

The 100-Person Punishment

By Charlotte York

I stood in front of the Headmaster's Office door, feeling grim. Sweat poured down my face as my hand shakily rose to the doorknob.

I was screwed.

Suddenly the door swung open, and another kid exited the office.

Rhonda Roberts.

She glared at me, her baby blue eyes narrowing, her face and blonde hair still slightly covered with cafeteria food. I smiled back, resisting the urge to punch the narcissistic little brat, as the headmaster was sitting right behind her.

Not that he looked interested in anything going on between us two. On the contrary, he was rather *un*interested, as he was hunched over his computer, his fingers occasionally pressing a few keys. He glanced up from his device briefly to signal me in with a jerky wave. I entered hesitantly, sitting down in the uncomfortable metal chair directly in front of his desk.

There was an awkward silence as I sat, waiting for something to be said.

He finally looked up, his eyes meeting mine. "Well? The door isn't going to close itself."

I shot up from the chair, scrambling to the door. "Sorry, Mr. Nelson."

In the corner of my eye, I saw him shaking his head. "Elizabeth Stanton. You've been in here so many times this year, yet you never remember to close the door." He tutted his tongue. "Such a shame. I'm afraid you aren't living up to your namesake at all."

I resisted the urge to glare at him as I shut the door with a little extra force than necessary.

"So, what'd you do this time?" he asked, not even looking up from his screen.

I was taken aback. Didn't Rhonda tell him everything?

"Oh, and don't think about lying. I know what happened. I just want to make you say it for me again," Mr. Nelson said, finally looking up from his computer for a full second to smirk at me. I felt my temper flare and my face redden, but I forced it down. Not now.

"Well," I started, gulping, "In the lunchroom, Rhonda was prank calling people, and saying that she was certain girl students in the lunchroom—all girls she hated. She eventually called my doctor—don't ask me how she got *that* number—and said it was me calling I overheard her, so I stopped her."

"By throwing a lunch tray in her face?"

I nodded stiffly.

"And what evidence do you have that she was prank calling anyone at all?"

I was a little surprised at that. "Um, you can ask anyone in the lunchroom about it—she was practically shouting."

He shook his head. “I did not hear the same story from Rhonda and a few other students. In fact, they said *you* were prank calling people, and when Rhonda told you to stop, you assaulted her with the tray.”

“That’s a lie!” I protested, “Do you really believe that?”

“Actually,” Mr. Nelson said, “*Your* story sounds like a lie.” He twirled around in his roly chair, grinning. “I caught you, Stanton!”

“I’m not lying, so there’s nothing to *catch*,” I said, gritting my teeth together, “What other kids did you ask, some friends of Rhonda’s or some kids she probably paid off to agree with her? It’s one or the other.”

His expression changed as he snorted abrasively. “Yes, it’s true that the Roberts family is rich and very...generous to this school, that doesn’t mean you can accuse them of bribing others.”

That was it. “Have you not *seen* her? Or are you just as blinded by her family’s power as everyone else in this town?”

Mr. Nelson snapped his computer closed. “That is *enough*, Stanton!”

I crossed my arms, glowering.

“Now, considering that I gave you a final warning the last time we met, and the fact that you’ve accused Rhonda of wrongdoing three out of the five times you’ve been sent here this year, it is my pleasure to finally expel you, as you have been an unneeded problem for everyone in this school for far too long.”

I gasped. “What? Can I get, like, a final final warning?”

Mr. Nelson shook his head with glee. “You’re OUT!”

“Wait! Don’t I get a hearing? Something that I can prepare for?”

“No can do, little missy. That’s public school. Private schools are their own little thing, which means I get to do whatever I want.” He grinned.

This was bad. Like, *really* bad. This school, St. Barnaby’s Private School for Gifted Children, was a school I had worked tirelessly to get into—it was the best of the best. At least, it was the best the small town of Pigeon Pit I was stuck in could offer, but it was the best chance I had to get into Harvard, or at least any Ivy League school.

In other words, it was my everything.

“Is there *anything* I can do?” I pleaded.

He thought about that for a second. “Well...”

“What?!” I practically yelled, my body yanking itself out of my chair.

He looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. I came to the suspicion that he was dragging out his idea as long as he could just to torture me. I put on a slightly less desperate face and resisted the urge to shake his shoulders and scream as I sat back down.

