



CHAPTER ONE TURF WARS

“Sa-weet!”

Alexis Helena Cournos dropped her backpack and sprinted into the sun-drenched, fourteenth-floor apartment, thrilled to be the first roommate to arrive. She could feel it in her bones: This summer would go down in Alexis-history as *The Coolest. Ever.*

All she had to do was play by the rules — easier said than done.

She’d applied to Top Model Prep on a total lark, and hadn’t expected to actually get in. Models were all about enigmatic beauty, sultriness, and allure. Alexis knew she was more the girl-next-door type: cute in a sunny-side-up, sparkly way.

But somehow she’d been accepted into the toughest modeling competition in the USA.

And now, on July first, here she was in New York City, one thousand miles, and a million already fading memories, away from boring Hamtramck,

Michigan. Alexis glanced out the window, down at the horn-honking yellow taxicabs gliding toward Broadway, at the hustle and bustle of fashionistas and hipsters streaming in and out of swanky boutiques. She couldn't believe she was a part of it, the world's biggest and coolest playground.

Alexis turned away from the window to continue her tour of the apartment. The common room was welcoming, with cushiony L-shaped couches and a nicked coffee table. The bathroom was all marble and ivory, with a humongous old-fashioned claw-foot bathtub. Alexis had only ever seen anything like it in pictures. In person, it beckoned her to strip down, turn on the gushing faucets, and jump in. She pictured herself under a down blanket of foaming bubbles, head tipped back, her long corkscrew curls draped over the bathtub rim. Her first modeling shoot! Maybe she'd suggest it to the photographers.

Alexis caught her reflection in the lighted mirror and laughed. Her tangled mop of strawberry frizz flew wild. Her freckles threatened a hostile takeover of her shoulders. Not such a model-worthy look. But as long as no one saw the word *imposter* stamped on her forehead, she'd be all right.

Feeling a nervous pang, Alexis wondered about her three roommates, who'd probably show up soon. She hoped at least one or two would be normal girls, not statuesque, perfect, privileged princesses who felt entitled to win (and probably were). Alexis swallowed hard. What if everyone was not only model-worthy, but model-stereotypical as well: dim, demanding, surly, petty, backstabbing, or morose? Not having a friend here would truly suck.

Whatever, since she was there and they weren't, Alexis figured she had dibs on beds.

There were two bedrooms. One was large, yellow, and square-shaped, arranged as a triple. It had a dorm room vibe, with a bunk bed hugging one wall and a single twin perpendicular to it. Three tall, narrow windows let in a lot of light, and there was an actual walk-in closet — she'd never been in one before!

The other bedroom was across from the common room. Smaller than the triple, it was gussied up (as her grandma would say) in shades of pinks and purples, with one duvet-covered bed, a desk, fringed lampshade, tallboy bureau, and closet. All the room needed was posters of kittens and daisies

to remind Alexis of her girlie-girl bedroom from back home.

Alexis didn't need to deliberate. She claimed her space immediately.

What a dump.

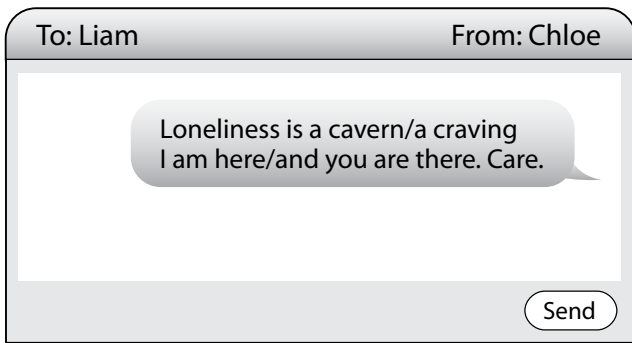
Chloe Huntley had barely managed to drag her Louis Vuitton luggage into that claustrophobia-inducing, creaking elevator — no paying student, let alone next top model, should have been exposed to it — only to have to find her way here. Clearly, Suite 14C had long ago been an opulent apartment, but was now going for a shabby-chic dorm look, and only managing the shabby part.

She couldn't bring herself to investigate. It was bad enough being forced to breathe this stale, dank air in the aptly named “common” room. With its bad lighting, drab draperies, and ancient furniture, the place was in need of an interior designer or a wrecking ball, whichever could get there first. Why her mother had sent her three thousand miles and a bunch of time zones away from her actual life was a mystery. She was going to be a super-model anyway, like it or not. That was a gimme.

