Do it! Do it! Just get up there and speak from your heart!

But my shaky knees give way and I sit back down. I’ll get there. I know I will.

Chapter 4

Jon Butterkatz, my neighbor, secretly watches videos on his phone while Mrs. Carter teaches.

We're learning about the life cycle of a plant. I'm doodling a beanstalk in my notebook, wondering where I'd be in the plant life cycle.

Leaf development?

Stem elongation?

I gaze down at my arms. Somehow plants look so much more elegant when they grow.

I pick up a green color pencil and start drawing a long rose stem. Mrs. Carter made us switch seats right before break, saying our interpersonal skills would improve if we sat next to a new person, which is how I got stuck with Jon. So far, the only skill that's improved is my arm-watching skills.

I have to say, his shirtsleeve is a pretty good hiding location for a phone. His phone is tucked just enough in that Mrs. Carter can't see but far enough down that Jon can still sneak a peek by moving his arm an inch.

I watch as Jon scrolls through videos about everything from banana smoothies to race cars to bathroom pranks to tree houses, a seemingly nonsensical string of videos that makes me wonder if it was curated by a pet monkey.

All of a sudden, my mom's face pops up.

“AHHHHHHH!” I scream.

“What is it?” Mrs. Carter asks, tearing her reading glasses off.

I point to Jon’s phone. Jon immediately yanks his sleeve down and hisses “Don’t you dare!” at me. Not wanting to be a bad neighbor, I immediately move my finger to the floor.

“Nothing, I, uh . . . I saw a . . . uh . . .”

“Ant!” Jon whispers.

“An ant!”

“Oh.” Mrs. Carter puts her reading glasses back on. “Well, it is getting warmer. So we might see a couple of them inside the classroom. But getting back to the process of photosynthesis. . . .”

I sit back down and nudge Jon. “Can I see that again? Please? I think that was my mom.”

“No way! I’m not giving you my phone!”

“Just for a second!” I try reaching for it, but he flinches away. “Please, it’s important. . . .”

Reluctantly, Jon pulls his phone out of his sleeve ever so slowly and hands it to me under the table.

I sneak a glance at Mrs. Carter. My heart’s pounding. Did Mom finally decide to take the plunge? And what did she SAY?

“How do I hear . . . ?” I ask, pointing to my ears.

“You can’t,” Jon says. “Just read the captions.”

I scroll up in the app until I find Mom’s video again, then tap on it with trembling fingers. Crystal-blue water laps calmly behind her. *She filmed this at the pool? How’d Mom get it so clean?* Though our apartment complex has a pool, the filter’s broken and there’s usually a layer of leaves thicker than my sweatshirt.

As the auto captions appear, I cross my fingers and toes.

“Hi, everyone,” Mom says. “My name is Jane Gao. I am the owner of JML Bath Bombs, a small family-owned business. This my first video. I want to talk about reality of running small business that’s not so famous. Every morning, I wake up at five to make these beautiful bombs.”

Mom holds up our Luxury Lavender bomb.

“I make all from scratch. Then I package and I ship. I do inventory. I track my sales. All this while I try to raise my two daughters. I used to believe that if I just work hard enough, eventually I succeed. I want to show my daughters: ‘Hey, girls, just think BIG IDEA, and work hard. You can make it.’”

Mom looks earnestly into the camera and shakes her head.

“But now . . . I don’t know. Because the last few months, my business really suffering. And I know the reason. I don’t do social media. Why not? Because I don’t think I ‘have it.’ I can’t sing. I can’t dance like it’s 1999. I just want to do my job, work hard, be a good mom, and give people great products. So I guess I’m just hoping . . . that if there’s anyone out there who wants to hear from just a mama. Not an influencer. Or a celebrity. Or a big famous person. Let me know.”

My heart explodes with pride when Mom finishes her video. It was perfect! God, I hope Bella Winters is watching this. I hope the whole world is watching this, because it took guts for my mom to put it out there!

