

**Excerpts from**  
**NICE AND MEAN**  
by Jessica Leader

**Chapter One: Marina's Little Black Book, Entry #1**

**Most Suspicious Behavior: Rachel Winter**

*A tin-foil shirt, a popularity poll. What exactly is Rachel up to?*

**Worst Mother: Bianca Glass, a.k.a. Mom**

*Those pants? That attitude? This mother's truly in a category by herself.*

When I realized I was about to flip through the *Seventeen* Back-to-School Fashions for the third time that afternoon, I slammed the magazine shut and hurled it across the room. It flew through the air and landed against the garbage can with a big loud smack.

Exactly.

Where were my friends? Play practice ended at five. Even adding time for Rachel to do an extra shimmy, Elizabeth and Addie to straighten chairs and the three of them to snag snacks, they should've gotten here twenty minutes ago. And I should've been snacking with them, not sitting alone on my bed like someone who forgot to order a life.

I got up to grab my magazine, since my ninja throwing moves had bent the cover. I couldn't believe how the play had turned into such a time-suck. Elizabeth was the only one with a real part—did all of them really need to spend three afternoons a week in that sweaty drama-basement? I had no desire to join the *Grease* cult—they'd already started quoting the songs so often that I'd had to tell them, "Hold the cheese, this is not Burger King." But if I'd known that my only company would be the blast of the AC and the thump of my iTunes, I wouldn't have

blown off the audition so hard. How was I supposed to know that the lines in the play weren't the same as in the movie, or that they'd make us sing alone in front of everybody? Why hadn't anybody told me these things?

*Ding-dong.*

Took them long enough. I threw my magazine on the bed and ran down the hall to open the door.

“Marina, darling!” Rachel struck a pose in the doorway.

“Um...hey.” I couldn't decide which was weirder—the drama-queen voice or her new get-up. Today's silver shirt had already been a strange choice for a Wednesday, but now she had piled her long black curls on top of her head like she was some kind of model.

“Hey, Marina.” Elizabeth gave me a hug, and I breathed in her sweet, flowery smell, which has been the same since second grade. When we first started having sleepovers, I used every soap and shampoo in her bathroom, trying to find that exact scent, but I never could.

We'd barely let go before Addie cried, “Reener!” strangled me, and bonked me with her grocery bag. Four bottles of Diet Dr. Pepper and one package of Mint Milanos straight to the shoulder blade.

“Ow!” I rubbed my back. “Hey, careful with the Pepper.”

Rachel slipped into the apartment, laughing. “Nice one, Addie,” she said.

Hunh? She and Addie were usually bff.

“Sorry!” Addie cried. Her cheeks remind me of chipmunks, and just then, they got all pink. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said as she stepped past me. “Seriously.” It’s too easy to make Addie feel bad. Even Rachel, her best friend, wanted to vote her Biggest Plebe in our online poll—*plebe* after the word for commoner in Social Studies last year.

“Sorry we’re late,” Elizabeth said, following Addie inside. “People kept fooling around while we were learning the dance, so Ms. Mancini kept us after five.”

“Oh.” I led them into the kitchen, the only place my mother will let us drink soda. “Were you late? I didn’t notice.”

“Well,” said Rachel, “we were actually late for two reasons.” She giggled.

As I hopped up on the counter, the cold granite sent a shiver up my spine. I held out a hand and said, “Pepper me, Addie.”

Her brown eyes gleaming, Addie handed one bottle to me, one to Rachel on the opposite counter, and one to her and Elizabeth at the breakfast table. “So?” Addie said to Rachel, once we had tapped down the fizz. “Are you going to tell her, or should we?”

Rachel grinned and squeezed her eyes shut, then blurted out, “I’m in love!”

Elizabeth and Addie cracked up.

“Again?” I untwisted my soda cap. Last year, Rachel had fallen in love about once a month.

“With…” Elizabeth prompted.

Rachel and Addie answered together, “Julian Navarro!”

I choked on my soda. *I* was the one who had pointed out his hotness after summer vacay. Didn’t that mean he was off-limits? As in, mine?

“We’re dance partners,” Rachel explained, leaning so far forward, she looked like she was going to fall off the counter. “He kept messing up the hand jive, so I stayed after and helped

him a little.” She giggled. “He kept teasing me, like, ‘Oh, prima ballerina thinks she’s got moves,’ but he totally liked it, I could tell.” She drummed her feet on the cabinet below her. “He is so hot! Eee!”

