Izzy Newton let go.

The rope swing went slack, and for a moment, for one heartbeat, Izzy was suspended in air. Yes! she thought. *This is how it feels to be weightless.* Then gravity took over. Down she plummeted, slipping smoothly into the water toes first. She landed on the soft, muddy lake bottom and then thrust herself up, bursting into the fire-bright sunshine. *Air, water, earth, fire,* she thought happily. *All four elements in a row. How often can you experience that?*

“Yah-hoo, Izzy!” cheered her friends Charlie Darwin and Allie Einstein, who were treading water nearby. The girls had biked to the lake for the last swim of the summer. Tomorrow was the first day of school, and they wanted to soak up every possible minute of being outdoors, preferably
at the lake. Actually, preferably in the lake.

Allie churned up waves to splash Izzy in celebration. “You did it,” she shouted. “Finally!”

“¡Hurra!” yelled Charlie. “Way to go, Izzy!”

“Admit it: You loved it,” said Allie.

“I did,” Izzy agreed. She nodded, sending water droplets sliding down her nose. Other droplets that were caught in her eyelashes and her curly black hair refracted the sunlight like prisms. “You’re right. The rope swing is The Best.”

“I can’t believe it took you all summer to jump!” said Allie. “You’re such a chicken!”

“Hey,” Charlie protested. “First of all, chickens aren’t necessarily scaredy-cats. And neither is Izzy. She’s just, like, you know, slow and careful. Right, Iz?”

“Yeesss,” said Izzy, slowly and carefully. In slo-mo, she cupped her hands and, with exaggerated care, scooped up water and sprinkled it on her friends.

The three girls burst into laughter.

Izzy knew she wasn’t the bravest person in the world. Take the rope swing, for example. It was a brand-new addition to the lake this summer. The very first time Allie and Charlie saw it, their eyes lit up and they raced over to test it out. Not Izzy. The first time and every time she’d thought about trying the swing, she’d held back. Questions flashed through her brain and set it whirling: What if I let go too soon? What if I belly flop? Would all the other swimmers watch and laugh at me? No wonder her nickname was “Dizzy Izzy”; her mind was always spinning.

But tomorrow was a new day—her first at Atom Middle School—and Izzy was determined to leave Dizzy Izzy behind. It may have taken all summer, but Izzy felt that her leap off the rope swing was a giant step toward ditching her anxious alter ego. She grinned at her friends and said, “Now that I’ve jumped once I want to do it again—like a gazillion more times.”

“Me too!” said Allie, already wading ashore. Allie was too impatient to walk the long curve of the beach past the lifeguard’s chair and wait her turn behind the other kids headed to the tree. She took a more direct route, scrambling over the rocks at the tree’s base.

“Allie,” Charlie called out in warning, “I think that might be—”

But Allie was already too far away to hear Charlie. She grabbed the rope, ran back and then forward, and
swung out over the water. “Waa-hoo!” she whooped, wildly waving her arms and legs as she tumbled through the air into the water, making as much commotion as possible.

Charlie sighed, saying, “Gotta feel sorry for the poor fish, don’t you?”

“Yup,” said Izzy. She grinned. It was typical of Charlie to sympathize with the lake creatures.

“Hurry up,” commanded Allie when she surfaced next to Izzy and Charlie. “Today’s your last chance to do those gazillion jumps, Izzy. Tomorrow is the first day of school.”

“I know,” said Izzy. “And not just any first day. Tomorrow’s the first day of middle school.”

“Claro,” said Charlie. “So, Izzy, if you don’t want to show up covered in a rash, don’t climb over the rocks like Allie Oop just did.” Charlie pointed to some greenery growing on the rocks. “That’s poison ivy.”

“No way!” squeaked Allie.

“Yes way,” said Charlie.

“Isn’t it pachysandra?” asked Allie.

Charlie shook her head. “Poison,” she repeated, “ivy.”

“Awww, man!” groaned Allie, frantically examining her arms. “Just what I need for the first day of school: a screaming pink rash.”

“I tried to stop you,” said Charlie, “but—”

“You were too rash!” joked Izzy. “Get it?”

“Ha, ha,” said Allie, rolling her eyes at Izzy’s painful pun.


“Let’s go the long way, Charlie,” said Izzy. She slid Allie a grin and scratched an imaginary itch behind her ear. “A pink rash will clash with my back-to-school outfit.”

