

EVERY FEATHER

Gwyn Stewart was angry. She had been hoping to play the lead female role in *Among the Stars*, a school musical, and had practiced several times a day for the last three weeks until she knew every line and song perfectly. Then Aria landed the role.

"How did the rehearsal go?" her mother asked, when she picked up Gwyn outside the auditorium.

"It's not fair," Gwyn replied. "I never get chosen for the lead parts. Miss Desi always picks other people. And now her favorite is Aria."

"Oh dear," her mother said. "I'm sorry you're disappointed. What part did you get?"

"I'm being cast as Jessup. It's a dumb part of a sickly, lovelorn girl. And I only get one solo!"

"I've always liked Jessup's part," said her mother. "She has an important part in the storyline, and she's a kind character, even though she is a bit shy."

"Then Aria would've been a better pick for Jessup as she's so timid. I don't know how she's ever going to be able to sing so many songs in front of an audience."

"While I understand your disappointment, Gwyn, try not to begrudge the fact that Aria got something you wanted. Being unkind won't make you feel better in the long run."

Gwyn crossed her arms and fumed as they rode the rest of the way home in silence. *Mom just doesn't get it*, she huffed. She spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in her room seething about the outcome of the cast selection.

Thoughts of the *Among the Stars* musical consumed her, and that night she dreamed about the upcoming performance. In her dream, the crowd had loved the performance, and she had basked in the audience's applause and enthusiasm when the musical had ended. But in her dream, it was Aria's name that the audience was chanting, Aria who received the congratulatory flowers and commendations, Aria who was solicited for photographs and autographs. No one seemed to notice Gwyn's part at all.



The next day, Gwyn was miserable and could barely focus on her classes. The more she thought about it, the angrier she felt at Aria for getting the part Gwyn had wanted so badly. *She doesn't deserve it like I do*, Gwyn thought.

At break that morning, Gwyn noticed Aria in a corner on her phone. Aria was glancing from her phone where she was texting and peeking up and down the corridor. *I bet she's chatting with her cousin Logan*, Gwyn thought. *They always hang out together.*

Just then, Aria tucked her phone in her pocket, looked up and down the hall again, and then slipped behind the door into the stairwell.

Intrigued, Gwyn waited a few minutes before following her. At the bottom of the lower landing, she spied Aria sitting next to Logan with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her shoulders. As they were talking in hushed tones, Gwyn could not make out what they were saying, so after a few minutes, she slipped out the door.

Later, while sitting with a group of her friends in the refectory, Gwyn again noticed that Logan and Aria were together in a corner by themselves while Aria held Logan's hand. Gwyn could not discern the exchange between the cousins, but being consumed with anger at not getting the lead role in *Among the Stars*, a rush of unkindness flowed through her.



"Don't tell anyone, but I think Aria is in love with Logan," she blurted out.

"Don't be silly, Gwyn," her friend Elaine said. "They're cousins."

"I know," Gwyn replied. "But I saw them cuddled up together in the stairwell during recess today. Now Aria is holding his hand. Yesterday, they didn't participate in any group games; they just sat under a tree together and talked. She even put her head on his shoulder."

"Ooh," said Melissa. "That's a bit ... umm ... weird."

"That's probably why they are trying to keep it under wraps," said Gwyn, and then reminded them of other times when Logan and Aria had hung out together. The more she talked about their interactions, the easier it seemed to exaggerate them to fit her purview.

But that night as Gwyn lay in bed, a sick feeling crept over her, and sleep was a long time in coming.

The next day, Gwyn was struggling to focus on her mathematics class. Raising her hand, she asked Mr. Lundt if she could use the restroom.

"Be back in five minutes," he told her.

In the restroom, Gwyn went to the sinks to splash water on her face. She was tired from her night of insufficient sleep. Suddenly, her eyes caught some writing on the adjacent mirror; her heart sank.

"Aria loves Logan!" it said, followed by two cartoon characters kissing.

What have I done?! she thought. What if someone made up a rumor like that about me?!

Grabbing paper towels from the dispenser, she tried to wipe off the scrawl, but it was difficult to remove. Wetting the towels and squirting soap, she managed to erase the words, but the mirror was left a smudge of color.

At least you can't see what it said, she concluded.

Gwyn slowly made her way back to class but was still unable to focus on the rest of the lecture. Her mind kept going back to the words she had seen on the mirror and the things she had discussed with her friends at lunch the day before.



As she walked down the hall, Gwyn checked her class schedule and noticed that there was a planning meeting at two PM for the participants of *Among the Stars*. She was considering calling her mother to ask if she could pick her up early when she crossed paths with Miss Desi.

"Hi, Gwyn. We have our first planning meeting this afternoon. I look forward to seeing you there."

"Uh ... uh," Gwyn stuttered. "I-I'll be there."

Throughout the meeting, Gwyn found it difficult to participate and would sneak glances at Aria, wondering if she had seen the writing in the bathroom, or worse, if people were talking about the rumors that she, Gwyn, had started.