A lot of time passed. I started to realize he may have forgotten me, and was back into his computer. I had to say something.

I shifted in my chair uneasily. “Headmaster, I really like this school. Like, I *really* like it. So please let me stay. Please.”

After a pause, he answered. “Hm...Stanton, ‘like’ is a very...*interesting* word.”
“It is?” I replied meekly.

“If you can get 100 people in this school to say that they like you and want you here in two days, I’ll let you stay.”

2

“That’s crazy!” I shouted, “*You* can’t even get that many people to say that they want you here!”

“That’s why I’m the headmaster,” Mr. Nelson snickered, “And that’s why that’s your punishment. Did you seriously think I was going to give you a punishment you could actually complete? Puh-*lease*. Go home. Get some sleep. You’ll need rest for your first day at the *public* school down the street.”

I felt a drowning sense of helplessness. I could feel my dreams slipping away from me, my beautiful, wonderful dreams of Harvard and neuroscience and Nobel Prizes...

“No,” I said.

Mr. Nelson met my eyes. “Pardon?”

I gave him my best steely resolve-like stare. “I’ll do your dumb punishment.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You do realize it’s impossible, right?”

I glared at him. “I’ll find a way.”

He sat up straighter in his chair. “Alright, then. Your deadline is two days from now, at 8:00 am on the dot, which really only gives you one and a half days, since you’ll be sleeping...” He trailed off as he saw my determined expression. “You’re not going to sleep, are you?”

I refrained from saying anything as I continued to stare him down.

“Welp, Stanton, you’ve wasted enough of my time already. In fact, you’ve distracted me from some very important work I have to do on my handy-dandy computer, so I suggest you head out and work on that challenge. Ta ta. Let the door hit you on the way out, won’t you?”

I strode out of his office as confidently as I could, making sure to leave the door open as I walked out just to spite him a little more.

Just as I stepped out of the entire main office, the school bells rang, signaling the end of the school day. I groaned, thinking of all the work I was going to have to make up tomorrow from the classes I missed.

And then I thought of Mr. Nelson’s punishment and nearly collapsed as I walked out of the school.

As proud of myself as I was for sticking up to that jerk, how was I supposed to even start that atrocity of a project? First of all, no one liked me at St. Barnaby’s, mostly because of Rhonda spreading malicious rumors at the beginning of the year about me going to juvie because I went to public school all my life, which was just plain stupid, but

everyone seemed to believe it. Another reason was that I was considered as somewhat of a nuisance in the school, mostly because of my temper. In other words, no one wanted me here.

Now the question was, how was I going to *make* them want me?

“Hey! Earth to Lizzie!” someone said. I looked up and saw one of the two of my best friends, Felix Penley, in my face.

“You’re going in, like, the opposite direction of your house,” he said, his curly brown hair bouncing as he spoke.

“Whoops,” I muttered, turning around.

“What’s up?” he asked, sensing my worry.

I sighed, and then told him everything.

“Whoa,” Felix said.

“Yeah! *Whoa* is right!” I said, “I don’t know what to do! No one likes me—”

“I like you,” Felix blurted.

“Well,” I said, rolling my eyes, “You don’t go to St. Barnaby’s, so you don’t count.”

Felix looked hurt.

“Anyway,” I continued, “It’s really quite impossible! And, how am I going to explain this to my *mother*?! She’ll *kill* me! What if she already *knows*—do you think she knows?”

“Um...”

“Wait, no. She can’t know. If she knew, she would sue Mr. Nelson. She’d find a way if it wasn’t legal. Mr. Nelson isn’t dumb, he’s just mean. He’ll probably just wait to tell her when—*if* I officially get expelled, when she can’t do much about it. So, then, maybe I *should* tell her.”

“Lizzie.”

“No, she would sue him *then* kill me if she knew. No way can I do that.”

“Lizzie!”

I turned to him, exasperated. “What?”

Felix fidgeted with his hands. “Um...so I know you’re all gung-ho about doing this—”

“I am *not*! I would do anything else in the *world* than this!”

He grimaced. “That’s not what I meant! Listen, Lizzie, would it be so bad to go back to public school? You have me and Megan there who actually *like* you, unlike the people here! And it’s just down the street—it would be like old times!”

I sighed. “Look, Felix, I’ve said this before. I love you guys, but—”

“Harvard. Neuroscience. Nobel Prizes. I know. I just wish you would change your mind sometimes.”

