

Chapter One

Call me pessimistic, but I am convinced my parents dropped out of parenting school before they got to the part on parenting your teenage daughter. And the most important course they skipped was the one titled, “Making Decisions That Will Benefit Your Teenage Daughter; Not Ones That Will Scar Her For Life.” If they *had* taken this course, they would never have decided to abandon me the summer I turned thirteen.

Let me provide some context. When a girl turns thirteen, she enters the second phase of what my best friend Savannah and I jokingly call the Hormone Hurricane. In phase one, when I was ten, my hormones were like scattered showers. The showers brought some flooding here and there, you know, harmless spit like snapping at my parents for no reason or locking myself in my room for hours at a time. But by the time I hit thirteen, things intensified and became way more torrential.

For example, one day, I found myself staring at a massive zit, blinking back at me like a third eye, and I refused to go to school for a week. Another day, it was a growth spurt that

caused me to trip over my own feet in front of all the cool kids. And if that wasn't enough, at thirteen my brain became flooded with life or death questions I never considered before: "Who's it fire to be seen with? Will the world accept the shape of my nose? Should I wear my regular shorts or push the envelope and wear my jaw-dropping shorts?"

But the worst part of the hormone hurricane has to be the arrival of your parents' unrealistic expectations. If you have crazy successful parents like I do, the kind you don't have a prayer of ever being as good as, you're royally screwed. What Mom and Dad used to consider 'good enough' like a grade on a science project or my softball batting average, is now *nowhere near* good enough. And that brings me back to where I started: my summer of abandonment. It should be written into law that summer vacation for a thirteen-year-old girl is a two-month retreat from all the awkward life changes she has to deal with the other ten months of the year. Which is why I was so F-ing ticked off when Mom and Dad dropped their bombshell the week before summer started.

"Grandma and Grandpa are really excited you'll be spending the summer with them," Mom said. Boom!

"Wha wha...what?! I asked.

"There's nothing like summers in Hammondsport," Mom said.

"But why?!"

"Because," Mom said.

"Because?" I asked. "That's the best you can do?"

"As your mother, it's not my job to explain every decision," she said.

"Got it," I said. "So, my reward for working my ass off in school this year is for you

and Dad to banish me to the retirement zone. An entire summer with Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy is like being grounded for life.”

“Alex, how did you get to be so judgy?” Mom asked. “You certainly didn’t inherit that from us.”

“I am so *not* judgy,” I said. “There’s a huge difference between being judgmental and knowing you’re right about people.”

“And how do you know you’re right?” Mom asked.

“I just do,” I said. “I have a sixth sense.”

“I see,” Mom said. There was a long silence.

“This is unbelievable,” I said, looking away. Mom put her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s going to be good for you, Alex,” Mom said.

“Good for me, like sticking me in algebra when I was just starting to comprehend the difference between a numerator and a denominator was good for me,” I said.

“We thought you were ready,” Mom said, “so we made an executive decision on your behalf.”

“A decision that only the CEO is qualified to make,” I said. “Why does my vote never count?”

“Your vote *always* counts,” Mom said. “In fact, your father and I go out of our way to include you in decisions pertaining to you.”

“Like how I should spend my summer!” I said.

“Six weeks away from her parents is what every thirteen-year-old girl would die for,” Mom said.

“I have no issue being away from you and Dad for six weeks. It’s the fact that you want to stick me with the grandparents from hell,” I said.

“That is so not fair to Grandma and Grandpa. They are wonderful people,” Mom said.

“‘Wonderful’ if you enjoy hanging with people you have zero in common with,” I argued. “Grandpa Jimmy is like a hermit in that musty barn of his, and Grandma June only wants to complain about her latest ailment. Mom, did you know that when she called last week, she forgot to wish me a happy birthday, but instead rambled on and on about her struggles with bladder control?” Mom fought off a smile.

“It’s not funny,” I said.

“What’s funny is how you love to get all hyperbolic about everything,” Mom said.

“I am so *not* hyper, hyper... whatever you called it,” I said. “That is insulting.”

“A mature thirteen-year-old would see this as a chance to develop a relationship with her grandparents, seeing as she doesn’t really have one,” Mom said.

“First of all, do not talk about me in the third person like I’m not even here,” I said. “Second of all, accept the fact that I’ll never be the perfect thirteen-year-old daughter you guys want me to be.”

