

Chapter One

It's summer and I'm sidelined with a broken ankle. I'm thinking I'm in for the most boring summer of my life until the word gets around that Jojo Benn is coming back home to live with his mother. Everyone knows he's coming back a few days before he actually shows up because his mother tells Megan Dalia's mom. Megan's mom immediately tells everyone else, even

though she says she doesn't blame Jojo's mother for what he did. My mother has a different opinion. She says Jojo's mother was always too soft on him. She says Jojo would have turned out differently if he had been taken in hand.

Jojo is twenty when he comes back. While we wait, we all wonder if he will show up in a taxi or if maybe one of his old friends, who haven't been around much while Jojo has been away, will drive him up to his mother's front door.

But he doesn't arrive in a taxi or a car. Instead, a city bus slides to a stop at the end of the street, and Jojo gets off. He's carrying a suitcase. He's taller than anyone remembers. He's bulkier too. Some people say it's from all the bad food he probably ate while he was locked up. Other people say they heard that guys work out in there, and sure enough, when Jojo walks past my house carrying his suitcase, I see muscles on his arms that I never saw before.

Jojo doesn't look at anyone, but everyone sure looks at him. He walks up to the front door of his mother's house and rings the bell. Someone opens the door, and he goes inside. After that—only after that—people come off their porches and into the street and start talking.

There are a lot of people who can't believe that Jojo has had the nerve to come back to our neighborhood. There are more people who don't want him around. Things haven't exactly been peaceful since he went away. Things are never peaceful in my neighborhood. But at least people haven't worried about Jojo for the past two years.

I know Jojo, but I don't know him well. He lives in the same row of houses that I live in. His mother is our next-door neighbor. Jojo is nearly four years older than me, so we never hung out together. But I used to see him out in his backyard sometimes when the weather was nice, making some food on the barbecue

or sitting in the sun or fooling around with some of his friends. Sometimes he would be talking to his mother who, it would surprise a lot of people to know, he always talked nice to. Because I saw him like that and other people didn't, I could see that sometimes he seemed like just a regular person. But then he'd get out on the street with his friends, and he'd do bad things—hurt people or humiliate them or take their stuff. Everyone was glad when he went away. Everyone except his mother.

Now he's back, and people are tense and afraid. They wonder if his friends will start showing up again. They wonder if they'll be walking down the street one day and they'll run into Jojo and he will give them attitude or shove them around, just for fun. They wonder if he'll show up in their stores or their restaurants and take stuff and tell them, *Go ahead, call the cops*, which a lot of them are afraid to do (Jojo always seems to know which ones are afraid). Jojo's friends have a way of making it hard—really hard—on

people who decide to press charges against Jojo. Those people just wish Jojo would go away and never come back.

Then there are the people who have hate in their hearts. Those people wish something bad would happen to Jojo. Something really bad.

Ardell Withrow is one of those people.