

In or Out

by Claudia Gabel

Chapter 1

It was the last day of summer, but to Nola James, the sun felt as strong as it had in the beginning of June. She'd been laying out in her Poughkeepsie, New York, backyard all Wednesday afternoon and now she could feel her skin sizzling. Nola loved quiet summer moments like this, when she could stretch out on a deck chair in her favorite blue-and-white-striped bikini, close her eyes, and forget all her worries.

But today, Nola's worries wouldn't disappear, no matter how long she worshipped the sun.

"I feel like a rotisserie chicken," moaned her best friend, Marnie Fitzpatrick, from the deck chair beside Nola. Blonde-haired and fair-skinned, Marnie usually preferred the shade of her dad's giant golf umbrella.

"This was your idea, remember? You said you didn't want to start school looking all pale." Nola's stomach jumped the second she said the word *school*. Wasn't she a little old for all this nervousness?

Marnie sat up and took a sip from the yellow plastic margarita glass that was resting on the arm of her chair. "I know. I know. It's just *so* hot out. Maybe we should give up." She blotted her glistening freckled face with a purple beach towel. "Do you think City Drug carries tan-in-a-can?"

"Probably." Nola retied her long, light brown hair into a sloppy knot on top of her head. "Just try not to turn Jessica Simpson-orange, like you did on the Fourth of July."

"I happen to like orange, okay?" Marnie threw her towel at Nola and smiled.

Nola knew this was a lie. Actually, she pretty much knew everything about Marnie. For instance, her favorite movie (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*), her least favorite brand of jeans (Joe's made her butt look gigundo), and her most embarrassing moment (she had spit out a mouthful of chai shake at Haagen-Dazs last month after Patrick Callahan, who held the number six spot on her Crush List, told her a funny joke).

Marnie knew a million little secrets about Nola, too. The girls had met in kindergarten, and Nola had turned Marnie into her honorary sister.

In fact, Nola and Marnie signed every correspondence between them—whether it was an e-mail or an old-fashioned folded-up note—with *LYLAS*, which was shorthand for Love Ya Like A Sister. Over the years, the girls had established traditions, like their Friday night movie-sleepovers and their very anticlimactic bumper bowling competitions on the last Saturday of every month. But tomorrow Nola would be surrounded by hundreds of strangers who knew nothing about her. The thought of that scared her so much, she was practically shaking.

The buzzing sound of an egg timer filled the air, bringing Nola's mind back to the present. "Time to flip over," she announced, glad for the distraction.

"Again?" Marnie rolled her eyes and squirted a glob of Neutrogena SPF 15 in her hand. "Hey, don't forget to check on Pip and Squeak."

“Thanks for reminding me.” Nola would rather forget her little brothers even existed, but that wasn’t an option. While her parents were at work for the day, the boys were her responsibility. She hated being the oldest, especially because it meant trying to keep the King of the Antagonizers (Dennis) and The Mindless Follower (Dylan) in line. Marnie was so lucky—her older sister and only sibling, Erin, had left for college a week ago.

Nola leaned toward the end table, picked up her Motorola two-way radio and clicked the ON button. “This is Nola, come in Dennis and Dylan.” She waited for a few seconds before she repeated herself. “Come in Dennis and Dylan, or else Marnie is going to hunt you down!” Nola looked over at Marnie. “They’re scared of you.”

Marnie chuckled as she adjusted the top of her lime-green bandeau bikini. “I don’t doubt that.”

Nola had always been a shy, timid girl who usually went unnoticed in a crowd, despite her striking features (deep brown eyes, full, pouty lips, and a tiny waist). She wasn’t the type to raise her voice or get in someone’s face, which is why her nine-year-old brothers ran around like the Rugrats on crack. The only way to keep track of them was with two-way radios.

Suddenly Nola heard Dennis screaming through the crackling static, “We’re on our way home, fathead!”

Nola’s cheeks flushed. “Yeah, well . . . you’re a . . . monkey butt!”

“Monkey butt?” Marnie laughed out loud. “Good one, Nol.”

“Shut up,” Nola said, embarrassed, Comebacks were definitely not her specialty.

For some reason, Marnie leaped up from her seat and started doing jumping jacks. Nola watched her friend’s bouncy C cups with envy and then glanced down at her own chest. She’d had small B’s since sixth grade, but over the summer she kept hoping they’d spontaneously grow. However, the only part of her that had gotten any bigger was her feet. A couple of weeks ago she had to order size 8 1/2 Skechers from zappos.com and she’d been depressed ever since. She was really missing all her size 7 shoes.