“No one wants you to be perfect,” Mom said. “But is it too much for your father and me to ask that you make an effort to connect with the only grandparents you have?” See what I mean about unrealistic expectations? “It’s time you start letting people into your life instead of closing yourself off to everyone and everything.”

“That is so unfair, Mother,” I said. “You make me sound like a self-absorbed brat.”

The look on Mom's face told me that is *precisely* what she thought.

"We just want you to go with the flow for once," Mom said.

"In Hammondsport," I said, looking away.

"Trust me, Alex, once you get to Hammondsport, you're going to thank us," she said.

"You'll see." In case you never heard of the place, Hammondsport is the dinky town where Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy live. It's one of a bunch of other dinky towns that make up the Finger Lakes area of upstate New York.

"The only thing I'll see is how cruel it was that my oh-so-thoughtful parents, who go out of their way to include me in decisions that only I should make, just dumped me in the middle of nowhere so they wouldn't have to deal with me while they're off making *Queen of the Nile*," I said. Mom looked at her reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall, and brushed a wisp of blonde hair from her forehead.

"Hello?!" I said.

"I heard you," Mom said.

"I know you said Egypt will be hot as all get out, and that I'd hate the food there, but that's no reason not to take me," I said. "We've never even had Egyptian food before. How bad could it be?" Mom went back to her hair. I was spinning my wheels, and knew my only hope was to mastermind a last minute escape plan. "Send me to camp this summer," I said.

"You? Camp?" Mom asked, scratching her head.

"You know, like cheer camp," I said.

"You hate cheerleading," Mom said. "You think it's sexist."

"What does that have to do with anything?!" I asked.

“You’re funny. And you’re spending the summer with your grandparents,” Mom said.

“Diving camp, then,” I said.

“Excuse me?” Mom asked.

“They have camps for diving, you know,” I said.

“Diving, as in high dive off a board?” Mom asked.

“No, for cultured pearls. Yes, off a board,” I said.

“So, you no longer have a fear of heights. It just miraculously went away,” Mom said.

“I’ve been practicing mind over matter,” I said, hoping she’d buy it.

“I’m glad to hear that, Alex, but the decision’s been made,” Mom said. She clearly didn’t buy it. *Time for Plan B.*

“This was supposed to be confidential top secret stuff,” I said, “but Savannah and I were gonna try out for *Annie* at the Charles Street Playhouse. You always tell me acting does wonders for your self-confidence. So, I was actually gonna take your advice this summer and read for Annie while Savannah reads for Pepper.”

“I’m not stopping Savannah from going out for the play,” Mom said.

“But she’s counting on me,” I said. “If I don’t do the play with her, she’ll never speak to me again.”

“There’s always next summer,” Mom said.

“That is such a stupid parent response!” I said. Mom’s steely-eyed look made my blood freeze. “I meant that the response was stupid. I didn’t mean that the parent who made the stupid response was... You know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m tired,” Mom said. As she walked out of my room, she picked up my favorite vintage Led Zeppelin rock concert T-shirt that was flung over my desk chair. She sniffed it, then opened my closet and dropped it in the laundry basket before leaving the room. I yanked it out of the basket and flung it back across the room where it landed in its original spot draped over my desk chair.

“And don’t touch my stuff!” I said as Mom walked out of my room.

The thought of six weeks out in the boondocks skimming stones and catching butterflies with a couple of fossils who think a tweet is the sound a sparrow makes was worse than my hair malfunction on 6th-grade picture day. That debacle left an emotional scar, and summer with Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy would leave an even bigger one.

On the morning of the snooze-a-palooza drive to Hammondsport, I hadn’t given up hope of weaseling out of the arrangement that had tackled me from my blindside. Pleading with Mom had proved to be a major waste of time. That woman is more rigid than the holiday fruitcake our neighbor, Mrs. Dowdall gives us every December. Dad, on the other hand, is a bit more flexible, like the Gumby I tossed in the clothes dryer when I was three. So, I made my final stand as Dad prepared to load up the car. “Dad, listen to me. I already spoke to Savannah, who spoke to her dad, who spoke to her mom, who said I could spend the summer with them. You just have to call them to finalize the deal. I’m already packed,” I said, holding up my suitcase. “You know, Annie and Pepper?”

“I’m not going to do that to the Stewarts,” Dad said.

“You’re not gonna ‘do that’ like it’s something awful?” I asked.

“It would be a lot to ask of them, is all I’m saying,” Dad said.

“What you’re saying is I’m too much of a burden for the Stewarts, but not for Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy, who are like a hundred and ten,” I said.

