

# CHAPTER 1

I stood at the bottom of the driveway in my pajamas with a serious case of bed head. Across the street, a large yellow rental moving van backed out of our neighbor's driveway. I felt a cold, deep pang of loneliness seep through my body.

Or maybe it was just the wind. These weren't very warm pajamas.

From the driver's seat, Mr. Finch smiled at me. He stuck his hand out the window, his other hand on the steering wheel. "Bye, Otto," he said. "Take care!"

"I'll miss you!" I hollered. But I wasn't yelling to Mr. Finch. I wouldn't miss *him*. I screamed to Alfalfa, their golden retriever, who sat in the backseat. I think I even heard an *Arf!*, a single gruff, depressed bark answering my shout.

"Bye!" I croaked, my yell catching in my throat. I couldn't hear much over the loud clacking of the truck. But I imagined a bark rang out as full of sadness and misery as I felt.

Then they were gone — the Finches, Alfalfa, and their truckload of stuff — around the corner and out of sight. Mom said a new family would be moving into the house in a few weeks. I asked if they had a dog, or if they had kids, or if they were professional soccer players.

Mom said no, no, and she highly doubted it.

I stood in the driveway for a moment longer, lonely, shivering, and wishing I'd worn shoes.

I'd feared this day. I'd feared it for weeks. So I'd pretended it was never going to happen. But ignoring bad things never worked. I sometimes ignored my homework and watched TV. But then I just had to do my homework the next day and Mom wouldn't let me watch television for a week. Unfortunately, things don't vanish just because you stop paying attention to them. Too bad. If they did, I'd have just ignored my sister, Lexi — and *poof!* — life would have been perfect.

But I figured life was going to stink now that Alfalfa had left. I had played with him almost every day since he was a puppy. I mean, the dog was practically more mine than the Finches'. I knew which ear he liked scratched (the right ear), his favorite game (keep-away with the tennis ball), and exactly how long he wanted his tummy rubbed (until he barked twice).

Alfalfa's new neighbors, whoever they were, wouldn't know any of that. What if they didn't even like dogs? What if they liked *cats*?

There are two types of people in the world: dog people and cat people. Dog people are clever, friendly, good-looking, funny, and overall fantastically wonderful. Cat people, on the other hand, are ugly, boring, and smell bad. I'm not making that up — those are the facts.

I, by the way, am a dog person.

But now that Alfalfa had moved away, there was only one thing I could do. Well, there were two things I could do. The first thing was to move to Montana into the house next door to the Finches'. Then I could play with Alfalfa every day.

But I didn't think Mom would agree to move to Montana.

The second solution, the more likely one, was for me to get a dog of my own.

I wasn't picky. I'd have taken just about any dog. We could adopt a quiet dog or a barking dog, a grumpy dog or a happy dog, a sitting dog or a running dog, a shaggy dog or a hairless dog. Mom wasn't exactly a pet person, though. She didn't love dogs or cats or anything. I needed help convincing her.

I needed Lexi.

I couldn't believe Lexi and I were related, to be totally honest. We were barely alike. She had long, straight hair.

Mine was short and curly — Mom called it *unruly*. Lexi spent hours picking out her clothes, and I just wore whatever jeans and T-shirt were on my floor, usually because I missed the hamper. She got As in school. I got grades that shared the same alphabet as As, but were a few letters later. Most of all, I wasn't annoying, and Lexi was the most annoying person in the world.

But while Lexi wasn't good for much, she was good at winning Mom over. Something I wasn't so good at. Usually, I hated that about Lexi. But not now. Because with my sister on my side, we could convince Mom in a nanosecond that the family should get a dog.

I found Lexi on her bed reading a magazine. It was one of those magazines with some annoying teen singer on the cover. The kind of magazine I wouldn't read if you tied me up and forced me to eat horseradish.

Have you ever eaten horseradish? If you have, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, don't. You've been warned.

"Lexi, we need to talk," I said, stepping into her room.

"You didn't knock." She didn't even look up.

"The door was open."

"Did someone say something?" She continued reading her magazine. "There can't be anyone here, because I didn't hear a knock first."

So I walked backward out of my annoying sister's room and knocked. Now wasn't the time to argue. There would be plenty of time to call her names after we had a dog.

"Yes, baby brother?" she sang. She liked to call me *baby brother* because she knew it bothered me.

"I'm not a baby!" I barked. Then I took a deep breath, reminding myself that I needed to ignore Lexi's annoyingness if I wanted to get her on board.

Lexi put down her magazine while I explained what I wanted. Lexi and I argued about a lot of things. Actually we argued about everything. But I knew we couldn't argue about getting a dog. Who wouldn't want a dog?

Apparently, Lexi wouldn't want a dog.

"No way." She shook her head. "Dogs smell. They're dirty. They lick everything. I'm not cleaning up after it goes outside — that's just gross. Cats are much better pets. Everyone knows that."

But everyone did *not* know cats were better pets than dogs, because it wasn't true. Just because Lexi was twelve, a measly year older than me, she thought she knew everything. Which also wasn't true. I should have known she'd cause trouble.

"Dogs are loyal. They're fun. They're your best friends. A dog will do anything for you," I said. "He'll lay his life down for you. But a cat? You're lucky if a cat gives you the time of

day. They act all high-and-mighty like they're better than everyone. Just like certain sisters." Sure, I wanted Lexi on my side, but a guy needs to stand by his principles.

"That's because cats are smart," said Lexi. "Just like certain sisters. We are so not getting a dog." She picked up her magazine again, ignoring me.

"We are so not getting a cat," I growled.

Lexi smirked from behind her magazine. I knew that smirk. It meant she was up to no good. It meant she was hatching a plan. "We'll see," she said, turning the page and continuing her reading, as if I were invisible and not standing in her room, balling my fists in anger.

I wheeled around, stomped out of the room as loudly as I could, and slammed the door behind me. There was nothing to "see." We were not getting a cat; we were getting a dog. We needed a dog. This wasn't just an everyday argument, like who got to eat the last bowl of ice cream or who got to use the bathroom first. It wasn't even an argument about who sat on the passenger side of the backseat of Dad's car. That was the better side because there was more legroom. No, this was big. It was bigger than big. It was humongous. This was the difference between right (dogs) and wrong (cats). Between getting a true-blue friend or an annoying, stuck-up hair ball. This wasn't your simple, everyday disagreement.

This was war.