Silence ensued.

Felix took a breath. “So, you need to get people to like you, huh?”

I laughed shakily. “That’s the gist of it.”
“Well, I got nothing for you. We need Megan.”

3

“Okay, that sounds tough,” Megan, who was my other best friend, said with her fingers pinched around an apple slice, “But not unbeatable.”

“*Thank you!*” I said, thinking of Mr. Nelson’s and Felix’s words of negativity.

We were at Megan’s house on her living room rug, which was littered with first-person shooter games and controllers, as Megan was quite the gamer. Her mom had brought us a few apples on a platter as brain food, but only Felix and Megan were eating them—I was afraid I would not be able to keep them down in my anxious state. Instead, I had grabbed a sheet of paper out of my backpack and labeled it BRAINSTORMING.

“So, first things first,” Megan stated, “How many people do you *know* like you?”

I paused. “Well, I guess the gym coach...maybe Mrs. Gareth, since I’m good at math, and I guess Mr. Pilkerton and Mrs. Cologne, since I’m okay at drama and Spanish, and for sure Ms. McPapskey—I always volunteer for garbage duty during lunch.”

Megan had taken my paper and now was scribbling down all the names I had listed. She looked up briefly. “Continue?”

I blushed. “Um, that’s it.”

“Only five people at this school, who I assume are all teachers, like you?” Megan asked.

“Yeah,” I said, wincing.

Megan shook her head. “If I were you, I would just get out of that school. It’s not fun being hated.”

Felix gave me one of his annoying I-told-you-so looks.

“Well, whatever,” I said, glaring at Felix, “What’s next?”

Megan sighed. “Well, I’m kind of afraid to ask, but...how many people *hate* you?”

I told her as quickly as I could.

“*Lizzie!* Fifty-three people? What have you been *doing* in that school?” Megan exclaimed.

“It’s not me!” I protested, “Well, it kind of is, but it’s mostly Rhonda just spreading rumors! And then they hate me and try to get me and then I kind of get them back...Well, not kind of, but whatever!”

“Rhonda’s that mean girl, right?” Felix asked.

“Beyond mean!” I said, “She’s a she-demon!”

“So, what’s the deal with the other kids?” Megan inquired.

I shrugged. “Either they don’t know me or they don’t care.”

“And how many of those kids are there?” Megan asked.

“300, give or take,” I said.

Felix whistled. “That’s the whole school? That’s *tiny!*”

“But it’ll be enough—more than enough actually,” Megan said, scribbling a 300 with a whole bunch of question marks around it on the paper, “What we need to do is in three words: form, execute, and reap.

“Can we make that an acronym? Like FER?” Felix asked hopefully.

I rolled my eyes. “Continue, Megan.”

“Form, meaning like form a plan, would be us right now. Execute would then be tomorrow, which would be Lizzie executing our supposedly brilliant plan. And finally, reap would be from when Lizzie successfully executes the plan to when her time is up. That step will basically be the most important one, since that’s her actually getting the 100 people to say or give proof that they like her.”

“So, plan time,” I said, “What’s a good plan...?”

We all sat there for a few moments.

“What about if you get everyone to sign a petition saying they want you,” Felix said, “That would be good, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, “But Mr. Nelson might bring all those people in to see if they really signed the petition. There’d be nothing stopping them from telling him that they really didn’t like me after all.”

Nevertheless, Megan put it on the list under the circled 300.

“Oh, what about a rumor that you make up that gets passed around that says that if they tell Mr. Nelson they like you, they each get pizza, except for you can figure out a way to not give them pizza by doing something really tricky,” Felix suggested in a stream of words.

“What would that trick be?” Megan asked.

Felix shrugged. “I dunno. You guys make up that part.”

Megan and I both exchanged a look.

“What?” Felix said, “I’m the only one actually coming up with ideas here!”

Megan sighed. “Well, whatever plan we *do* make up, we have to make sure this Rhonda girl doesn’t find out about it, or else she’ll try to mess it up. Felix, I’m talking to you right now—keep your mouth shut at all costs around her.”

“Got it,” Felix said, “Hey, Lizzie, are you okay there?”

“I got an idea,” I said.

4

I stepped into the school the following morning, my eyes scanning the halls for my least favorite person in the world: Rhonda Roberts. I kept telling myself that nothing bad was going to happen, that meeting Rhonda was all part of the plan, but the butterflies in my stomach were feeling otherwise. Finally, I spotted her in the center of a gigantic

group of students, trying to get some poor sap to crush on her. As soon as she saw me approaching, however, she dropped the act.