“Look, your grandparents are really excited to have you,” Dad said. “We think it’s going to be really good for all of you.”

“And that’s been my point from the start,” I said. “*You all* think this is gonna be really good for me. Forget about what *I* think.” All Dad could do was give me a dumb stare. This whole discussion of me spending the summer with my grandparents was becoming less about actually doing it, and more about having my feelings acknowledged by my own parents. I was becoming a teenager, and my parents still insisted on pulling all the kite strings. All I’ve ever wanted was to be taken seriously; for them to see that there’s an intelligent, independent person underneath this flawless exterior.

Mom glided out of the house, like she was late for her weekly tennis lesson with Giorgos, her Greek God tennis instructor. And then it hit me. An idea so brilliant it could only come from the mind of Alex Abrahms herself. An idea with the potential to define my life for years to come. *Step one: Test the water.*

“You two are convinced I’m gonna love summer in Hammondsport, aren’t you?” I asked. Mom and Dad looked at each other.

“I’m sensing some snarkasm,” Dad said.

“It was a simple question,” I said.

“We wouldn’t be taking you today if we didn’t think you’d enjoy yourself,” Mom

said.

“I could see how you would think that,” I said. “And since you’re so sure, I assume you’d be willing to place a wager on it.” They looked at each other again.

“You know, like a bet,” I said.

“Like a bet?” Mom asked. “What do you mean by ‘bet’?”

“You don’t know what a bet is?” I asked.

“Of course she knows what a bet is,” Dad said. “I just think she’s confused as to...”

Dad looked over at Mom who had just released a dagger in his direction.

“What *kind* of bet?” Mom asked.

“Exactly,” Dad said. “What *kind* of bet?” *Step two: Slowly release the Kracken.*

“Since I’m one hundred percent sure, beyond a reasonable doubt, this will be the most forgettable summer of my entire life, and the biggest parental mistake ever made in history, and you’re both so sure I’m gonna have the time of my life, I was thinking we could bet on the outcome,” I said.

“You need to be more specific,” Dad said. *Hold on, Doctor Demanding. I’m still working out the details.* Dad tapped his foot while Mom played with her hair.

“Okay. Here’s the bet,” I said. “If at the end of the summer, I, I mean you, I mean *we* find that I was right, that it *was* a miserable experience being in Hammondsport with Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy for six weeks...” I took a deep breath.

“Go on,” Dad said. *Step three: Pray the Kracken doesn’t scare them away.*

“You can *never* force me to spend another *minute* in Hammondsport and you can’t say ‘no’ if I want to travel with you on location.” If there was a way to describe my parents’

mental gears wildly turning, I would do it. But that would be impossible.

“And?” Dad asked. “What’s in it for us?”

“If I’m wrong, and by some act of God, I end up enjoying myself, I can never say ‘no’ to Hammondsport again,” I said. Dad’s foot tapping stopped and Mom’s started.

“Somehow, that doesn’t seem fair,” Mom the skeptic said.

“What’s not fair?” I asked.

“The bet’s one-sided,” Dad said. “A victory for you includes two perks: no more Hammondsport *and* you can lay down a get-out-of-school card whenever you want to go on location with us. If we win, we only get no more ‘no’s’ to Hammondsport.” I hadn’t figured they’d catch that.

“Okay, so I inadvertently dealt myself too many face cards,” I said.

“It seems that way,” Mom confirmed.

“To make it fairer,” I said,

“More fair,” Dad said. *Step four: Add some chum to the water.*

“To make it more fair, I’ll throw you a bone and raise the stakes,” I said.

“Sounds like she’s bluffing,” Mom said.

“I’ll call her bluff,” Dad said.

“If you win the bet,” I said, “not only can I never say ‘no’ to Hammondsport ever again...” *Do not bite off more than you can chew here, Alex. You know how you tend to do that.*

“I can never say ‘no’ to *anything* ever again.” Mom and Dad looked at one another and cracked smiles. *Yup. Too big a bite.*

“As much as I enjoy winning, Alex, I think you’re making a colossal mistake,” Dad

said. “You’re giving away the farm here.”

“You realize,” Mom said, “your whole life has been built on ‘no’s.’ Losing this bet means your life instantly becomes a life of ‘yeses,’ which probably changes who you are as a person.”

“We’re talking a major life change,” Dad said.

“Don’t you like who you are?” Mom asked.

“I guess, but...” I mumbled.

“Alex, face it. You wouldn’t survive one day without the word ‘no,’” Mom said.

