

CHAPTER ONE

As I climb into the number 42 bus today, a bus full of laughing kids, I wish had a perfect family. Not a dad who's been traumatized in the Afghanistan war and hardly knows I exist. Not a mom who's stressed from having to work all the time. I imagine a dad who gives me hugs and tells me he's proud of me, and a mom who has time to sit on the floor and listen. Of course, part of my perfect family is a cute, fluffy dog. Instead we have a huge, smelly dog-brute named Fred that Dad likes better than me. Maybe if I turned into a dog, he'd like me too.

As I reach the top step and see that Courtney has taken my favorite seat, the laughing stops.

Everyone stares at me, and then they quickly look back down at their phones. The driver isn't Mrs. Brock. She must be sick. The substitute looks like a witch they dragged out from under a rock, stuck a rumpled uniform on, and put in charge of driving us to school. She has a long, hook nose and black hair that's as tangled as mine, if that's even possible.

Since Courtney, my archenemy, is in MY seat, I take my second-favorite seat, nine rows back. From there, I watch everyone talking.

Courtney snickers and puts her head close to Maya, who's next to her. They both peek back to see where I ended up. Then more heads turn. I whip out my phone to see what they're saying, because of course I follow her on Twitter, just to keep track of her taunts. Rachael gets on at the next stop, comes back, and sits down next to me.

My hands shake as I hold the phone and read what Courtney wrote:

OMG!!! Looks like she's never brushed her hair—
IN HER LIFE!!! I'm not sure why she needs three exclamation points. It's just hair. My hand automatically goes to smooth it down, even though the rest of me is yelling at my hand to stop. Okay, so I have frizzy hair and it doesn't like to stay where I put it, especially on a windy day, or a damp day, or a dry day. It just does whatever it wants. Courtney's hair isn't perfect either. She twirls and pulls strands so hard that sometimes clumps come out. Her hair being long, the missing clumps aren't visible, but maybe that's why she has it so long. Anyway, she should be the LAST person on the planet to poke fun at my hair.

The oatmeal I ate for breakfast turns rock hard in my stomach, and I bend over a bit to ease the sharp pain of it going around a corner of my guts. Rachael takes my phone and turns it off.

“Sydney, you know better than to read that stuff,” she says. This is easy for her to say, because

her hair lies down nicely and her hair clips aren't swallowed up by it.

I shove my phone into a pocket of my backpack. She's right, but it still makes me mad. I stare out the window, trying to ignore the laughter all around me. The bus rumbles down Creston Road. My town is not too big and not too small. The hills are still green from the winter rains, and all the trees have burst out with leaves. Houses are mostly well kept. Yards are green, except for the ones that have white volcano rock. Mom, the real estate agent, says those white rocks hurt sales. Maybe because they're ugly.

"How's your dad?" Rachael asks, then sniffls, and I wonder if she's going to start sneezing. Rachael sneezes when she's worried, like Dad screams when something reminds him of being in the war. Mom says that's because he has post-traumatic stress. Last night was a great example. A few claps of thunder and flashes of lightning, and

he was blubbering and cowering like in the duck-and-cover exercises they make us do once a month for earthquakes. After he yells, I usually hear Mom's voice try to calm him, tell him he's safe, but I don't think he believes her.

This morning, while I ate my now sharp-as-pins granola, he drank from a whiskey bottle, and Mom's eyes were red and swollen. When she handed me my lunch, she wiped a tear off her cheek with the cuff of her expensive business suit.

She must have seen the sour look on my face, because she said, "Dad's just a bit lost. PTSD does that to someone. He really does love you."

I'm not so sure she knows what she's talking about. Not the way he ignores me.

And then there's Fred, his bomb-sniffing dog. Fred got wounded in the same explosion that hurt Dad, so they came back home together. Dad has an artificial leg and something wrong inside his head. Fred is missing an eye and part of an ear.

They're quite a pair.

"The only one he talks to is that dumb Fred," I say aloud, to no one. "I wish I spoke dog language. I wish I was a dog. Then MAYBE he'd talk to me."

The bus slows down as it turns into the circular drive in front of McKinley Middle School.

"You could run away," Rachael says. "Then they'd notice you were gone."

I want to ask her why she would suggest that, but Rachael stands up to get off the bus. When I get to the front of the bus, the driver reaches out her spider-veined hand and clasps my wrist. Her breath smells minty, and my skin tingles where her hand clutches it. Everything around me goes black with little sparkles of light. Her eyes are dark, spooky, like they are trying to send me a secret message. I shiver.

"A wish wished in love is granted," she whispers, then releases me and turns her head to

wave to another driver, as if she hadn't said anything at all. The sparks of light vanish. I rub my wrist as Rachael and I walk into the school.

"Did you see that?" I ask. Rachael shakes her head. I want to believe I imagined it, but the twinge in my wrist is too real.

"You should go to Florida," she says. "We went there once on vacation, and I liked it." Back to the running-away idea. I wonder how long it takes to get to Florida.

Rachael sneezes, and that tells me something is wrong. She always sneezes in fits of five or six blasts, so she's just a little worried right now.

"What?" I ask, but looking up, I see why she sneezed. Courtney and her groupies are blocking the hallway we need to go through to get to our classroom. I plaster on my smile-through-it-all face and head toward them.

"How do you get your hair to stand up all around like that?" Courtney asks, her voice all

sing-songy. Courtney isn't just my archenemy; she's my bully, my tormentor. Usually I ignore her and walk past, but the whole hallway is full of kids staring at me. I hear Rachael take in a quick breath. One sneeze-fest coming up.

Sometimes I laugh it off and take the coward's way out: let her say what she's going to say anyway and pretend it doesn't bother me, which I've gotten pretty good at. Even though it does bother me. A lot.

Pretending is what I should do, but it's not what I choose to do this time.

"Why, Courtney, I am fortunate not to have to spend much time to achieve this fashion-forward hairstyle. How much time do *you* spend getting yours to lie flat like a melted vanilla ice-cream cone on your head?" I say. I'm not mean enough to mention the patches of missing hair.

I'm not sure where all those fancy words came from. Probably the fashion and home-design

magazines Mom has stacked on the coffee table. And I'm not sure how I had the courage to say them, or the stupidity. Maybe Dad is rubbing off on me.

It takes a moment for Courtney to realize she's been insulted, but the kids around her get it right away. A few of them smile; a few widen their eyes in amazement that I'd say something back to the meanest girl in school. Courtney's eyes narrow; I can barely see the little line of blue between her over-mascaraed lashes. Mom won't let me wear makeup until I'm older. Courtney wears eye shadow, mascara, and lip gloss.

"I'll make you pay for that," she says.

Just then Rachael lets go with a huge sneeze, and everyone steps back enough for us to pass through, waving their hands in the air to clear her spewed-out germs. Four sneezes later, Rachael and I stand at the doorway to our classroom.

"Now you're going to *have* to run away,"

she says, “Courtney will make your life miserable.” She wipes her nose for about the billionth time. “Maybe you shouldn’t let her say things like that to you.” Sheesh, what kind of best friend would say that?

“Rachael, I don’t choose to be bullied.”

“I mean—all I’m saying is, you’re going to have to deal with Courtney,” she says, “and Courtney can be mean.”

That much I already know.