“I can’t sit still anymore,” Marnie said through short breaths. “Next Saturday is my birthday, *and* we’re starting high school tomorrow. Freshman year, baby! Aren’t you excited?”

Nola’s heart began beating double-time. This was the conversation she’d been *dreading*. Although they’d talked about their freshman year at Poughkeepsie Central over the summer, fall had seemed so far away then. But now it was a reality: her life would be drastically different—maybe even unrecognizable—tomorrow and there was nothing Nola could do about it. She hated feeling so frightened.

“I guess,” Nola mumbled.

Marnie stopped jumping and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “You guess?”

Nola was only able to nod her head.

Marnie plopped down next to her. “You’re flipping out, aren’t you?”

“Kind of.” Nola couldn’t stop her lower lip from trembling.

“Remember our first day of kindergarten?” Marnie asked.

As if Nola could forget it. She closed her eyes for a second and every detail of that day came back to her. She thought about how she’d sat by herself at the long rectangular table, her legs dangling off the chair and her feet barely touching the olive-green carpet beneath her. She thought about how her mom had cuffed her tan pants so she

wouldn't trip on the hems, and put her hair in a high ponytail so she would stop chewing on strands of it.

She could practically smell the Play-Doh and Clorox Wipes. She could see the cheerful banners that hung on the walls, and the coloring books scattered across the floor. But what stood out the most in Nola's mind was the sound of all the kids laughing and playing together before the bell rang, as well as the sound of her own crying when her mom left her behind for the very first time.

Nola smiled as she recalled the moment Marnie walked through the doors of the classroom several minutes later. She was wearing a pink polka-dot dress with puffy sleeves, white knee socks, and white patent-leather shoes with big, shiny buckles. She had a bow in her hair, too. Marnie definitely stood out, considering that most of the other kids were dressed for finger painting and freeze tag, not a *Showbiz Moms and Dads*-style beauty pageant. Nola was almost scared when Marnie flounced over to her table. Without even a "hello", Marnie had greeted a sniffling Nola with an affectionate pat on the head and a sweet grin.

Nola opened her eyes and saw that same grin on Marnie's face now.

"What was the first thing I said to you?" Marnie prompted.

"You promised to adopt me if my mom didn't come back," Nola replied.

"And?" Marnie urged.

"And you said, 'Let's play Barbies! We'll have the best time ever!'"

Marnie squeezed Nola's arm. "And we did! We had the best, Barbiest time *ever!*"

Nola simply loved Marnie at moments like these. She was an eternal optimist.

The girl made lists of *everything*, and when a situation called for Pros and Cons, Marnie only listed the Pros. Which was exactly why Nola needed her.

"You'll do just fine tomorrow, Nol," Marnie said reassuringly.

Nola took a deep breath and exhaled. "I hope so."

"Besides, this is the year when everyone is going to notice us. We're *way* cuter now. I mean, we could totally shoot for the top five guys on my Crush List. Maybe I could even go for number *one*."

Nola leaned over and picked up Marnie's margarita glass. Then she peered into it carefully.

"What are you doing?" Marnie asked.

"Just checking to see if someone spiked your lemonade." Nola grinned.

Marnie swatted her on the arm. "I can't help it. Think of all the great people we're going to meet and all the parties we'll get invited to and all the boys that we're going to kiss. Dah! I'm going to give myself a heart attack."

The girls laughed in unison.

"You're delirious from the heat, Marn," Nola said. "Don't you realize we're *freshmen*? We're the bottom feeders on the food chain. Maybe even lower."

"Leave that to me," Marnie said slyly. "In a few weeks, we'll be two of the most popular girls in our class. *Everyone* will know and adore us. And of course, no matter what happens, we'll always have each other. Promise."

Nola gave her friend a sideways glance. She wasn't sure she liked the way that sounded. She had been fine with flying under the radar in middle school. Why mess with that now? However, when she looked into Marnie's big blue eyes, she saw that they were sparkling with excitement.

Maybe I shouldn't worry so much, Nola thought. Marnie had never broken a promise in her life. So Nola breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Okay, *now* I'm psyched!” Nola exclaimed, raising her own tumbler of lemonade. “To ninth grade!”

Marnie clinked the rim of her glass against Nola's. “No, to the most spectacular year of our lives!”

Nola smiled widely. She liked the sound of that much better.

