

The background is a stylized illustration of a room. At the top, a brown pipe runs horizontally. Below it, a brown lamp hangs from a cord, casting a warm glow. A white curtain hangs from a rod. Below the curtain, a wooden shelf holds various items: a black bag, two paint cans (one blue, one white), a rolled-up rug, a purple thermos, and a red and white cooler. Below the shelf, there are more boxes and items on the floor, including a blue box labeled 'WHITE', a red box labeled 'The', and a green box labeled 'Life'.

Remember the dancing gym teacher? I never intended for that video to go viral. I also never intended for it to get me kicked off my school's television news crew. But that's what happened. My best friend was behind the camera at the time, and she got kicked off too.

Just because we can't report the news at school, though, it doesn't mean we can't report the news. Together with our friend Brielle, the best video editor you'll ever meet, we decided to keep doing what we love and bring the news straight to you—yes, **YOU**—whoever and wherever you are. So, subscribe to this channel for important, real, breaking news brought to you by the sharpest sixth-grade journalists in Baltimore City.

# THE RENEGADE REPORTERS

ELISSA BRENT WEISSMAN



Dial Books for Young Readers

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# CHAPTER 1

## THIS JUST IN: More Fallout from Dancing Gym Teacher Incident

For Ash, watching *The News at Nine* from inside the control booth was like watching her little sister try to tie her shoes; Ash could do it so much better if she were only allowed to help. Once the broadcast went live, she wanted so desperately to jump in and take over that she had to press her feet together to keep them from carrying her into the studio.

“Good morning, John Dos Passos Elementary,” said the lead anchor, Harry. He was staring straight into the camera with a smile so tight, he had to speak through stretched lips, like an amateur ventriloquist. “Today is Tuesday, September tenth. The cold lunch is turkey sandwich. The hot lunch is spiral rotini with tomato and sauce broccoli.”

Ash raised her eyebrows.

Harry’s co-anchor, Damion, nudged Harry with his elbow and whispered something.

Harry squinted at the cue cards, his forced smile still

set. “Today’s hot lunch is spiral rotini with tomato and broccoli sauce.”

Damion looked at Harry and shook his head. The cue card holder took a step closer, which meant her back now blocked the camera.

“Tomato sauce and broccoli!” Harry said triumphantly, though viewers could see nothing but the cue card holder’s hair.

“Camera one, you’re blocked,” Brielle, the director, said into her headset.

If Ash’s best friend, Maya, had been operating camera one, she’d have known just what to do. “Pan right slowly,” Maya whispered, as if to prove the point. But no one could hear her, because she was in the control booth with Ash. Khalil was lead cameraman now, and he didn’t pan right slowly. Instead, he said “Yo,” and pulled on one of the cue card holder’s braids. She whipped her head around and glared at him—and at the whole school, since the camera was now capturing a close-up of her face.

Maya covered her eyes. Ash closed hers. She could hear laughs from classrooms down the hall. *The News at Nine* was broadcast live, which meant the whole school was witnessing this disaster.

“Ready camera two,” said Brielle, cool as always. “Birthdays in three . . . two . . . one . . .”

The second camera operator was ready, but the birthday reporter wasn’t. Now the broadcast showed him

pulling at a thread on the bottom of his uniform shirt. It was one of those threads that just kept going and going, which meant he could have pulled it all morning if Damion hadn't shouted "Over to birthdays!"

The birthday reporter looked up, startled. "Birthdays," he said. "That's me." He dropped the thread and blinked at the camera. "Wait. Did you already do the Pledge of Allegiance?"

Ash shook her head. They'd skipped the Pledge of Allegiance. Sure, this was the first episode of the new school year, but this was basic stuff.

Director Brielle said, "Pledge of Allegiance in three . . . two . . ."

Right on cue, the editor in the booth cut to the video of a waving flag. But the birthday reporter, unaware, had decided he was finally ready to report the birthdays. "Happy birthday to kindergartener Curtis Thompson and third grader Madison—oh? We're doing the Pledge of Allegiance? Okay."

Damion said, "Please rise for the Pledge of Allegiance," but the editor in the booth now swapped the pledge screen for camera two, where the birthday reporter had resumed pulling the thread on his shirt.

The laughter from down the hall got louder, and Ash pressed her palms into her face. This broadcast was going off the rails. She was glad that she and Maya weren't part of it. Then again, if they *could be* part of it—more than

having written the environmental report that Harry was surely going to butcher—Ash never would have messed up the lunch menu, and Maya never would have screwed up the camerawork, which meant *The News at Nine* never would have gotten off track in the first place. Ms. Sullivan was probably rethinking Ash and Maya's punishment this very moment, for the good of the show and the school's reputation.

