

Chapter One

I step into the school bus and stand next to the driver's seat, looking for a place to sit by myself. The bus smells like rotten oranges, sweaty running shoes and cheese. It's the middle of November, and this is my first time on the bus. In fact, this afternoon is the first time I've been on *any* school bus. Back in Vancouver I took public transit, the

city buses. And Gran dropped me off this morning on my first day at this school.

“Keep moving,” the driver says. But she doesn’t bother to look up from the romance novel she’s reading. She’s about as old as Gran, in her sixties. And she wears a fedora. Not just a hat. A *fedora*. Like, an old man’s hat. I bet she’s like that teacher I had in sixth grade who wore a different hat to school every day. A cowboy hat one day, a crown the next. Thinking she’s being funny or *fun*. But at least that teacher had pizzazz, energy. This driver appears worn out, like she’s been driving the school bus for a while now. Too long. She nods wearily in my general direction. “Take a seat.”

Yeah, I think, but where? Most of the seats already have at least one kid in them. Super-little kids, probably kindergartners, sit in the first rows at the front, and what look like elementary kids are just behind them. The ones who look like they’re around ten or eleven, younger middle schoolers,

take up the middle of the bus. The biggest kids, the cool eighth graders, are at the back.

Seating on the school bus is by age group then, I guess. Well, except for this one girl who’s clearly the weird kid. She’s about my age, thirteen or so, but is sitting three seats from the front with the young kids. She is wearing glasses, and her hair is bunched into a knot. She has these big headphones on and is reading a book. I can see the title. It’s a textbook on how the brain works. A smart kid then.

It’s clear that everyone in each little group knows one another. They’re friends. I’m arriving at this school late in the fall. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t, I doubt I’ll make friends now. Who cares? It’s not like I’m staying long anyway.

I start to make my way down the aisle. A red-haired girl whispers to another girl, and they giggle at me like I’ve got my fly open or something. I check. I don’t. I feel my face heat up.

“Hey, fresh meat!” some guy shouts.

“What’s with the merman hair?” the red-haired girl asks. Oh, so it was my *hair* they were giggling about. There are a few dye jobs on the bus. But nothing like my bright neon green and blue spikes. I just had it done before...well, before.

I ignore them, keeping my eyes on the single empty seat I spotted at the very back. I want nothing to do with these rural freaks. I’m only staying with Gran until Mom gets back on her feet. Then I’m back to the city, first chance I get.

I slide into the empty seat next to the emergency exit. I figure here, at least, I’ll be left alone. But then a guy dressed in a black hoodie pulled low over his face turns in his seat to look at me. He’s wearing black lipstick. And what little hair I can see is dyed black. His face is pale, like he never sees the sun. There are circles under his eyes like he never sleeps. The guy is the Grim Reaper. All emo.

“Hey, *Merman*. I wouldn’t sit there if I were you,” he says. “That’s Jeremy and Sophie’s seat.”

Two people couldn’t sit here. The seat I’m in and the one on the other side of the emergency exit are only big enough for one person. And anyway, back in the city, nobody “owned” a bus seat. I stare out the window, hoping he will leave me alone.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” says Emo.

My reflection stares back at me. That colorful spiked hair. Ocean-blue eyes (or so Gran tells me). The new puffer jacket Gran inflicted on me. Warm, but not my style. I look tired, almost as tired as Emo. No, I look *sad*.

I refocus on the school parking lot. It’s been snowing since before lunch, the first snow of the season. The school grounds are covered in the stuff. Clouds hang low over the surrounding hills. Winters are gray and depressing here. I remember that from Christmas visits to my granny’s. Vancouver

is cloudy all winter too, of course. But at least we hardly ever get snow. This first snowfall has turned to slush on the roads and made them slick. A few parents picking up their kids have trouble driving their cars up the hill to the school.

“That’s my seat.”

I look up to see this muscled guy in a Canadian tuxedo—a jean jacket and jeans—staring down at me. He seems too old to be in middle school. Jeremy, I presume. Behind him a girl with blond hair dipped in green grips his bicep. This must be Sophie.

“*Our seat,*” the girl adds.

I wave a hand to object. “But there’s only room for one in this seat.”

“Exactly,” the girl says. So they’re a thing.

“Take that seat,” I say, pointing at the one on the other side of the emergency exit.

Emo and several of the eighth-grade kids in nearby seats are watching the drama unfold with interest.

“I don’t think you understand,” Jeremy says. There’s a warning in his voice. “You’re sitting in *my seat.*”

“*Our seat,*” Sophie corrects him.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Out, now!”

“Is there a problem back there, Jeremy?” the driver asks, using the PA system.

“No problem,” Jeremy calls back. “The new kid is just moving out of my seat.”

“*Our seat,*” Sophie says. It’s like there’s an echo in here.

“Get a move on,” the driver says, her voice booming over the speaker. “We need to get going. The roads are slippery. It will be tough driving today.”

“Fine,” I say. “Whatever.” I sling my backpack over to the other single seat. Then I watch as Jeremy sits in “his” seat. The girl all but sits on top of him, her legs crossways over his lap. She giggles and giggles. Then, *god*, they start to kiss. To avoid

looking at them, I peer up at the ceiling, then squint when I realize there is a blob of pudding up there. Hardened, fossilized, but still clearly *pudding*.

My phone buzzes, and I click on *Messages*. Gran.

How are you doing, Mark? Get on the bus okay?

Yeah. We're about to leave.

Made any friends?

No.

And I'm not going to bother, I think of adding. What's the point in trying to make friends? I'll only be here a couple of weeks max. Why would I want to make friends with any of them anyway? Local yokels, the lot of them.

Another message from Gran pops up.

I talked to your mom today.

There is a long pause in which neither of us texts.

Finally the phone vibrates again.

She's okay. But it's going to be a long haul this time.

A long haul. A phrase Gran uses a lot. She means things aren't going to get better any time soon. *Mom* isn't going to get better anytime soon. I refuse to believe that. Because that would mean Mom's stuck in that creepy hospital. And I'm stuck up here. On Gran's farm in the middle of nowhere. In this crappy small-town school. On this stinking bus.

Ugh. Jeremy and Sophie are making slurping noises in the next seat. I roll my head back and stare up at the petrified pudding on the ceiling. This is going to be a long ride.

Chapter Two

The bus ambles out of town, rocking back and forth down the highway. City transit isn't exactly quiet, but at least people keep to themselves. The kids on this school bus, on the other hand, are *nuts*. Half of them are screaming at each other. The other half are yelling just to make themselves heard as they talk to their friends.

One orange-haired kid is hurling bits of cheese. *Cheese*. The only kids who are quiet and keeping to themselves are the kindergarten kids right up front. Oh, and that weird girl in the third row. She's got these massive headphones, like, noise-canceling headphones. I wish I had a pair.

Gross. Now Jeremy and Sophie are *really* kissing in the seat. I mean, there's tongue action.

Jeremy catches me squinting at them in disgust and disbelief. He stops kissing and gives me the stink eye. "Do you *mind*?" he asks. "A little privacy, please?"

Privacy? On a school bus?

Then he goes back to snogging the girl. That's it. I'm out of here. I grab my backpack and stand up, steadying myself with a hand on the back of a seat as I try to figure out who to sit with. A skinny kid with blue bangs shakes his head. Okay, I won't sit with him. A girl in yoga pants shifts toward the