



CHAPTER ONE

Shall We?

“Welcome to sixth grade,” said Mr. Lamonte. “We have a great many forms to fill out, so let’s get started, shall we?”

Julia Gillian exchanged a look with her best friend, Bonwit Keller. Mr. Lamonte, their homeroom teacher, was famous at Lake Harriet School for this particular phrase. Each year, until the new batch of sixth-graders had grown used to hearing it, “shall we?” rose from the hallways, lunchroom, and playground nearly any time of day. It was an irresistible phrase.

Mr. Lamonte began making the rounds of the room, depositing a packet of forms on each student’s desk: *Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

“Please, students,” said Mr. Lamonte. “Let us try to get these back tomorrow, shall we?”

How Julia Gillian wanted to say *shall we?* in just the way that Mr. Lamonte said it, with the dip in the *shall* and the upswing in the *we*, but she resisted. *Thunk*. She stared down at the batch of forms that he had just dropped onto her desk.

Each new school year brought the same forms, all of which needed to be filled out, signed, and returned immediately. Julia Gillian, under the influence of her schoolteacher parents, always returned her forms the very next day. So did Bonwit, who was conscientious by nature. Their friend Cerise Cronin generally had hers back within a week, while others, such as Lathrop Fallon, sometimes straggled their way into October. This was a

terrible thing, because extreme stragglers were not allowed to go on field trips.

Two years ago, in fact, Lathrop had once been forced to sit in the lunchroom all day, doing extra homework, while everyone else was at the Oliver Kelley Living History Farm harvesting vegetables, making applesauce, and forking hay into the hay barn for the long winter to come.

“Take them home,” said Mr. Lamonte, who had *thunked* the last packet of forms onto the last desk. “Go through them with your parent or legal guardian. Sign where necessary. And then bring them back. Let’s be prompt, shall we?”

A whispered “shall we?” rose from three distinct places in the classroom, including Cerise’s desk. The

defenses were already beginning to crumble. Julia Gillian resisted.

“You are sixth-graders now,” said Mr. Lamonte. “And as such, you are middle schoolers.”

He leaned back against his desk, crossed his arms, raised one eyebrow, and scanned the room slowly, nodding as he did, a habit known school-wide as the Lamonte Look.

“As of right now,” he said, “your lives are fundamentally altered.”