“*YOU*,” she spewed, a long red fingernail pointing at me accusingly, “*WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?*”

The crowd got the signal to boogie on down to their classes right then, so in five seconds flat it was just Rhonda and I in the hallway, for the exception of a few stragglers who either wanted to see what happened or were clueless about Rhonda’s current rage.

“Rhonda,” I said as calmly as I could manage, glancing at the stragglers, “Can we go somewhere more private?” I gestured to the girl’s bathroom.

“NO,” she said, “Let’s talk. *RIGHT* here, *RIGHT* now.”

I panicked a bit, since that reaction was a little off the plan. “Well, I guess I won’t tell you how I didn’t get expelled then...” I started to walk away slowly, letting the suspense build until...

Rhonda sighed. “You *disgust* me,” she scoffed, and entered the bathroom. I breathed a sigh of relief and then followed her in.

“Everyone *OUT!*” Rhonda yelled. Panic filled my body as stalls popped open and girls came out of them with their heads down. I quickly positioned myself in front of the last stall, which was closed, hoping Rhonda wouldn’t notice.

After she was done yelling, she turned to me, arms crossed. “Okay, talk. How did you not get expelled? I made sure it would happen. I mean, I paid Mr. Nelson and everything.”

I shifted on my feet anxiously. “He did expel me. But then he made me a deal.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What deal? How did I not know about a deal?”

I shrugged my shoulders, trying to appear nonchalant. “He challenged me to do something easy by tomorrow morning. In fact, it’s so easy I figured why not play with my fate a little and get my enemy involved in it?”

She shook her head. “No way you’d be that stupid. No deal.” She started to walk out of the bathroom. My pulse increased significantly. She couldn’t walk out!

“Wait!” I called to her.

She turned to me in a fancy fashion. “What, you’re gonna spew more lies to me now?”

I sighed, frustrated that I was going to improvise the plan a little. “No, I’ll tell you the truth now.”

Rhonda smiled sweetly. “Spill.”

“So, Mr. Nelson did strike a deal with me, but the task is to get 100 people to like me by tomorrow morning. I was hoping to enlist your help...?”

Rhonda looked stunned. “Wow, you really *ARE* a dumbo, aren’t you? No way in this *WORLD* would I help you—in fact, I’m gonna go do the opposite right now, so if you would *excuse* me...” She strolled out of the restroom, her red high heels clicking

irritatingly on the stone tile floor. I just sat there, feeling angry and confused, wondering why the plan didn't work.

I suddenly felt the stall door behind me pushing at my back, and I stepped forward, allowing Megan to come out of her hiding place.

"Well, that went well," she said with her clunky old flip phone that she was recording with still in hand.

"Yeah, *sure* it did," I ranted, "I managed to fail the plan *and* get Rhonda after me in three minutes flat! I mean, I totally blew it! I didn't get her to say yes to the high-stakes rap battle at lunch, where I would win because we practiced all night freestyling at your house, and then where she would reluctantly get everyone to sign a petition that said they liked me because we had video proof of her making the deal...what?" I stopped, noticing Megan's big grin.

She simply pushed the play button on her phone, and Rhonda's voice rang out, "I paid him and everything."

"We got her now," Megan exclaimed, "for bribing the headmaster!"

5

For the second time that week I was sent to Mr. Nelson's office, only this time I had sent myself. He seemed surprised to see me, although he didn't express emotions very well in the first place, as most of his face was focused on a screen.

"Aaah, Stanton. Here to forfeit, I'm guessing?"

"Quite the opposite, actually," I stated, and then slapped Megan's phone on his desk (Megan had to hurry off to school, and I didn't have a phone myself, so she left hers with me as evidence). "Watch," I ordered, pulling up the video on the phone screen.

And, for the first time in forever, his gaze almost completely broke from his computer as he watched our conversation.

Once the video ended, Mr. Nelson sighed. "It appears you've been right all along, Ms. Stanton."

I beamed at the fact that he was agreeing with me and the fact that he called me 'Ms.' Stanton. "I *knew* it! I *knew* this school was corrupted! I promise not to show anyone else this video if you let me off my punishment and promise to not expel me from this school ever again," I said.