“It was the first word out of your mouth,” Dad said. “Long before Dada or Mama.”

“You *live* for ‘no,’” Mom said.

“Alright already. I get the point,” I said. They were right. My life *had* been built on ‘no’s.’ It was what I knew and found comfort in. Take ‘no’ away from a thirteen-year-old girl like me and she dies a slow and painful death. But I had thrown down the gauntlet and there was *no* turning back. “You think I’m dumb enough to give away the farm?” I asked. “I think I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Mom asked. “It seems a bit reckless on your part.”

“Because if that’s the bet you want,” Dad said, “we’re all in. My only question is how do we know at the end of the summer you’ll be totally honest with your final assessment?” I was partially pinned. *Step five: Never let your rival see you sweat.*

“How do you know I *won’t* be honest?” I said.

“I asked you first,” Dad said.

“I asked you second,” I said.

“Oh lord,” Mom said.

“Alex, you still haven’t answered my question,” Dad said. “How will we know you’re telling the truth?”

“It’s called trust, Dad,” I said. I held out my pinky finger. “Pinky promise.”

“Pinky promise? Dad asked. “That’s my assurance?”

“You never had a problem with it before,” I said.

“That’s true,” Dad said. He locked his pinky with mine.

“I’ve created a point system,” I said. “For all the horrible things I experience, I’ll award summer disaster points. For any fun I might have, I’ll award summer fun points.”

“But Alex, you have to actually try to have a good time,” Dad said. “You can’t just spend six weeks sulking in your room and expect that qualifies as a lousy vacation.”

“Dad, I’m offended you would even insinuate that,” I said. *So much for the ace hiding up my sleeve.*

“And you have to make a real effort to connect with your grandparents,” Mom said. “You can be sure I’ll ask them if you did.” *And that ace, too.*

“My God. You’re both so untrusting,” I said.

“If we’ve learned anything from producing films, it’s to your advantage to establish guardrails,” Dad said. “You can deposit that one in your lesson-of-the-day savings account.”

“Gee, thanks Dad. You’re a lifesaver,” I said.

“Are we finished here?” Mom asked.

“We’re definitely finished,” I said. “This is gonna be like taking candy from two big

babies.”

“Famous last words,” Dad said.

“If we lose, it’s on you,” Mom said to Dad as she opened the passenger door.

“At the end of the summer, I’ll tally up my summer disaster points and my summer fun points,” I said. “If I have more summer disaster points, it’s bye bye Hammondsport and hello get out-of-school card.” Dad loaded my suitcase into the trunk.

“And if there are more summer fun points?” Dad asked.

“There won’t be,” I said.

“Keep talking, counsel,” Dad said. “The more inflated your pride gets, the louder the pop when it bursts.”

“That is such a lame analogy, Dad,” I said. I ripped open the back door of the car and hopped in. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s make like a tree and blow this popsicle stand.” I pulled out my phone and popped in my ear buds. I scrolled to my classic rock playlist. As Jimmy Page strummed a guitar riff, I thought about the bet and the potential risk of losing it. Almost as bad as the endless punishment that would come with losing, was *admitting* that I lost. I hate admitting I’m wrong, about as much as I hate waking up in the middle of the night with a song I despise stuck in my head. Or worse yet, being told I’m ‘adorable,’ when that word should only be used to describe baby shoes and pets dressed for Halloween, and not sophisticated thirteen-year-old girls like me. What I’m trying to say is losing was not an option.

Dad looked over his shoulder and backed the car out of the driveway. He smiled at me, and I nodded back. I did my best to play it cool, even though the butterflies in my stomach were in full flight pattern. The truth is, I *had* bit off more than I could chew, but I wasn’t about to

let Mom and Dad know that. If, for even a second, they sensed doubt on my part, they would never take me seriously again. *Even though they don't take me seriously now.*

I stared out the window as we drove down our street. In six weeks, I'd be driving back home on this same block, a wasted summer behind me, and no closer to Grandma June and Grandpa Jimmy than when the summer began. But I will have made my point, and for a kid like me, that means everything. That's the other thing my parents missed by dropping out of parenting school: kids like you and me matter. Our voices matter. That's really what this summer was about: showing Mom and Dad that there's only one person qualified to make decisions on my behalf: Me. Winning the bet would prove that once and for all.

As Dad drove out of our Boston neighborhood, I smiled to myself. This was going to be the best worst summer of my life.

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At least, that's what I thought.

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