Chapter 2

THINGS TO DO THE MORNING BEFORE MY FIRST DAY OF HIGH SCHOOL

- 1) Go for a run. Take the long route and try for ten-minute miles (And don't forget to wear the sports bra this time!)
- 2) Use extra-conditioning hot oil treatment in the shower.
- 3) Clean out tote bag.
- 4) Find missing silver hoop earrings
- 5) Create KILLAH OUTFIT!
- 6) Remind Nola to bring an extra five-subject notebook.
- 7) CALL ERIN BACK!!!

Thanks to her overactive, list-happy brain, Marnie Fitzpatrick didn't get much sleep after she left Nola's place late Monday night. So at 6 A.M. the following morning, Marnie was not enthusiastic about going on her run.

She stumbled out of the house, wiping at her eyes and yawning uncontrollably. She stretched on the front porch for a while as the sun continued to rise through the clouds. She could feel the cool, crisp wind through her mesh running shorts, but even that didn't energize her. Soon Marnie realized there was only one solution: Make a pit stop at the Dunkin' Donuts on Main Street and buy a twelve-ounce cup of Turbo Iced Coffee.

Ten minutes later, she was outside the store, vigorously stirring her drink with a large straw. She finished it in about twelve big gulps and then strode down her favorite jogging route through the southwest corner of Poughkeepsie, where all the nice houses with landscaped yards and BMWs in the driveways were located.

Nola's beautiful, mauve Victorian house was nestled there on quaint, peaceful Willow Bend, while Marnie and her family lived a few blocks away, right on the corner of Generic and Suburbia. In Marnie's neighborhood, the houses were smaller, the cars were less flashy, and the people were friendlier. Still, she preferred hanging out at Nola's house and jogging through her area—Marnie couldn't help it that she liked nice things.

And, nice things were harder to come by at the Fitzpatrick residence as of late, especially since Marnie's parents had separated, and her dad had moved to Connecticut. Marnie didn't like thinking about that, but it was difficult not to when she ran. Her brain was just as much a part of the exercise as her legs were.

The caffeine really kicked in thirty minutes later, when Marnie returned to her modest three-bedroom yellow ranch house on St. Anne's Road. She dashed inside and showered, exfoliated, hot-oiled, and styled her naturally wavy blonde hair in record-breaking time. She emptied out her tote bag onto the floor and reorganized the contents. She found her silver hoop earrings in the pocket of her old tattered Levi's. She texted Nola—XTRA NTBK PLS!—and left a message on her older sister Erin's voice mail. But the most daunting task was left unfinished—she had to pick out what to wear on her first day of high school.

This decision could make or break her reputation—she knew that all too well. Four years ago, Marnie had sat at Erin’s feet and watched her dive into her closet in search of the foolproof, I-dare-you-to-stop-staring-at-me-because-I’m-just-that-perfect outfit. And it had worked. Erin had become the “it girl” of Poughkeepsie Central’s student body the minute she set a stacked-heel Mary Jane onto the school grounds.

The past four years had been known as “The Erin Era.” Right before graduation, Erin had been crowned queen of the senior prom and had even ridden on a float in the local firemen’s parade. As for Marnie, she was well liked growing up, but she never came close to Erin’s you-must-bow-down-before-me status. But lately Marnie had been telling herself, *This year all that could change.*

After weeks of putting together sample ensembles, Marnie had narrowed it down to two: a short, dark, indigo denim skirt from Abercrombie paired with a crisp white button-down, a tiny yellow vintage knit vest, and gold Steve Madden ballet flats; *or* a tight-fitting green V-neck sweater, Lucky Brand white, cropped jeans with a multicolored, striped silk tie belt, *and* her pink canvas Keds slip-ons. All of the clothes were from last season and bought on clearance, but as always, Marnie focused on the positive. Both choices sent a similar message—*Marnie Fitzpatrick is hell*a hot—but only one would make the statement with an exclamation point.

At precisely 7:15 A.M., Nola was in Marnie’s room, clutching a Mead five-subject notebook and gazing at Options 1 and 2, which were lying on top of Marnie’s neatly made sleigh bed.

“So tell me what you think already! We’re losing precious time!” Marnie’s blood was pumping with so much adrenaline and iced coffee that she was about to combust.

Nola shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. Do you have anything else?”

Marnie, clad in boxers and a tank, stopped rifling through her glittery pink makeup bag long enough to throw Nola a death stare. “Um . . . NO!”

Nola let out a hearty laugh. “I’m kidding.”

“Not funny,” Marnie growled, and then returned her attention to her bag of tricks. “Tell me something. Why are you so abnormally calm this morning?”

“Oh, I took some of my mom’s happy pills,” Nola joked. “Worked like a charm.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you brought a few for the road, because I’m about to go crazy.” Marnie found the caramel-colored lip gloss Erin had given her before she left for Penn State and held it up like she’d won a trophy. “Thank God!”