Ash glanced over, and sure enough, Ms. Sullivan was biting her fingernails so intensely she could draw blood. It made Ash think of a word her babysitter had taught her: *Schadenfreude*. It was German, and it meant "taking pleasure in someone else's pain." Ash knew it wasn't nice to want the show to fail, but it was still sort of gratifying to see just how badly it was going without her and Maya.

"Brielle," Ms. Sullivan said. "Let's end the show early today. Cut to the closing credits."

"Ending the show early," Brielle said into her headset. "Closing credits in three . . . two . . ."

"I'm Damion Skinner," Damion said.

"And I'm Harry E. Levin," said Harry. "This has been *The News at Nine*, sponsored by Baltimore-based Van Ness Media."

The editor cut to the show's logo, a blocky number 9 with the words *The News at Nine* inside.

"Well," Ms. Sullivan said as the crew gathered in the

newsroom. “New year, new crew, lots to learn. But we’ll get there.”

Ash raised her hand. “Maybe we’d get there quicker if some of the old crew—I mean, some of the people with more experience—had bigger roles.”

“I’m lead anchor, Ash,” said Harry E. Levin. “Get over it.”

“I was just speaking generally,” Ash said.

“Yeah, right,” said Damion with a snort.

Ms. Sullivan put out her hands like a referee. Then she took a long sip of her coffee, like she was going to need it if she was going to get through this day. If Ash drank coffee, she’d have done the same thing.

“Go ahead and get to class, everyone,” Ms. Sullivan said. “Ashley, please stay and speak with me.”

Maya shot her a worried look, but Ash shrugged. She was hopeful. Ms. Sullivan had seen how terrible the show was today without Ash in front of the camera or Maya behind it. She probably wanted to figure out a way to revoke their punishment and make Ash lead anchor without upsetting Harry. Ash planned to be very mature about it. Maybe she’d offer to share the role with Harry, alternating days or weeks. That would make Ms. Sullivan respect her even more, which might make her *insist* that Ash take over the role full-time.

Sure enough, once everyone had cleared out and Ms. Sullivan had gotten rid of Harry, who was zipping his



backpack very slowly in an obvious attempt to eavesdrop, Ms. Sullivan leaned against a desk and smiled. "I know it's hard for you to watch *The News at Nine* from the booth, Ashley," she said. "You've been a dedicated member of the crew since—"

"Second grade," Ash finished for her.

Ms. Sullivan smiled again. "It must be difficult for you to watch Harry sit at the anchor desk instead of you."

Ash nodded. *Here comes the offer*, she thought.

"However," Ms. Sullivan said, "I'm not going to change my mind about your punishment."

Ash felt her face morph from hopeful anticipation to genuine shock. *What?*

"No matter how the show runs without you, we cannot have you back on-screen after what happened last year. And we can't have Maya operating a camera."

"I'm really sorry," Ash said for what must have been the five millionth time.

Besides, it wasn't even their fault. Well, not entirely. She and Maya had been roving reporters, walking to the gym to give a live status update on the new basketball hoop being installed. They'd heard a noise coming from the gym teacher's office and decided to investigate. Wasn't that what a good news reporter was supposed to do?

How were they supposed to know that Coach Kelly would be in there wearing nothing but shorts and a sports

bra? How were they supposed to know that she wouldn't hear them coming because she'd also be wearing headphones, dancing and lip-synching in the mirror while applying her makeup?

Okay, so Ash shouldn't have looked into the camera and said, "Breaking news: Coach Kelly's got moves!" She regretted that part of it (even though it *was* a compliment), and her first thousand or so apologies had been sincere. And maybe Maya could have shut off the camera quicker, but she *had* stopped recording the moment Coach Kelly turned around and screamed. That meant the 300 students and staff at John Dos Passos Elementary only saw about 5.4 seconds of the dancing gym teacher before *The News at Nine* cut to the sixth-grade anchors in the main studio. It definitely wasn't Ash's fault that the lead anchor was staring at the camera like a stunned raccoon, or that the co-anchor was laughing so hard, a rubber band on his braces snapped. It wasn't Maya's fault that this made the lead videographer crack up and let his camera slip, which made it capture, sideways, the shock and hilarity that had engulfed the newsroom while a red-faced Ms. Sullivan frantically searched for the camera's off-button before the screen cut to black.