"Is this...the only copy of it?" Mr. Nelson asked carefully.

"Yup," I said, "And I promise on my own life that I will destroy it once—"

Suddenly, Mr. Nelson's hand shot off his keyboard with admirable agility and grabbed Megan's phone.

"Hey!" I yelled, stunned.

He tapped a few things on the chunky keypad, and then smiled wickedly, tossing the phone back to me.

I glanced at the phone and in horror I realized he had deleted the video.

“You think I’d just let you keep that?” he snickered, “Are you kidding me? With my spotless reputation here at St. Barnaby’s?” He shook his head, sneering. “No, I couldn’t just let you do that.

“I...” I stuttered, at a loss for words.

“The punishment is still on, *Stanton*,” he chortled, “I am a little...unprofessional sometimes, but I don’t break promises. Actually, I do, but I just want to see you fail even more now.”

“I can tell someone!” I shouted, “You’ll be known to take bribes from very rich families and you’ll never be allowed to be a headmaster or principal again!”

He sneered. “Ah, but it’s your words against mine and the Roberts family’s, isn’t it? After all, you have no proof!”

“I thought you were better than this!” I spat, “I mean, sure, I suspected you were controlled by the Roberts family and I knew you were a horrible headmaster, but I never expected you stoop so *low*! You expect a grown man to have some dignity!”

He shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say? After all, it’s not like I have the power and status to expel a certain someone tomorrow morning—oh wait, I DO.”

“I still have one more day,” I stated, standing up from the metal chair, “It’s only...” I checked Megan’s phone. “Oh my gosh, it’s 11 in the morning already?!”

Mr. Nelson nodded snootily.

“Well, I can still do it,” I said as confidently as I could.

Mr. Nelson snorted. “*Please*. You haven’t gotten proof that a single person has liked you, let alone 100!” He laughed. “Tell you what. If you magically get my task done, I’ll even throw in invincibility from being expelled *and* suspended.”

“Fine,” I said, walking towards the door, fuming.

“That’s how little faith in you I have!” he added.

I slammed the door shut as hard as I could.

As I walked out of the main office, I felt the unfamiliar urge to cry.

I shook my head. *Stantons* didn’t cry—especially one named after the infamous Elizabeth Cady Stanton. That’s why my mom named me after her—to give me strength in the hardest and most unfair situations.

Well, it isn’t working, I thought as I involuntarily sniffled.

It was just so obscenely...*unfair*. Not to mention surprisingly twisted.

When I switched from public school to private school, I thought that everything in public schools that was wrong would be magically fixed. Sure, the sanitation was way better, and so was the awful cafeteria food my old public school had served. But the people never changed. There were always those infectious mean kids in any school, except for this one you had to pay a fee to be near them.

But that doesn't matter, I thought, trying to boost my own morale, Once you get into Harvard and go into neuroscience and become a Nobel Prize winner, you won't have to worry about mean people anymore.

I checked my watch. It was still 11, which was just the beginning my free period, followed by lunch at 12. I thought about going back to science class to pick up the homework, and then thought better of it, worrying I would have to face the wrath of Rhonda.

Instead, I decided to pay Felix and Megan a visit to break the news.

6

After a few minutes of pondering why people are naturally selfish and greedy while I walked slowly, I reached the front doors of the red-bricked school I had left only 6 months before. My finger was slightly trembling as it reached out to push the security buzzer so the door would unlock. I didn't know how everyone would react to me showing up. After all, I had basically just packed up and ran off to St. Barnaby's without really saying goodbye.

I took a deep breath.

It was going to be fine.

Right?

I pushed the buzzer.

A doorbell-like noise played through the outer speakers and through the windows I could see a person inside checking to make sure I wasn't a danger to the school through the security camera.

Only, instead of the door unlocking, I heard the intercom click on.

"Elizabeth Stanton. What a surprise."

I immediately recognized the voice. "Tameka, why are you in the main office?"

"Why are *you* here? Shouldn't you be in Hoity-toityville right now?" Tameka scoffed.

I raised an eyebrow. "Jeez, I thought you would be the one who would be the *most* happy about my change of schools."

"Are you kidding?" she spat, "I've been SO BORED here without you! You were my enemy! My competition! Now I've got no one to beat, and it sucks."