“You guys looked like you were really into it.” Elizabeth took a sip of Pepper.

“You’re, like, *meant* to be together,” Addie agreed.

I forced down a burp. Why was Rachel suddenly after Julian? He was popular, but also a homeboy, not like the artsy guys she usually went for. The clothes, the Addie-slammings... what was going on with Rachel?

“So, Marina.” Elizabeth’s voice broke into my thoughts. “You find out about Video soon, right?”

“Hunh? Oh, yeah.” It was nice of her to ask—she *had* tied for Nicest Girl, after all—but I didn’t care about Video the way they all cared about the play. I mean, I could already make all the videos I wanted with my equipment at home. I had just acted like Video was woo because everyone had been squealing about getting into the play until my ears practically bled, and I’d needed something to come out of my mouth that wasn’t barf.

*Read the rest of Marina’s first chapter in Nice and Mean, available in stores starting June 8, 2010.*

## **Chapter Two: Sachi’s Video Nightmare #2.0**

INTERIOR. JANE JACOBS MIDDLE SCHOOL LOBBY - DAY

Students crowd around a bulletin board.

CLOSE-UP: SACHI, her face alert.

CUT TO: the bulletin board. A piece of paper reads, “After-School Activities.”

CLOSE-UP: the word VIDEO and a list of names underneath it.

PAN down the list of names, resting on: SACHI PARIKH.

Sachi claps her hands in delight.

SACHI

Yes! I made it! Oh, thank you,  
thank you, thank-

She knocks into someone and turns to see MR. PHILLIPS, a teacher who has appeared as if from nowhere wearing a black suit and dark glasses.

MR. PHILLIPS

Sachi Parikh?

SACHI

*(gulps)*

Yes?

MR. PHILLIPS

*(briskly)*

Come with me, please. We  
have some questions about  
your permission slip.

STUDENTS JEER and WHISPER, "Busted!"

"Excuse me," I said, weaving through the crowd outside of school. "Sorry. Pardon me."

"Hey, Sachi!" said a voice.

I turned to see Tessa, from my math class, disentangling herself from her friends. "Oh, hi!" I replied. I really wanted to get into the lobby, but I didn't want to be rude, so I asked, "How are you?"

"Good. Listen." She sighed. "I lost that pencil you lent me."

"Oh!" I felt bad that she felt bad. "That's okay."

"Are you sure?" Her dark skin wrinkled in worry. "It was one of those nice mechanical ones."

I tried to smile, but all I could think was *Video, Video, Video*. “It’s okay,” I told her, “really. Hey, I need to check over my homework, but I’ll see you in math, okay?”

Her face relaxed. “Okay, thanks. Yeah, see you later.”

I wove through some tiny sixth-graders, careful not to shove into them but barely able to wait another second. We’d handed in the permission slips for after-school activities on Monday—they had to post the list today! When I came close enough to the door to give it a good yank, I burst into the lobby, looked toward the bulletin board and—

Oh. No list.

Not that I could read the bulletin board from all the way across the lobby, but last year, when my sister Priyanka wanted to know whether she’d gotten the fun Test-Prep teacher or the strict one, seventh- and eighth-graders had flocked to the board in such a mob that I’d had to wait on the edges until Priyanka had come back with the bad news. Today, some people were milling around by the board, but they looked more like people waiting than people who’d just found something out.

I walked over to my spot near the library, trying to stay hopeful. I *had* gotten to school pretty early. Maybe they’d put up the list before homeroom. After all, activities started next Tuesday, and today was Thursday. Surely they wouldn’t wait until next week to tell us. My stomach clenched with the thought that I’d have to spend the whole weekend worrying whether I’d gotten into Video. The teachers wouldn’t notice that the signature on my permission slip didn’t really match the one on my sister’s...would they?

“No way,” said a giggly voice, “you didn’t count that right.”

“That’s because I can’t do it when you’re moving!”

I looked up to see Flora and Lainey heading toward me. Lainey was clutching Flora's collar, and the two of them were laughing.

"Hi!" I laughed, too, because they looked so silly. "What's going on?"

Flora sank down next to me. "Not much." I inched away to give her room, since the pin collection on her bag can scratch you if you're not careful.

