

## OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

I felt a sharp pang of jealousy. Someone was singing *my* song! The melodic voice drew me like a siren's call, and I leaned toward the sound and tilted my head to get a better listen.

The singing seemed to be coming from inside the school gymnasium. I raced over, but the windows were slightly higher than I could reach, so I scanned the area for something to help raise me up. An abandoned milk crate! I placed it beneath the window and stepped onto the rickety box.

Stretching onto my tiptoes, I peered through the gymnasium window. Inside, the owner of the beautiful voice stood tall and proud on the stage, her golden blond curls glowing around her head like a halo. She looked and sounded like an angel.

My heart sank.

*Emily.* Why did it have to be her?

I wanted it to be me up there. I wanted to be the one singing that song! "Ave Maria" held a special meaning for me because my parents used to play it at our house during the holidays. Their favorite version was by a singer named Luciano Pavarotti, and the three of us used to sing along with him. Together.

I closed my eyes and imagined it was me standing on stage, but in my daydream the stage was in a giant arena filled with adoring fans, and when I finished my solo and bowed graciously, they burst into cheers and applause. I looked out into the audience and saw my parents hugging one another, tears of joy running down Mom's face. The crowd began chanting my name: *Mia! Mia!*

"MIA!"

Someone banged on the window, and my eyes flew open. Two angry faces stared back at me. Nicky and Vicky. Great.

“What do you want?” Nicky yelled through the glass. “Get lost!” Vicky said, then pressed her mouth right up against the window and did that thing where you blow air out of your mouth and it gets huge and distorted like a crazy clown face.

Surprised at how disgusting Vicky’s face looked, I leaned back, causing the milk crate to tip. Desperate to regain my balance, I flailed my arms. Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion, and for a split second I was floating weightless in the air like an astronaut on a spaceship.

No, no, no, NO!

Too late.

Gravity kicked in, and I crashed down on the ground. Hard.

“Owwwww,” I moaned as Nicky and Vicky looked down at me and laughed. They stuck their tongues out, like a two-headed monster, then turned and walked away from the window.

In need of some sympathy, I looked over at my best friend, Siarra, who was standing nearby. She was telling a story to a small group of kids, her auburn ponytail swishing back and forth as she expressed herself boldly with her hands.

*Huh.* She hadn’t noticed me fall. No one had. Apparently, I’d landed in a big fat pile of “no one gives a poop.” Siarra just continued her story while the kids hung on her every word. No one so much as turned their head in my direction. Typical. Sometimes I felt invisible, especially in groups.

I picked myself up and dusted off the back of my pants, but instead of joining the others, I stood back and watched.

*How does she do it? Must be nice to have people listen to you.*

The story Siarra was telling was a funny one. I’d heard her tell it a hundred times and knew exactly where the punchline came in. *Here it comes . . . voilà!* The kids laughed out loud, right on schedule. There were chuckles, giggles, and even a knee-slap. Knee-slaps were rare. *Impressive.*

Actually, it made perfect sense—Siarra was a good storyteller and it was a really funny story. She always made everyone laugh.

Only today, she didn’t make me laugh.

Maybe I was grumpy because Nicky and Vicky had scared me at the window, or maybe it was because Emily had sung my favorite song really well. Maybe I was upset that no had one noticed when I fell down. Maybe it was all of the above.

Whatever the reason, Siarra’s joke sounded different. Kind of annoying, like when the alarm clock wakes you up too early. Maybe the fall had knocked something loose inside me, but I didn’t like the way I was feeling. Why was I getting so upset, anyway? What was the big deal?

It would be a while before I’d be able to answer those questions.

My name is Mia Vigore, and this is the story of how I lost my best friend, found my voice, and realized that friendship is *way* more important than fame.

But before we go any further, I want to be clear. I don't mean *lost*, lost. Siarra didn't die or get sick or anything like that.

No. I lost Siarra because of the things that I did.

Choices that I made.

You see, I was tired of being the quiet kid no one ever noticed. I wanted to be the person up on stage, the performer people wanted to hear sing. I wanted kids to listen to me and laugh at *my* funny stories.

In short, I wanted to be popular.