Suddenly, I heard a scuffle. I peered into the windows and saw Mrs. Pickrunner, the school secretary, pushing Tameka away from the intercom button. I leaned on the doors, intrigued in the argument, until they suddenly unlocked and I stumbled forward into the school. Mrs. Pickrunner immediately burst from the office doors, her large frame almost touching both ends of the door frame.

"Elizabeth? Is that really you?" Mrs. Pickrunner exclaimed, running toward me at a rate I thought was not humanly possible.

“Yes,” I said, trying to get up as fast as possible to avoid being pummeled by Mrs. Pickrunner’s ginormous loafer-clad feet.

“Sweetie, I missed you *bundles!*” Mrs. Pickrunner cried, pulling me into a rib-crushing hug, “This school hasn’t been the same without you!”

“Get a room!” Tameka shouted.

Mrs. Pickrunner glared over her shoulder toward the office. “I can replace you, Tameka!”

I heard Tameka sigh. “Whatever.”

“So, what brings you back to Pigeon Pit Public, sweet girl?” Mrs. Pickrunner asked, her smile returning.

“I was actually looking for Megan Thurner and Felix Penley. Do you know what classes they’re in right now?”

“Oh, those two,” Mrs. Pickrunner laughed, “I should have guessed. I believe Megan is in Mr. Dorsey’s class taking a test, but Felix is in P.E. I’m sure he’d be quite charmed to have a visitor to pull him from his least favorite period. But, before you go, I have to wonder why you aren’t in class?”

“Ooooh! Elizabeth the great, skippin’ class!” Tameka shouted from behind a filing cabinet.

“Pipe down!” Mrs. Pickrunner yelled.

“Oh, it’s my free period,” I answered.

“So, they just let you wander all over town during free period at St. Barnaby’s?” Mrs. Pickrunner asked with a suspicious glance.

I nervously gulped. The truth was, when I tried to leave the school, the guidance counselor had stopped me. However, Mr. Nelson stepped in and simply laughed, telling the guidance counselor I could “go all the way to the Empire State Building” if I wanted to. It gave me chills how little confidence he had in me.

I didn’t want to reveal that whole drama to Mrs. Pickrunner, though. It would just cause more trouble for me, not to mention that she might say something to my strict and stern mother who I believed had no clue what was going on.

So, I simply replied, “Yes.”

“Hrm,” Mrs. Pickrunner said, “Alright then. You know where to go. It was good seeing you, darlin’!”

“G’bye now, sweets!” Tameka said in an imitation of Mrs. Pickrunner as I walked away toward the gym.

“Tameka, I *swear...*” I heard Mrs. Pickrunner’s reprimands fade away as the gymnasium came nearer. I looked around, feeling uneasily sad and wistful as I passed through the junior high halls I had known since 2 years before, in 6th grade. I remembered all the memories I’d had with my instant best friends Megan and Felix, all the carefree days we’d had where we’d all whisper about the teachers and groan at the cafeteria food, all the crazy situations I’d find myself in thanks to my undying spirit.

I missed it. A lot.

I suddenly found myself at the gymnasium doors. Just as I was about to open them after mentally preparing myself to see all my old friends and foes, the door to my left burst open, causing me to narrowly jump out of the way.

“Hey!” I said, yelling from behind the door.

“Lizzie?” the person asked.

I groaned with half-anger, half-relief. “Felix, I swear, you almost gave me a concussion.”

He grinned, walking over to the water fountain. “That’s my specialty. So, how’d it go?”

“You’re not going to ask why I’m here?” I asked sarcastically, “Because it seems like everyone loves that question today.”

“Well, I would, but I’m more concerned on how your confrontation with the headmaster about bribes and all that stuff went.”

I sighed. “So Megan told you about that, huh?”

“Well, *yeah*. So spill already.” Felix said, starting to slurp up water from the fountain.

I told him my spiel.

Felix was silent, lost in thought.

“Felix?” I asked, “Hellooo? Were you even listening?”

He looked directly into my eyes so suddenly I startled and took a tiny, quick step back. “I have an idea,” he said confidently.

I exhaled. “Okay, then tell.”

The bell suddenly rang, and students came pouring out of the surrounding classrooms. I checked my watch, and saw it was already 12.

I looked back at Felix. “But quickly, because I gotta motor.”

He turned around, starting to disappear into the swarm of kids. “I have work to do. Don’t worry about a thing, Lizzie, I got your situation covered!”