When the meeting ended and the participants were leaving, Miss Desi asked Gwyn to stay back for a little while. "I noticed you didn't participate in our plans and discussions today for the performance," she said. "You usually contribute. Is something wrong?"

"I'm ... umm ... not feeling that great today," Gwyn mumbled. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"I understand," said Miss Desi. "It just seemed as though something is troubling you, and I am concerned about you. You are an important part of this performance, and if there is something that you are struggling with, I would be happy to listen and help if I can."

Gwyn stared at her fidgeting hands in her lap, and tried to blink back burning tears.

"I-I," she began. "I did something I'm not proud of, and I don't know what to do to make it better."

After a halting and tearful start, Gwyn spilled the tale of the rumor she had started about Aria and Logan. Gwyn avoided looking at Miss Desi, worried that she would see disappointment and disgust in the music director's eyes. She was surprised when Miss Desi reached out and squeezed her hand.



"I know you wanted the part of Tessa," Miss Desi began. "You sing well and have put forth tremendous effort in class. But there are reasons why I chose you for the Jessup role and Aria for Tessa's. You have an innate vivacity that will enhance the Jessup character. You sing with a lot of passion, which is perfectly suited for Jessup and what she's facing in the story. I had hoped to explain all of this in our first practice session, specifically how I was envisioning each person bringing his or her role to life. I imagine you were disappointed by my selection and thought I was favoring Aria."

"Well, I did sort of wonder..." said Gwyn, and Miss Desi continued.

"You probably weren't aware of this, but Aria and Logan's grandmother was in a car accident earlier this week, and her condition is still unstable. Both Logan and Aria are very close to her, which has made this time especially difficult for them. This is one of the reasons they have been spending more time together—people naturally draw closer to family and loved ones during difficult times."

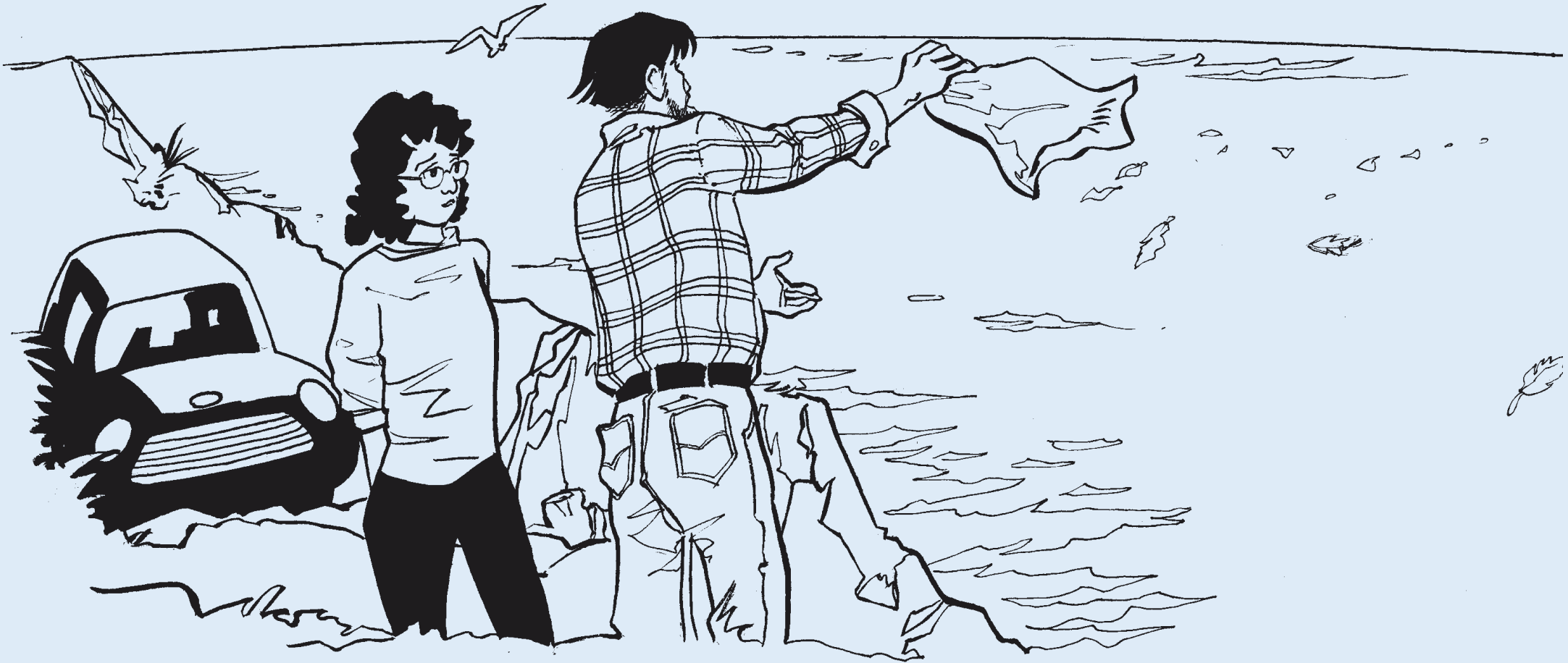
"I-I didn't know," said Gwyn.