Nola brought the denim skirt to her waist and posed in front of Marnie’s mirror. “Don’t you think this is too short, Marn?”

“Yeah, that’s the point.” Marnie peered down at her lower half and smiled. Her legs did look a lot better now that her skin had some more color.

Nola shuffled over to the corner of Marnie’s room, set the notebook down on Marnie’s desk, and picked up the old tattered Levi’s that were hanging over her white swivel chair. “What about these? They look super comfy.”

“Comfy?” Marnie gave Nola a quizzical look. “Do you think the Mighty Erin Fitzpatrick would be caught dead in anything *comfy*? Do you think Sawyer Lee or Jason Naperella or Chris Gates would want to get *comfy*?”

“Ew, why would you want to impress *those* guys?” Nola sat on the swivel chair and spun around a few times.

Marnie shook her head. When it came to boys, Nola was *so* clueless. Sawyer, Jason, and Chris were numbers one, two, and three on her Crush List! How could she *not* want to impress them? Especially Sawyer. He had been the object of marnie's devout admiration since she saw him skating on the half-pipe at Waryas Park in fourth grade. He had olive-colored skin, black spiky hair that was gelled to the max, and these amazing dark eyes. Marnie practically had a conniption every time he crossed her path.

"And I wish you'd stop obsessing about Erin," Nola added.

"Easy for you to say." Marnie stepped in front of the mirror and frowned. "Erin has always gotten to be *her* first, so I'm just stuck with the label of 'Erin's little sister' for all of eternity."

Suddenly Marnie's phone began vibrating on her dresser. She scrambled for it and then sighed when she saw who it was.

Speak of the She-Devil.

"Hello?"

Erin's voice was barely audible.

"Hel-lo?" Marnie repeated loudly.

"Shhhhhh. My head is *killing* me," Erin groaned.

Marnie snickered. "Too much partying, I assume."

"Yeah, well, they call this place Happy Valley for a reason."

"What are you doing up so early?" Marnie asked.

"Ugh, I have this *stupid* eight A.M. required class. I mean, who can even *think* at this hour?" Erin mumbled.

"But you've been going to school at eight A.M. for twelve years now."

"Okay, *Mom*."

Marnie rolled her eyes. "So, I called you back 'ASAP' just like you asked me to. What's up?"

Erin sniffled. "Oh, right. I wanted to give you some sisterly advice for your first day at Po-Con."

"Uh-huh." Marnie braced herself. Erin was known for her booty-licious body and ultra-pretty face, *not* her warm and fuzzy personality.

"All you need to do is mention *me* as much as possible."

Marnie was utterly speechless.

"Seriously. Everyone *loved* me, so I suppose there's some hope for you because we, like, share the same DNA or whatever," she said coolly. "Oh, and *don't* take any leftovers from my closet because then you'll just look like a poseur."

"Thanks, Erin. I've gotta go."

Erin coughed up a "peace out" before hanging up.

Nola nudged Marnie with the tip of her Skechers. "Just ignore her, Marn."

"I'll try," Marnie said wistfully.

Nola got up and put an arm around her. "Look at it this way. If Erin saw what *I* was wearing, she'd banish me to the far reaches of Wal-Mart."

Marnie smiled. If Nola only knew how gorgeous she looked in her baby blue Lacoste polo shirt and a pair of long-frayed twill pants from Hollister. To top it all off, Nola had added the perfect accessory: one of her trademark homemade necklaces. Marnie stepped forward to get a closer look.

“Oh my god, is that made of *real* paper clips?” Marnie ran her finger along the lightweight chain of rainbow colored plastic.

“Yes, I was in a nervous panic last night and I ran out of real materials, so I raided Dad’s office supplies.” Nola’s signature crooked smile slowly revealed itself. “It’s lame, right?”

“No, it’s fabulous,” Marnie said simply as she popped the collar on Nola’s polo shirt.

And it was true. Nola may have been shy and quirky, but she had talent, creativity, and natural beauty that Marnie secretly envied. She had spent so much of her life being Nola’s best friend, and at the same time living in Erin’s shadow, that she hadn’t really figured out what made *her* stand out. Yet here she was, less than an hour away from stepping into this new frontier, with the opportunity to totally reinvent herself.

Marnie wandered over to her bed and looked at Option 1 and Option 2 carefully. But at 7:46 A.M., when she walked to the bus stop arm in arm with Nola, she was wearing Option 3, which hopefully made this statement loud and clear:

Erin who?