

meow
or
never

Jazz Taylor

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Chapter 1

Today is an important day. Two reasons: One, it's the first day back to school after winter break.

And two, I'm about to make my first friend.

Well, it won't technically be my *first* friend. It's just my first one since we moved here. Even though that was six months ago. The beginning of seventh grade was pretty rough.

I've been planning all week. I'm wearing the new red sweater Dad got me for Christmas, and I scrubbed my tennis shoes so they *look* new, even though they aren't. I pulled my curly black hair into a high bun (so I won't tug on it while we talk). I murmur my practiced lines: "How was your break?" "What'd you get for Christmas?"

I breathe in the cold air at the bus stop. I can't believe it's so cold in northern Alabama! I moved from southern Alabama, so I'm not used to this. I shift from foot to foot and adjust my sweater nervously. I can say something that simple, surely. My palms sweat inside my old gloves, so I take them off and stuff them into my pocket. I'm all set. I'm going to do it. The next person who walks up to me, I'll talk to. And we'll be friends, and I won't have to sit in the back of the theater at lunch, and maybe we can even hang out after school sometimes when Dad has to work late—

My excitement dries up in an instant. Because the next person who walks up to the bus stop is Nic Pearson. Nic, the girl who makes everyone laugh, who is pretty and kind, who makes my chest get this funny feeling when she meets my eyes.

Nic, the girl I made a complete and utter fool of myself in front of last semester.

I give up. No friends this year.

“Avery, hey!” Nic runs the last few feet to meet me, smiling with her perfect teeth and cute light brown freckles under her eyes. She's taller than me by a few inches, and her

skin is a lighter shade of brown than mine. She stands next to me, uncomfortably close. “How was your break? What’d you get for Christmas?”

No, these are my lines! My mouth is dry, but my hands, my back, under my arms are so sweaty. What do I do?

Nic is waiting for me, still smiling. Okay, I can do this. I know what I got for Christmas. A new sweater. A case for my phone. A stuffed cat Dad thought was cute.

Come on, I will myself. Say you got a new sweater. You can do this.

But I can’t do this. All I can think about is our last conversation, and about how she hangs out with all the other drama kids, so she doesn’t need a weirdo like me, and I don’t say anything. I don’t say a word as Nic’s smile fades and she looks away and the bus arrives and I sit in the back and wish the world would swallow me whole.

“Class, come here,” Mrs. Thompson calls us from the stage. I look up from my doodling. It’s seventh period, the last one of the day, and I somehow survived.

Nic is in *three* of my classes, so I've been avoiding her. After my embarrassing display this morning, I would rather die than have her look at me like I'm a weirdo who can't talk. She's in this class too, so I wait for her to go to the stage before joining everyone at the back.

Mrs. Thompson beams at us. She's tall and thin, and her bright green dress clashes with her pale skin. Like a festive vampire. Except that she's a nice teacher, always smiling, always wearing a new streak of color in her hair. Today the strip is bright pink.

"I hope we all had a good break, but now we need to talk about this semester's play."

"We just did one," Thomas complains. He's usually in the cast, based on the play we did last semester, but he acts like he doesn't even *like* theater.

"And we'll do another!" Mrs. Thompson says, laughing. "This time will be a little different. Come up here, Harper."

A girl with blonde hair, light skin, and brown eyes climbs the steps to the stage and stands beside Mrs. Thompson.

She's tiny! And nervous. She's picking at the hem of her shirt, something I do too.

"I'm sure y'all know Harper. But in case you don't, here she is!"

Poor Harper looks like she's going to die of embarrassment. Her neck and ears are bright red. Adults really need to learn to leave kids alone.

"Harper has won an award for her script, and I think it would be nice to perform it, don't you?"

Mrs. Thompson phrases it as a question, but she's looking at us like she dares us to disagree. But I think it'll be cool. At my old school, we did classic plays like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. And even here, last year we did *A Christmas Carol* (which I'd already done before). I like those plays okay, but everyone knows those stories. It'll be nice to do something new. I wonder what she wrote.

"What's the play?" Nic asks, her hand raised high.

Mrs. Thompson glances at Harper, but Harper looks

close to fainting. My stomach twists in solidarity. Someone save her, please.

“It’s a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*,” Mrs. Thompson finally says. “It’s about two rival donut shop owners and their kids, who fall in love.”

Thomas rolls his eyes, but I like it. Maybe they’ll bring us donuts to get in character.

“We’ll start right away! It’ll involve quite a bit of singing, so we’ll hold auditions over the next few days. Come to my office if you’d like to try out for the cast. Anyone who doesn’t want to be in the cast can start brainstorming about sets. Any questions?”

Several hands go up, but I don’t bother. I like singing (well, I really love singing), but I don’t like acting. That was fine at my old school because we could pick two electives. I could sing in choir and do the crew for plays. But here you can only pick one, and I chose theater. And I don’t mind! I like being behind the scenes, setting up lights and painting sets and making sure the actors are in the right place.

But still, I get a tiny prick of longing as Mrs. Thompson answers questions. I wish I could sing without having to act.

Mrs. Thompson passes out scripts and finally releases poor Harper from her torture. I watch as she hurries out of the auditorium. I know that was terrible, standing up there in front of everyone. I think about talking to her, because I get nervous too, but I don't know what I'd say.

“Okay, everyone!” Mrs. Thompson is beaming again. “We have six weeks. Let's make this *shine*.”

They'll make it shine. I'll be in the back, staying out of everyone's way.

I'm not at home yet, but soon! Sorry, angel! But when I get there, I promise we'll do pizza.

I stare at Dad's text, then pull out the script from my backpack. I'm still in the auditorium, but everyone's gone home already. I don't feel like going home. No one's there anyway.

This happens a lot. Since we moved here last summer,

Dad's been really busy. He says it's good, because he makes more money now, and he wears suits instead of jeans, and we live in a house instead of an apartment. But I liked the apartment. I liked the jeans. I liked coming home knowing he was waiting for me.

I put my earbuds in to drown everything out and pick a Beyoncé song. She's my favorite artist, especially her new album, but I love almost all music. I love hearing each note, picking out harmonies and singing each part of a song until I've memorized every note, every gasp, every tick of a metronome. Even the super-low notes I can't sing so well. Dad says I should have picked choir instead of theater, but he doesn't get it. Being in the crew means I don't have to be sweaty and nervous before a concert. I can sing by myself.

I bob my head to the heavy beat as I read Harper's script. It's short, only three acts. Not bad. I pencil in what sets we'll need for each scene, and sometimes I even laugh. Romeo is a goofball who likes to play guitar, and Juliet rides a skateboard and likes anime. I can't believe someone my age wrote this. Harper's a genius!