"I know," said Miss Desi, "and I'm not trying to make you feel worse than you already do. But I thought you should know, because Aria and Logan are already experiencing a difficult time, and unkind rumors have the potential to make a sad time harder for them."

"You see, when I was a teenager, I was a bit of a gossip. I liked to watch people and imagined what was happening with them and would tell others my thoughts on what I saw. I eagerly picked up on any bit of news I heard and spread it around, not realizing there was anything wrong with it."



"Then in 11th grade, I spread a rumor that ended up ruining my closest friendship at the time. When my dad heard about it, he took a feather pillow from the couch and told me to follow him to the car. We drove in silence for several miles till we came to a cliff overlooking the ocean. There my dad tore open the pillow and shook out the feathers, which dispersed and floated every which way. We stood watching the feathers on the wind, some soaring high, some sinking to the ocean surface. Many going beyond our view.



"After about fifteen minutes, my dad told me to go and gather every feather. 'That's impossible!' I replied. 'I know,' he said. 'Those feathers are like rumors and gossip. They are carried far and wide, and in the end, you never know how far they will go or who they will reach. You cannot control them once you have released them. You can never unsay the words you say. Always remember that, Desi.'

"I try to recall that lesson every time I'm tempted to spread a rumor, or even something that is true, because I can never retrieve 'every feather'—every rumor or gossip—to make it right. That doesn't mean you can't make amends or ask forgiveness when you have been in the wrong; in fact, it's important to make things right as soon as you can."

Gwyn burst into tears again, and Miss Desi handed her a tissue.

"But what should I do?" Gwyn asked. "How do I make it right?"

"As in the story of the pillow feathers, you can't fully make it right, but you could start to make amends by telling your friends that the rumor isn't true. And you need to admit to them that you started the rumor because you were upset and unhappy—jealous that Aria was given the musical part you wanted."

"I ... I think I can do that," said Gwyn.

"And it's very important that you apologize to Aria. I know you are not particularly close to her, but you are going to be working together on this performance, and it's important that nothing comes between you. You can ask her to apologize to Logan for you, too, unless you know him well enough to talk to him personally.

"Well, Gwyn, we should be going," said Miss Desi with a glance at her watch. "I imagine your mother will be here to pick you up."

"Thank you so much for listening to me," said Gwyn. "I will think about what you said and do what I can to make things right."

"I am glad," Miss Desi said. "I will see you at rehearsals on Monday. Have a good weekend."

The following day, holding a small potted plant, Gwyn stood at the front of Aria's house and rang the doorbell. She had spent the better part of the morning talking with her friends to explain her error, apologize, and do her best to curb the rumors she had started. The red brick house she stood in front of was her last stop.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Genaro," Gwyn began when the front door opened. "Is Aria home? I was wondering if I could talk with her."

"She's in the backyard. I'll take you to her."

Aria was sitting on a lawn chair reading when Gwyn approached.

"This is for you," said Gwyn, thrusting out the potted plant. "I'm sorry about your grandmother. I hope she recovers soon."

"Umm ... thanks," Aria said, looking somewhat mystified as she took the plant.

"I ... I also need to tell you about something I did. ... It's a ... c-confession ... sort of..."

"I hadn't heard anything," Aria quietly said, once Gwyn had told all. "But thanks for telling me..."



"I just wish I could take it all back," added Gwyn. "I feel terrible about what I did."

Silence fell between the two girls. Aria fumbled with her book, and Gwyn stared at the ground, absentmindedly digging her shoes into the grass.

"I'll go now," Gwyn finally said, and turned to walk away.

"Wait. You don't have to leave just yet. I-I wouldn't mind discussing *Among the Stars* with you.

"What?! You want to talk to me about the musical?"

Aria nodded.

"But aren't you angry with me?"

"Well, I guess I can understand why you would be disappointed about not getting to play Tessa. But we are also going to be spending a lot of time working together on the musical, and our roles intersect a fair bit, so ... well, I'd rather that we could get along, and maybe even help each other."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. You see, I'm kind of nervous about playing Tessa. I didn't think I'd get that part, and I'm not sure why Miss Desi picked me for it, but I want to play it as best as I can."

Gwyn sighed and sank on the grass next to Aria. "I would like to work together too. I'm just not sure how. I messed things up so much already."

"Perhaps we could simply start from the beginning," Aria said, standing up and holding out her right hand. "Hello, Gwyn Stewart, I'm Aria Genaro," she added with a grin. "I hear we're going to be performing together in *Among the Stars*. It's nice to meet you."

With a broad smile, Gwyn rose and grasped Aria's outstretched hand. "Thank you, Miss Genaro," she said. "I am very happy to meet you too!"