It wasn't Ash's or Maya's fault that *The News at Nine* was available to anyone with the password to the school's online portal. So, it also wasn't their fault that a former *News at Nine* reporter, now in high school, happened to

watch this episode later that day, or that he'd decided to post the clip online for a wider audience. And it *certainly* wasn't Ash's or Maya's fault that the video racked up over two million views in just under five days.

Besides, Ash thought now as she pleaded silently with Ms. Sullivan here in the studio, all of this had happened in May—*last* year, before summer break—and Ms. Sullivan had taken them off the news crew for the rest of fifth grade. Surely that had been punishment enough. This was a new year, a fresh start. More importantly, this was *sixth grade*, Ash's last year at John Dos Passos Elementary and her only chance to be lead anchor for the morning news show. She'd been training for this opportunity since she was her little sister's age. Back then, her brown hair was still in long pigtails and her fingernails were unpainted and her top front teeth were just jagged lines poking unevenly through her gums. Now her hair was short and choppy, and her fingernails were purple and orange, and not only were her adult teeth fully in, but her face had finally grown enough to make them look the right size. In other words, Ashley Simon-Hockheimer had come a long way since she'd first joined the school news crew and had only been allowed to occasionally say "Who's there?" for the knock-knock joke of the week. She was a young woman now, an experienced journalist, and the most qualified person to be lead anchor, with her best friend, Maya Joshi-Zachariah,

the undisputed choice for lead videographer. Together, they were an unstoppable team. An unstoppable team that was unfairly, devastatingly, permanently benched.

Ms. Sullivan took another long sip of her coffee. “We’ve been through this before, Ashley. You violated Coach Kelly’s privacy. She was so uncomfortable, she moved to a different school. There need to be consequences.”

*Privacy*, Ash thought, resisting the urge to roll her eyes, because what sort of privacy could you expect in a school full of kids? *If Coach Kelly really cared about privacy, she shouldn’t have been dancing around her office in a sports bra.* “It won’t happen again,” Ash promised. “Trust me.”

But Ms. Sullivan shook her head. “It’s not just me who has to trust you. It’s the principal, and the teachers, and the people at Van Ness Media who pay for all our equipment and sponsor the show.”

“But won’t the people at Van Ness Media be more embarrassed if the show is really bad?” Ash asked.

“Just because you’re not lead anchor, it doesn’t mean the show is bad.”

“Today’s show was really bad.”

“Excuse me?” Ms. Sullivan said sharply.

“Nothing,” Ash muttered.

Ms. Sullivan gave Ash a hard stare for a full five seconds. Then she said, “You’re a strong reporter with a lot of experience. I know you care about broadcast journalism.

If you want to continue to write stories for the anchors to read, I'd love to have you be part of the crew. But you'll need to be a team player, which means you support the other members of the team no matter what. If you can't do that"—she crossed her arms—"I'm going to have to cut you from the crew entirely."

She said it gently but firmly, in that way teachers do, and Ash felt a sharp pang of betrayal. It was Ms. Sullivan who'd gotten Ash into reporting to begin with. Five years ago, she had substituted for Ash's first-grade teacher and asked for a volunteer to tell her what they were working on. Ash had stood up and given a complete rundown on what they were learning in every subject. Ms. Sullivan had been impressed. "You should consider joining *The News at Nine* crew next year," she'd said. "We could use a clear and confident reporter like you."

Ash still remembered how her six-year-old body had swelled with pride and possibility. She'd started watching *The News at Nine* closely every morning and dreaming about the day she'd be on the screen instead of watching it from her classroom. She'd signed up as soon as she was old enough, and she never looked back.

It was Ms. Sullivan who taught Ash about the importance of a free press and the responsibilities that came along with reporting the news. It was *The News at Nine* that taught Ash to investigate stories thoroughly and fairly,

and to be confident and capable on camera and off. It was Ms. Sullivan and *The News at Nine* that had brought Ash together with Maya, who was too shy to speak around adults but silently noticed the things Ash didn't because Ash was too busy talking. Ash and Maya had been dedicated to *The News at Nine* for four years. How could Ms. Sullivan, of all people, do this to them, after just one little mistake?

Ash gulped, not wanting Ms. Sullivan to see her cry. It'd be hard to watch the show from her classroom, but as she knew from this first episode today, it'd be even harder to watch it from the control booth. She didn't think she could handle seeing Harry E. Levin read the things she'd researched and written, even if he did learn to do it without sounding like a robot. In fact, the better Harry delivered Ash's reports, the harder it'd be to watch.

Ms. Sullivan was right. There was no way Ash could be a supportive team player when she was aching to be captain. It'd be torture.

Ash swallowed, then squared her shoulders. "All right," she told Ms. Sullivan. "I quit."