I feel the power of her inspiring words as I hand Jon back the phone. She’s right. I just need to get over this fear of my new body and be my true best self!

. . .

As soon as school is over, I bolt out of the classroom, racing all the way to Mom's car.

"MOM!" I exclaim. "I saw your video!"

"You did?" She grins. As Millie and I climb into the car, she fills us in. "I was sick of not doing anything! Being scared! Not trying. So I took my phone and went to the pool! And, girls, it's been bananas! You wouldn't believe the orders coming in!"

"Like how many?" I ask, taking Mom's phone and showing Millie the video.

"Fifty in the last *hour*," Mom says as she pulls out of the school parking lot.

"You're kidding!" I exclaim.

"Mom's video has 5,239 views!" my sister reports, holding up Mom's phone. She grins from ear to ear, bouncing in her seat.

"OH MY GOD!" I shriek. "Mom's going VIRAL!"

We're screaming and laughing. Mom pulls over, instructing me and my sister to read the latest comments to her.

Love your energy! Automatic buy!

You're not just a mama—you're a modern mama!

You can absolutely make it without dancing like it's 1999! I'll support you!

We love an honest queen!

I used to be scared of social media too! But don't be scared—we're with you, Modern Mama, and I can't wait to try your bath bombs—I've just ordered!

You have two daughters? Can I ask you for some parenting advice??

Your skin is beautiful!

Congrats on taking the plunge!
This was the content I needed today.
Brb . . . purchasing ALLLLLLL your bath bombs.
Love that it's a family business! So sweet and authentic!
Admire your courage and how open you are! You are the American dream!

Tears stream down Mom's eyes as I read her the comments. I can't even heart them fast enough; that's how many of them are coming in as the views continue to jump.

"Look, now it's at 6,828 views!" my sister says.

A second later, I call out, "7,293!"

It feels almost like a video game! But I know it's real—I can feel the love pouring in, filling the car with hope. Mom's crying. Millie's practically bounced a hole in our backseat, but no one cares because this is the greatest day of our lives!

"You girls were right! I should have taken the plunge a long time ago. I don't know why I was so afraid—the internet is a true equalizer!" Mom says, wiping her tears, as she restarts the car.

"Hear that, Bella Winters?" I yell, rolling down the window. "An equalizer!"

"Our whole lives can change! With just a phone! Can you imagine?" Mom cries. "We don't *have* to get left behind!"

I yank off my sweatshirt and throw it in the trunk. I'm so hyped by Mom's words, I don't even care how I look!

"We gotta go to the store! Stock up on baking soda! We gotta fill all those orders!" Mom says, stepping on the gas.

"Can we stop at the ice cream shop?" Millie asks. "For two seconds?"

We both give Mom our biggest *pretty please* eyes. Mom relents.

“Fine, but only for two seconds!” she says. “I still have to clean the rest of the pool if that’s where I’m going to film!”

“Wait, why the pool?” I ask.

“Well, it’s the only half-decent place we’ve got. Our apartment is so . . .” I wait for Mom to find a good adjective. Messy? Cozy? She finally settles on “Sad-looking.”

Ouch. I feel the sting of her word, even though I know why she’d say that. Our sofa has a giant hole in one of the cushions. My parents sleep in the living room on a yoga mat, which they use for a mattress. But surely all that stuff can be moved around. There must be *one* corner that doesn’t look . . . sad.

But Mom shakes her head firmly. She doesn’t want to take any chances.

“I’ll help you with the leaves,” I offer.

“Actually, you really want to help me? I need ideas for what to post! I saw this video—this lady said, to really grow on social media, you gotta post *all the time*. So if I’m going to do this, it can’t just be one video!”

“I’m on it!” I yell, grabbing a notebook from my backpack and a pen. “You can count on me!”

“Can I be in one of the videos with you?” Millie asks, putting a hand under her chin and smiling at the rearview mirror.