Eight weeks of enforced detention, that's what

this summer felt like. Two months wasted in some smiley-face competition, dumped into a sea of wannabes most likely to be nobodies.

Dispirited, Chloe adjusted the hem of her Jason Wu minidress and dropped onto a saggy club chair. She promptly whipped out her iPhone and texted the love of her life, Liam Lattimore.



When texting with her back-home BFFs, Chloe was all about “OMG”s and “BTW”s. But Liam knew the *real* her.

With all the patience of a hummingbird on Red Bull, she kept looking for an instant response. None came.

She reminded herself that it was still early in California, especially for her boyfriend, who, on weekends, rarely stirred before the crack of noon. Plus, she knew that after Liam had driven her to

the airport last night and kissed her good-bye, he'd gone with some of his buddies to The Kresse, the hottest club in LA. Just thinking about the bright lights of Sunset Boulevard made a wave of homesickness crash over Chloe.

“Hi there!”

Chloe gave a start and glanced up to see a freckled sprite hovering over her. Judging by her outfit — green Old Navy tank top, Gap jeans, flip-flops — it was clear that this wannabe competitor hailed from one of the flyover states. Still, nothing about her said “all-American girl.” Her hair was carrot-colored, with glints of amber, her eyes flicked from blue to green. And her lashes, thick, long, and charcoal — the kind Chloe's friends dropped serious money on at Beverly Hills salons — were unsettlingly real.

“I was so busy getting unpacked, I didn't hear anyone come in,” roommate-girl rambled on. “Isn't this place amazing? I'm Alexis, by the way. And you're — ”

Underwhelmed. And miserable. Chloe masked her feelings behind her veneer-perfect smile, and tossed her gleaming blond locks over her shoulder.

“Chloe Huntley,” she replied, bracing herself for Alexis’s inevitable jaw-drop of recognition. But the other girl’s expression remained blank, if still over-eager. Chloe felt a rush of relief. Alexis had no clue who Chloe was — or wasn’t. In LA, people either thought she was a cast member from *The Hills*, or instantly realized that she was the exact replica of her mother, supermodel Charlotte Huntley.

“Where’s your stuff?” Alexis asked, looking around.

“Outside.” Chloe motioned toward the hallway. “I was about to drag it in.”

“I’ll help,” Alexis offered.

Chloe gave a sigh, abandoning her iPhone on the chair along with the hope that Liam would wake up anytime soon. She rose up in her platform Stuart Weitzman slides, noticing right away how drastically under the modeling height requirement Alexis was. The girl had to be five-six on a really good Manolo day. Which meant that she’d probably be one of the ten hopefuls booted off in the first session, and therefore no competition at all to Chloe.

But do I even want to win? Chloe asked herself

before pushing the thought away and following Alexis to the door.

“I was told there was a single here,” Chloe mentioned casually, hoping early-bird Alexis hadn’t assumed the solo room would be hers.

“Go for it.” Alexis pointed to the doorway on the other side of the common room. “I’m all about bunk beds. I took the top one!”

Good choice. Chloe smirked to herself. Alexis was probably the only one small enough to not bang her head on the ceiling when she sat upright.

“Excuse me, *what* is going on here?” Lindsay Robinson demanded, pausing at the entrance to the private room. She put one hand on the hip of her high-waisted gray trousers, into which she’d tucked a snug white tank top, the better to showcase her curves and cocoa-colored skin.

Lindsay was floored by the sight before her: a skinny Barbie type — *Chloe Huntley*, Lindsay realized, recognizing the girl’s impeccable features from the pages of *Us Weekly* — was hanging up her designer clothes in the closet while her suitcases lay splayed open on the bed. Lindsay gritted her teeth. She had specifically asked Top

Model Prep for a single. That had been a non-negotiable.

“Um, can I help you?” Chloe asked coolly, scooping up a Michael Stars shrug from her suitcase.

“*Um*, yeah, you can,” Lindsay snapped, tightening her slim silver headband over her puffy dark curls. “The private room is supposed to be mine.”

Chloe blinked, then shook her head. “That can’t be. The school pre-reserved this room for me. You’ll be staying with Alexis in the triple.”