"Hey." Lainey smiled as she sat on the other side of Flora, her dirty-blond hair pulled into a messy and complicated bun. "What's up?"

"What were you guys talking about?" I couldn't imagine why Lainey had been holding on to Flora's collar.

"Oh, nothing." Flora shook her head, but she had a little smirk that made me think it was actually something.

"Flora wants me to get her some of that bicycle-chain jewelry they sell near my house," Lainey explained—"you know, like my bracelet." She rooted among the many bracelets on her wrist and ran her finger over a thick silvery one that I now realized was a chain from a bicycle.

"Oh, right," I said. "I like that one." Honestly, I thought it was sort of strange, but I knew Lainey was proud of it.

"Thanks," said Lainey, pleased. "Anyway, you have to tell the people at the store how many links you want, so I was trying to measure with my fingers, except *somebody*—" she leaned into Flora, who let out a barking laugh—"kept moving, so I couldn't get it right."

"Oh, funny," I said. Although why was that such a big deal that Flora didn't want me to know about it? "You should let her count, Flora. That bracelet would look good on you."

"Hey," said Lainey, "do you want me to get you one?"

Flora burst out laughing. "Oh yeah, right."

“What?” I asked, surprised.

Flora shook her head, chunks of dark-brown hair falling from her ponytail. “No offense, Sachi, but I don’t think you’re the bicycle chain type. I mean, the poll said you were a *Nice* Girl, not a Tough Girl.”

“Ugh, do not even mention that stupid poll.” Lainey scuffed her pink hi-tops against the wall opposite us. “That thing was evil.”

“Yeah.” Flora snorted. “Weirdest Girl.” She kept saying it like that, but I knew she liked her title.

“You’ll be on it if they do it next year,” I assured Lainey. “For best singer, maybe.” She was new this year, so people didn’t know her that well yet, but she was playing Rizzo in *Grease*, so she must have been good.

Lainey chipped at her purple nail polish. “I guess. But you’re, like, the only non-popular person who got something good. Not that those girls are popular with *me*, but you know.”

I crossed one leg over the other. “Yeah...” I had to admit, at first I had been flattered to have made it onto the poll. But lately I had started to wonder, what did “nice” mean? That I lent so many people pencils, I had to dip into my tiny allowance to buy more? Or that I didn’t say anything when Flora acted secretive about a necklace? “Nicest Girl” may have seemed like a compliment, but it was part of the reason I needed to get into Video.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn’t notice when it happened, but a teacher must have posted the list on the bulletin board, because all of a sudden, there was a stampede! Seventh- and eighth-graders mobbed the board in layers so thick, I couldn’t even see the board itself.

“What *is* that?” Lainey asked.

“I think it’s the after-school activities list,” I responded, my heart thumping. I sat frozen between them, not sure if I should move. Of course I wanted to see if I’d gotten into Video, but I wasn’t sure I wanted Flora and Lainey to be there when I did. What if the teachers noticed that the signature was funny, and had written “See me” next to my name?

Well—even if that was the case, I had to know. I jumped up and said, “I’m going to check out the list.”

Flora squinted up at me. “Are you that excited about test prep?”

“Um...I also requested Video.” The crowd was gathering more people by the second.

“No way!” Flora scrambled to her feet, and Lainey did the same as my heart squeezed in protest. “That’s so cool. I thought your parents were making you take test prep. What did you say to them?”

“I just asked and they said yes,” I replied, heading for the board. I wished she hadn’t said that in front of Lainey. They were already getting close because of the play—what if Flora told her things about me that made me seem immature? “It wasn’t a big deal.”

Just then, a boy pushed past me and elbowed me, hard.

Ow! I rubbed my arm. Was that my punishment for lying? Because I hadn’t only lied to my friends. I’d deceived my parents as well, only far, far worse.

VIDEO NIGHTMARE #2.2—A TRUE STORY.

INTERIOR. SACHI’S PARENTS’ BEDROOM - NIGHT

CLOSE-UP: a credit card, flipped over. A piece of scrap paper. A hand practicing a signature.

SACHI’S MOTHER (off-screen)  
Sachi? Why aren’t you in bed?

PAN from Sachi's hand to her face as she gasps.

SACHI

Coming!

Using the signature she's been practicing, Sachi scrawls her mother's name on the after-school activities form.