“Ohhhh,” moaned Allie with dramatic misery. She sank down into the water until it covered her bright blond head and then shot up right next to Izzy to splash her, laughing loudly.

Good old Allie, thought Izzy. Talk about a disaster magnet! But she bounces back fast. Charlie, on the other hand, was just naturally cool and calm. Izzy watched Charlie use the rope swing: Effortlessly, she swooped, flipped midair, and dove smoothly. Izzy had to give her own jump a lot more thought. She carefully calculated when the swing reached its highest point and then, just as
carefully, let go and slipped into the water, trying to make as small a splash as possible.

As she waded ashore, Izzy shivered. “Am I crazy, or does the lake feel warmer than the air?”

“I mean … you are crazy,” said Allie. “But you’re also right. It’s pretty cold for September. Seems like the temperature’s dropping every day! The leaves will probably change color early this year.”

“Well,” Izzy corrected, “that also has to do with the angle of the sun and hours of sunlight.” Izzy knew all about the sun, moon, stars, and planets; she loved space! Her grandfather taught physics—the study of energy and what things are made of—at the local college. Sometimes he and Izzy used the telescope there to stargaze. Izzy was saving up to buy a telescope of her own. Her ambition was to discover a star so that she could name it after Granddad. Ever since Izzy was a little girl, he had encouraged her fascination with light, heat, sound, electricity, motion, and force. Izzy was determined to be a physicist just like him when she grew up.

The girls waded up the sloping beach to the shore.

“Anyone hungry?” asked Charlie, offering snacks.

“No, thank you,” said Allie and Izzy together, quickly. Charlie and her family—her two moms and her two younger brothers—had a small vegetable garden. Her snacks were always homegrown and a little too healthy. The kale chips she’d brought today were no exception.

“You sure?” asked Charlie, her mouth full of green. When Izzy and Allie shook their heads emphatically, she shrugged. “Your loss.”

“No offense, Charlie,” joked Izzy, “but those kale chips look—and smell—like mulch.”

Charlie laughed and shoveled another handful into her mouth. “Yum,” she said with a sly wink. “Delicious.”

“Speaking of delicious,” said Izzy. “I told Granddad I’d help him get dinner ready. So I better head home.”

“Izzy, wait till you tell your granddad you tackled the rope swing today,” said Allie as she crammed her wet towel into her backpack.

“You didn’t just tackle it,” added Charlie. “You ACED it!”

“He’ll be proud,” said Allie.

“Yup, he will,” said Izzy as she and her friends hopped on their bikes and started down the lane. It was true: Izzy’s granddad was her biggest fan. After every A-plus report
card, every “100% Perfect!” sticker on every quiz, Granddad was the first one waiting with a high five. Nobody believed in Izzy more than Granddad. Now, if she could just bring him with her to sixth-grade homeroom tomorrow. “You know, guys,” Izzy admitted to Charlie and Allie riding beside her. “I’m freaked out about tomorrow.”

“Me too,” said Charlie.

“Me three,” agreed Allie.

For a while, the girls pedaled silently. They were thinking of all the ways middle school was different from elementary school: changing classes, tons more homework, and dances. Tomorrow, they’d be swept up in the swirl of students flowing in from other elementary schools. There’d be lots of new faces.

“What if we aren’t in the same classes?” asked Izzy. She knew she sounded Dizzy-Izzy-ish, but she couldn’t help worrying out loud. “How are we going to find our way around the building, and get to our classes on time? What if the new kids are mean? What if we forget our homework assignments? Or locker combinations?”

“Allie,” said Charlie, “you’re good at numbers. Maybe you can help us remember our combinations.”

“Sure,” said Allie. “I’ll try anyway.”

“I’m going to try out for the track team,” said Charlie. “Remember, in middle school you have to try out for stuff you want to do, like teams and chorus and the school play. It’s not like elementary school, where everybody does everything.”

“Oh, right!” said Izzy. “My brothers said something about tryouts ...” Thinking about tryouts made Izzy feel wobbly on her bike. She had planned to play her favorite sport: ice hockey. She loved the physics of the blade on ice,
the speed and the momentum, and the challenge of figuring out the perfect force and timing to hit the puck into the goal. It suddenly occurred to her that she might not even make the team. “Thanks a lot, Charlie,” she groaned. “Now I’m even more worried.”

