

# Chapter One

Every kid in my grade wants to be my lab partner for one reason and one reason only—I'm Chinese. I don't know who it was, but some jerk started a rumor that Asians are good at math and science. So every time a science project or math homework is due, students desperate to get a good mark suck up to me for help.

Last year Tyler Mason tried to be my best friend around the same time our science projects were due. A peacock with more fashion sense than common sense, Tyler gets by on his perfect smile and smooth confidence. He likes to pretend he doesn't care about appearances. One time he showed up at school with serious bed head. But I could smell the gobs of gel he had used to style his hair into that artful mess.

Tyler became a minor celebrity at our school because of a YouTube video. He filmed himself flipping a half-full water bottle on top of his pet turtle. His post netted 497,876 views. He brags about this number every day. When he approached me, he claimed he could shoot a video of me that would go almost as viral as his had. All I had to do was help him with his science project. And by *help* he meant "do it."

Here's the thing. I'm terrible at math and even worse at science. I can't tell the difference between

an acid and a base. The only stars I watch are the ones on Netflix. I would tell you that I'm lousy to the power of ten if I knew what the power of ten meant. When Tyler asked me for help, I turned him down because I knew he'd be worse off with me. But then I learned the hard way that no one turns down Tyler Mason. Ever.

In science today Mrs. Hill rolled out a metal cart loaded with half-full beakers, trays and plastic bottles. She had posted instructions for something called "Elephant's Toothpaste" on the smart board behind her.

"All right, class. Today you're in for a treat. We're going to examine catalyst agents. I think you'll like this experiment."

"Why is it called Elephant's Toothpaste?" I asked.

"You'll see," said Mrs. Hill. "You'll be working in pairs."

I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't leave the choice to us. The last thing I needed was to spend

a class trying not to breathe in Tyler's body spray. He uses a lot.

Mrs. Hill scanned the class list. "Tyler, you're with Alanna."

I sighed with relief. Alanna buried her head in her arms on her desk.

Tyler strutted over and plopped himself down on the stool beside Alanna. "You know how many views my YouTube video has now?"

I think I might have heard Alanna scream into her desk.

"Jon, I'm putting you with Megan," Mrs. Hill announced.

Megan Reese is the new girl at school. I don't know much about her other than she is, well, the new girl. She's only been at St. Thomas More Middle School for a month and she barely talks to anyone. No group has claimed her yet. Not the athletes. Not the gamers. Not the theater kids. She is a loner. But she seems cool.

I looked around. There was Megan, perched on a stool near the back wall. Our gazes locked in a silent battle of wills. I motioned for her to come to my counter, but she shook her head. She pulled her blond hair back in a ponytail and patted the stool beside her. Fine. I shuffled over.

"Hey," I said.

Megan nodded.

"You good at this kind of stuff?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm hopeless. I know enough about science to stay away from it."

I chuckled. "I'll beat you to the door."

"On those scrawny legs? I'm surprised they can even hold you up."

"So you like looking at my legs?" I teased.

"I also like looking at photos of autopsies. You remind me of one of them."

I did my best impersonation of a zombie, with my eyes rolled back and tongue hanging out. Megan laughed.