Mom laughs.

“We’ll see . . .,” she says.

“To JML Bath Bombs!” I cheer, thrusting my pen up.

Mom looks back at me with misty eyes. “To us, taking control of our lives!”

Chapter 5

I walk into school the next day with “Unstoppable” playing in my head. Last night was too amazing for words. The only way I can describe it is with sounds:

The opening of the door when Dad came home early from work. He surprised us with mapo tofu from the restaurant!

The swish of my hair as I danced with my sister while Mom responded to comments from her fans. She stayed up till one in the morning—there were that many!

The buzz of the fan blowing in our faces as we frantically mixed the baking soda with the Epsom salts to fill the orders.

The thump in my heart as Mom held up her phone and snapped a selfie of her and me and my sister, and posted it on her Instagram Stories with a message: *Overwhelmed with gratitude. Thank you for all your support.*♥

The most amazing thing? I didn’t do basketball hands or reach for a Trader Joe’s bag and try to wear it over my chest. I just smiled!

I skip toward Finn and Carla in the library at school with my good news. Maybe I can do this. Maybe deep down inside, underneath fifty pounds of sweatshirt, I have the same confidence flowing inside me. All I have to do is post it like Mom. But I need help from my friends coming up with ideas!

“I’m so in! Finally, my chance to be a writer-director!”
Carla says.

“This is great!” Finn says. “I know all about social media from Brooke!”

“Who’s Brooke?” I ask.

“This lady my dad hired to help him with his social, for his construction company. She charges an arm and a leg, according to my dad, but he says she’s the best there is!”

I grab my notebook and start taking notes. “So what did she say?”

“So far, I think she said, post consistently. Let’s see, don’t take too long to get to your point. Oh, and come up with a good hook!”

“A hook?” I ask, picturing a pirate hand.

“It’s the thing that gets people’s attention. Tells them immediately what the video’s about! Like, you know, those descriptions on the front of a book?” Finn asks.

I smile. Leave it to Finn to talk to me in a language I can understand.

“You mean *How can you be yourself if no one sees the real you?*”
I ask, pulling *Invisible*, one of my favorite graphic novels, off the shelf.

“Yeah! Or *Standing up for who you are is no joke*,” Carla says, reading from the cover of *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!* I grin. Another one of my faves.

Finn grabs another book and reads the title. “*My Life As a Potato*. Now, if someone made a video with that hook? C’mon, that’s gold.”

Carla’s head jolts up. “What if we made a video—‘My Life as a Bath Bomb?’” she asks. “We could *be* the bath bombs!”

“Ohhh! That’s good! I like that!” Finn says.

“We could be *two* bath bombs meeting in the bathtub!” Carla continues. “It could be a meet-cute!”

“What’s a meet-cute?” Finn asks.

“In every rom-com, there’s a moment when two people meet and fall in love. . . .”

I like the idea. But I’m not sure about being a bath bomb for my first video. “I don’t know. . . .”

“Well, I can’t meet-cute myself!” Carla says. “Finn?”

“Oh nooooo! Preston and Nate would never let me hear the end of it!” Finn says firmly.

Finn’s answer is so loud, Carla and I both fall quiet.

I put my book down. “Why do you hang out with those two anyway?” I ask gently.

Finn stares at his shoes.

“They’re not that bad . . . ,” he finally mutters. “Preston’s all right.”

“Preston gave Mrs. Carter a tattoo for teacher appreciation week,” Carla reminds him.

“It was a temporary tattoo,” Finn says. “He was trying to be funny.”

“It was a tattoo of toilet paper.”

“So she’d never run out!”

We give him a look.

“Okay, it wasn’t that funny,” he finally admits. “Look, it’s not been easy, okay, with my parents’ divorce. And Preston . . . he’s the only one who understands.”

My face softens. So that’s why. Poor Finn. Here I thought things were getting better for him now that the divorce was final. He seemed excited that he had two houses and two of