Lindsay felt herself reddening. She inhaled a deep, three-part yoga breath and exhaled an Emmy-worthy performance of a reply. “Well, someone with actual on-camera experience requires more privacy. The school knows that.”

There. With one sharp well-delivered quip, she’d put Chloe, “I’m Charlotte Huntley’s look-alike daughter,” in her place. She’d let her know that being a star — even a fading star — trumps being a model-spawn. So what if Chloe’s mother had once been the world’s biggest supermodel? *She* was Lindsay Robinson, and she wasn’t sharing a room, let alone a triple!

“Ooh, what kind of on-camera experience? Like, commercials and stuff?” asked the bright-eyed redhead who suddenly cropped up next to Lindsay. *Alexis*, Lindsay guessed, trying not to roll her brown eyes.

Have you never watched TV? Lindsay wanted to bark. *What cave did you just crawl out of?*

“Whatever,” Lindsay huffed instead, whipping her cell phone out of her Anya Hindmarch for Target clutch. “I’ll take care of this. I’m calling Ms. Devachan and making sure I’m moved into my rightful spot.”

“Ms. Devachan?” Chloe smiled smugly. “You mean Aunt Vickie? She and my mom have been friends for ages.”

Lindsay sucked in a sharp breath, knowing that the model-spawn had played her trump card. Fine. Chloe may have won this battle, but she was going to lose the war.

Big-time.

Lindsay dropped her cell back in the clutch and turned on the chunky heel of her Baby Phat sandal. “Keep the lame room, then,” she hissed over her shoulder. “It’s not like I’ll be spending that much time here anyway. I’ll be taking meetings

with my agents and going to parties with my friends.”

“You mean you’re *from* New York?” Alexis squealed, leading Lindsay through the common area. “That’s ah-mazing! You have to show me around the city. . . .”

Lindsay let Alexis walk ahead and prattle on while she came to an abrupt stop, her attention diverted by something on a nearby chair. An iPhone. But whose? Could it belong to Chloe? Lindsay felt a prickle of excitement.

She’d been part of the “industry” long enough to know what winning was all about: ruthless manipulation and cunning. Which meant she had absolutely no qualms about reaching for the phone, ready to see what secrets —

“D’Neese?”

The iPhone slipped out of Lindsay’s hand, dropping back onto the chair. She jerked her head up to see a dazzling, sun-streaked brunette with almond-shaped dark eyes standing in the doorway.

“That was your name, right?” the girl continued in a heavy Middle Eastern accent. “On the TV show?”

“Yeah, but it’s Lindsay in real life,” Lindsay muttered, half flattered and half annoyed that her little recon mission had been interrupted.

“I’m Shiva-Rose Safir,” the girl said, dropping her camouflage duffel onto the floor. “From Haifa. Israel.”

Isn’t that peachy, Lindsay thought, scowling. *The only one who recognizes me isn’t even from this country!*

“Wow,” Shiva-Rose went on, walking over to Lindsay and beaming. “My first day in New York, and I’ve already met a star.”

“A star?” Chloe echoed, popping her blond head out of the single room and looking confused.

“What? You don’t know? She played D’Neese on *Yes, We Blend!*” Shiva-Rose gushed while Lindsay bristled.

Chloe’s sky blue eyes widened. “OMG!” she exclaimed, “That was *you*? I’d never have guessed. You used to be adorable! What happened?”

Did she seriously just say that?

Lindsay balled her hands into fists, ready to snark back, when the iPhone on the chair let out a chirping sound. At the same instant, Lindsay felt her own cell phone buzz in her clutch while

Shiva-Rose dug into the pocket of her carpenter capri pants.

“Oh, *there’s* my phone!” Chloe cried, rushing over and snatching up the iPhone. “I was looking for it all over. Hey, it’s a text from Aunt Vickie!”

“Did you guys just get a text?” Alexis asked, barreling out of the triple with her cell phone held aloft.

Still vowing to exact revenge upon Chloe, Lindsay whipped out her cell and read the message that all the girls had received:

**Welcome to Top Model Prep!
Meet me in an hour on the
rooftop deck of SoHo House
for poolside mocktails, hors
d’oeuvres, and orientation.
And be ready to take NYC by
storm!**

xoxo

V