“What?” I yelled, “Felix, wait! What are you doing?” I tried to run after him, but was held back by the thickening crowd of kids surrounding me. After ten seconds of trying to fight the people torrent, I gave up and turned back towards the school office. So much for help from Felix.

I was about to go look for Megan when I checked my watch. It was dangerously close to my next period. No matter what Mr. Nelson said, I was not missing debate class.

I could only hope Felix knew what he was doing.

I fidgeted nervously with a strand of my hair, glancing at the math test in front of me. Usually, I could ace an easy test like this one without breaking a sweat, but today my mind was elsewhere.

Most specifically on whether I was going to be expelled or not.

Of course, knowing my friend, I hadn't really trusted Felix to fix my problem. I had spent the rest of the day trying to get people to like me the old-fashioned way—attempting to be absurdly mainstream. No matter what I did, however, Rhonda or one of her lackeys were always there to stop it.

I sadly glanced at the second sheet of paper on my desk. It was a list of people who vowed to say they liked me, and so far I only had the five names I had named to Megan.

I sighed, burying my face into my hands. Math was the last period of the day, and it was already halfway over.

In other words, I was doomed.

Suddenly, the intercom crackled on.

“All students and faculty, report to the front of the school. No exceptions are—” The voice cut off quickly, clearly interrupted. I gasped, realizing who was on the intercom.

“Tameka?” I muttered to myself, “What are you doing here?”

The class, obviously intrigued by the vague and mysterious message on the intercom, eagerly poured out the door into the hallway.

“You still have to take your . . .” Mrs. Gareth shouted after us, and then gave up. “Screw this. Something’s going down, I’m gonna see it.”

After 5 minutes of wading through the throng of excited students, I finally made it out to the front of the school. Outside, there were a group of 3 people standing on top of boxes, looking as if they were waiting for something. I immediately recognized them and realized exactly what was happening.

“Felix, you son of a gun!” I whispered.

Suddenly, one of the people whipped out a bullhorn.

“EVERYBODY SHUT UP!” Tameka shouted into the bullhorn.

“Hey!” someone shouted, “You’re the girl who went on the intercom and then broke it so no one else could use it!”

Tameka tried again. “IF YOU VALUE YOUR EARS I SUGGEST YOU SHUT UP *RIGHT NOW* OR ELSE I’LL SCREAM!”

The crowd hushed with nervous silence. I think they sensed that Tameka could and would commit to her threat.

“THANK YOU,” Tameka yelled, and handed the bullhorn to another figure.

“We’ve brought you here today to talk about Elizabeth Stanton. Not the past-day one, but the present,” Felix stated into the bullhorn.

“BOOOO!” someone shouted.

“She sucks!” someone else yelled.

I bowed my head a little in embarrassment.

Felix passed the bullhorn to someone else.

“We’re not going to talk about how bad she is or how she’s a horrible, awful person,” Megan shouted into the bullhorn, “We’re also not going to talk her up. We’re just stating the cold, hard facts about her.”

I frowned. Cold, hard facts did not sound like a good idea.

Felix sighed, taking the bullhorn back. “So, as you all know, Lizzie can be a bit of a pain—no, a HUGE pain. She tends to argue and debate a lot for pretty much anything. She also may come off as irritable and nosy.”

Tameka snatched the bullhorn from Felix. “Not to mention stuck-up and a know-it-all!”

Megan wrestled the bullhorn back. “But, if you really get to know her, she’s a lot more than that. She’s a great friend...”

“...A great partner,” Felix said.

“...And an okay competitor.” Tameka finished with a haughty tone.

“To prove this, we’re not just going to list a string of words about her being good and awesome,” Megan said.

“Because that would be really lame,” Tameka added.

“Instead, we’re going to share a few anonymous stories that people wrote today that show what we mean, and let them show Lizzie’s character themselves,” Megan said.

8

Felix pulled a wad of papers out of his pocket and passed them around. I realized in that time how quiet the front lawn of the school was. A pin could drop 300 feet away and I’d be able to hear it.

“Ahem,” Felix said, clearing his throat, “In 6th grade, I was kind of the laughing stock of the school. Kids from all grades would line up and make fun of my weight and my height and my *everything*. Then Elizabeth stepped in. In a bullying assembly, when everyone was saying they were bully-free and all that, she raised her hand, stood up, and pointed at me, saying ‘Why are we making fun of this kid then? What makes him the exception to bully-free?’ You’d expect something like that to make me want to disappear, but it didn’t. I just smiled and grinned, realizing the horrible days where I was afraid to go to school were gone.”