“Nice going, Char,” said Allie. “Izzy’s already crazed about tomorrow.”

Tomorrow! Izzy repeated to herself. She trembled. The dreaded day was only hours away. She asked anxiously, “How will we meet up with each other in the morning before school? We should make a plan, a specific plan.”

“Let’s meet at the bike racks,” said Charlie. “I’m going to ride my bike to school. Are you guys?”

Allie answered yes. But before Izzy could respond, her phone beeped. It was an old flip phone that her mom had given her for emergencies. Coasting slowly, Izzy lifted the phone out of her bike basket, flipped it open one-handed, and saw that she had a text. “Whoa,” she breathed. She stopped her bike. “Intense.”

“What?” asked Allie and Charlie, stopping, too.

“Guess what?” said Izzy.

“What?” asked Allie and Charlie again.

“I just got a text from my mom,” said Izzy. “It’s about Marie. She’s back.”

“Wait, WHAT?” gasped both Allie and Charlie.

Izzy spoke slowly and clearly. “Marie’s mom texted my mom to say that they’re back. They’re in a new apartment, but Marie will be going to our school.”

“Marie. Is. Back,” stated Charlie, as if she needed to say it to believe it.

“Whoa … that is intense,” said Allie.

“It’s … it’s good intense,” said Izzy, looking at her friends. “Right?”


Marie Curie had been Izzy’s best friend since preschool. In elementary school, Marie and Izzy and Charlie and Allie had been a solid team. The girls had looked forward to being a fantastic fourth-grade foursome. But Marie left after third grade. She and her family had been living in Paris for the past two years.

At first, the four friends tried hard to Skype each other regularly. But it was hard. The time difference between America and France threw them off; it seemed like it was...
always the wrong time to talk, either way too early in the morning or way too late at night. And also, it seemed like Marie was always busy. She was traveling around Europe with her family, taking cooking classes, and exploring Paris with her cool new friends. For a while, Marie sent photos of herself in chic French clothing and weird French haircuts, made jokes in French, and referenced French celebrities, whom the other girls didn’t know. Then, suddenly, Marie stopped responding to e-mails and texts. One time, the girls tried to call her and there was no answer, so they gave up. Marie was a mystery—a mystery that hurt, too.

Izzy thought aloud, “The real question is: Why didn’t Marie text us to say she’s back?”

“She dumped us,” said Allie, sharp and certain. “That’s why. Face it.”

“Ohhh, no, I don’t know,” said Izzy. She hated to give up on anything, and a friendship seemed way too important to just kick to the curb. “Don’t you think we kind of fell apart because she was so far away in France? Now that she’s back, maybe we’ll be friends again.”

“Nope,” said Allie. “You can’t put a positive spin on this one, Izzy. Marie stopped talking to us a long time ago. I don’t know why. But it is clear that now, as far as she’s concerned, we’re over and out.”

“I still hope—” Izzy began.

Charlie interrupted gently. “I think Marie has made it pretty clear that she isn’t interested in us anymore,” she said. “I think she thinks she’s outgrown us. When she thinks of us, she probably remembers the goofy kid-stuff chemistry we used to do. Like, remember how we used to spend hours testing out different recipes for slime?”

“That’s not kid stuff. Making slime was FUN!” protested Izzy. “It’s STILL fun!”

“Fun that Marie is way too cool for now,” said Charlie. “Think of the photos she sent us where she looked so French and sophisticated. She used to be all about chemistry, but not anymore, judging by those photos.”

“Marie’s Marie,” said Izzy. “She’ll be glad to see us.”
“Hunh!” snorted Allie. “Don’t count on it.”

“Allie’s right,” said Charlie. “I know you don’t like change, Izzy. But I think you’ll only get hurt by hoping Marie will be the way she used to be. Past is past. We’re not the same, and she won’t be, either.”

“That’s one hundred percent for sure,” said Allie.

“But!” said Izzy, holding up her index finger to make a point. “There is a fifty-fifty chance that the new Marie will be friendly, right?”

“I hope so,” said Charlie.

“Well,” said Allie, “I guess so.”

“I know so,” said Izzy. “Maybe she will, maybe she won’t; both possibilities are equally likely. I think the friendly fifty percent possibility will win. You guys think the not-friendly fifty percent will win. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Allie and Charlie exchanged a glance, eyebrows raised.