

Chapter One

DAY ONE

11:30 AM

The helicopter sounds like a roaring monster.
And I'm in its belly.

While the pilot prepares for takeoff, I quickly edit my video. Type words over it. Move the text around. Then I hit *upload*.

@Dex_Effex_

 19-second video

COME ALONG FOR THE RIDE!!!

SEE IF I SURVIVE!!!

FOLLOW THE FIVE-DAY FEED THEY SET

UP @Dropped_CanTheyMakelt/Dex

Selfie mode—Me! Gangly, brown-eyed, ear triple pierced. “Hey, everyone. I’m ready to go! Just saying bye to my mom.”

Phone flips to our small, tidy house. Mom stands outside. She blows kisses. To the camera, not to me. “Be careful, Dex!” she says.

Selfie mode—Me again! Grinning. “Can’t wait for this! Make sure to follow me!” I stick out my tongue.

Phone flips. And joggles. I walk toward a helicopter in the field behind my house.

“Check this out!”

Selfie mode—Me sitting in the helicopter. One thumb up.

**IF YOU GUYS LOVE ME THE MOST, I WIN
\$250,000! AND THAT SICK TRIP TO DUBAI!!!
REMEMBER...WHEN I GET TO ADVENTURE
ISLAND, FOLLOW ME**

@Dropped_CanTheyMakelt/Dex


When I look up from my phone, the pilot hands me a blindfold. I set it on my lap while I check the main *Dropped!* feed. They started filming an hour ago. Their team is editing and uploading to this main page. They told


us they'll post whatever they think will get the most attention. Their footage. Our footage. They have 100,000 followers already. Each contestant has their own *Dropped!* feed too. I don't have many followers—and one of them is my mom.


Right now one of the updates on the main feed is a photo of me in the front seat of the helicopter. I scroll through the rest.

@Dropped_CanTheyMakelt

Updates

 Close-up video of a girl blowing kisses at the screen. Tons of makeup.

 Hypershort video of another teenager chewing her nail.

 Two big guys get into a helicopter, arms round each other. They are identical twins. Hard to tell which one is which. They both wear swim trunks and not a lot else.

Soon I'll know all these people. I'll be competing against them.

I guess I already am!

11:39 AM

With a lurch, the helicopter rises. Blindfolded, I find everything even more strange. My stomach feels like a fish is swimming inside.

I am one of six contestants on the new reality show *Dropped!* When I told my mom

three weeks ago, she shared it on her social media. In fact, she made me tell her again so she could film me sharing the news. She's totally addicted. Her whole life is online. Our whole lives are online.

Sure, she asked me if Adventure Island was safe. Asked if I was going to be okay. But only after she stopped filming "our moment." Like it was an afterthought.

I didn't tell her I had to escape my real life. The way it had suddenly headed. Downhill, like my life online.

I was no longer Mr. Popular.

She knew anyway. She'd seen my ratings crash. My friends abandon me. But talking about all that bad stuff makes it real to her. I know she didn't want to face that.

The helicopter swings to the left, and I try to imagine where we're going. It helps me forget about my ex-girlfriend, Lola. Forget about my crappy friends. Forget how I broke my life.

No, I'm lying. I never forget. It's like, when I close my eyes, my brain is looping. The video in my mind shows Lola making out with my best friend. Ex-best friend.

The next scene is at that party. Where I drank too much. Where I stood by the outdoor pool in my swim shorts. At the party. In front of everyone.

And sang.

I sang to Lola. She used to love my songs.

Multiple people streamed my performance. It did not look how I'd thought it would. In real

life, I looked pathetic. Not as muscular as my feed makes out. In my old swim shorts. With wet hair over my face. Slurring my words.

Then I'd flung my arms out and yelled, "I love you, Lola! Take me back!" Well, that was the death of my old life. Right there. My followers left me. My social-media life was over.

But not anymore. I'm going to revive it. On the island the *Dropped!* team will be filming us constantly. With secret cameras. Some will livestream, and some footage will be edited. To best suit their audience. Which will help me regrow mine. Both on the island and when I win that trip to Dubai. Imagine the photos and content I can score from a trip like that.

The helicopter speeds up. It pushes me into my seat.

"You doing all right, kid?" the pilot shouts over the roar.

I can't see her at all with the blindfold on. "Awesome," I say, although my stomach is queasy.

12:15 PM (I'm guessing!)

Still blindfolded, I get off the first helicopter. Then the pilot ushers me up a short flight of steps. I work out that we're getting onto a plane.

I try to look cool in my seat. Because I know they are filming us. Every minute.

We take off, and hours go by. I try not to drool while I sleep.

When we land, I hear two voices talking behind me. "We're going to win this easily."

"You bet, Salvo."

I am led off the plane. A newly familiar helicopter roar fills the air. Another chopper? By this stage, I can't tell how long I've been traveling.

I'm squished close to someone else. They smell antiseptic. Like a hospital.

More time goes by.

Suddenly we're dropping down.

The churn of the helicopter.

The sudden rush of heat as the door opens.

The tropical smell of the air.

"Come on, kid, let's go."

The other person stays behind as someone leads me out.

I go down the steps. My hair blown by the chopper blades, floppy all over.

The soft ground makes me stumble to one knee. Sand. Someone says, "Good luck. Remember..."

"What?" I ask.

"Don't risk too much," she says. I think it's the pilot. Before I can ask what she means, her footsteps retreat. Rustling. The helicopter gets even louder, then rises above me.

I listen to it disappear.

In the new quiet, I hear a swooshing noise. Water perhaps.

It repeats. Waves.

Sand. Waves. Tropical air.

Sweet! Adventure Island smells and sounds amazing.