I smiled, tears welling up in my eyes. That was his story. I had almost forgotten I did that for him, starting our friendship.

Megan took the bullhorn. “In 7th grade, I was the new kid. I was so scared to go to the first day of school because I was afraid I wouldn’t fit in, and everyone would hate or just ignore me. And for the most part, I was spot on—no one knew me, and no one cared.

Except for one person—Elizabeth. She actually took time out of her life to say hi to me, to see what was going on in my life, to argue with kids who were picking on my newness. She was kind of my savior.”

I started to realize what was happening. They were sharing their stories of how I helped them.

It made me feel indescribably happy.

Tameka rolled her eyes, and grabbed the bullhorn. “So, I was a kid who thought I was on top of my game before I went to middle school. I was smart and aggressive and pretty much thought of as the best. That was until Elizabeth and I met. She gave me something to beat, because she was truly amazing at all the things I was. At first I hated it, and I hated her. But then I started slowly liking the competition, mostly because she wasn’t mean to me. She treated me as her equal, and she treats everyone the same because of it. She’s a fair person. Mic drop.”

Felix quickly took back the bullhorn before Tameka actually did a mic drop with it.

“So, why are we saying these things? Why have we called an entire meeting to talk about this person?” he asked.

“Well,” Megan said, “Elizabeth is actually about to be expelled from this school. The only way she stays and influences this school for better is if she gets 100 people from here to say that they like her. The way you do that is if you participate in this.”

Felix held up a sleek iPhone that I assumed was Tameka’s because it had a giant T on the front of it.

“With this,” he said, “We will record you vowing that you support and want Elizabeth at your school.”

“So, what do you say?” Tameka roared at the crowd, “Do you want a valuable person in or out of your school?”

9

I yanked open Mr. Nelson’s door the next morning at 8:00 sharp.

“Ah, Stanton. Horrible to see you. Please, don’t make yourself comfortable,” Mr. Nelson said bluntly without taking his eyes off his monitor screen yet again. I closed the door behind me only for privacy, not because of the fact that I was trying to please him. However, Mr. Nelson took it the second way.

“Stanton, there’s absolutely no way you can make this better for yourself,” he chuckled, “Your friends up on top of those boxes yesterday didn’t help a smidgen once Rhonda started digging into them. That’s why I let them get away without a single charge against them—or *you*, as a matter of fact! You don’t have a single bit of proof that people like you, do you?”

I smiled, and laid down a sheet of paper on his desk.

“Oh, what’s this? Are these...signatures?” Mr. Nelson asked, sliding the paper toward him.

“Yup,” I said. “That’s proof.”

“Not unless I—” Mr. Nelson ripped it in half, “—make it go away.” He smiled smugly.

I pulled out a copy of the signatures out of my bag.

“Well, isn’t that just...*swell*,” Mr. Nelson growled, “How many copies...do you have?”

I shrugged. “I just kept printing until the librarian kicked me out because I was using too much ink.”

“You used the—wait, these aren’t St. Barnaby’s signatures!” Mr. Nelson exclaimed, “These are signatures of your public school friends *aren’t* they?” He grinned snakily. “I *caught* you, Stanton!”

I grinned. “I know.” Felix had given it to me after his whole presentation, saying that he got everyone at the school to sign it.

Mr. Nelson looked confused. “Well, then...what are you pulling here?”

“I’m going back to the public school,” I said.

Mr. Nelson’s jaw dropped. “Wha...what?”

“I realized in the last few days that I know where my real friends are. I thought I could make it work here, I thought that my dreams would help me push through, that people would automatically change when I got where I wanted to be, but the truth is, no matter where you are, you’re always going to have challenges. Mean people exist. But so do good people. And when you’re surrounded by good people, there’s nothing that isn’t possible. Like becoming a Harvard graduate neuroscientist with a Nobel Prize.”

Mr. Nelson closed his mouth. “Well, that’s great. Good for you. Now leave.”

“Actually, before I go,” I said, and my hand darted to his computer monitor, turning it towards my direction.

“Hey!” he protested.

On the screen was minecraft in full screen.

“It’s not what it looks like...” Mr. Nelson pleaded.

“You *disgust* me,” I replied, quoting my archenemy Rhonda Roberts.

And then I walked away.