

CHAPTER ONE



I was probably the first kid ever excited for summer to be over. There was too much free time that summer, which can lead to too much thinking, especially for a loss-stricken eleven-year-old. I couldn't wait for seventh grade to start. To dive into schoolwork. To distract myself from the loneliest facts. At one point, I regretted turning down Dad's offer to spend the summer in Ireland with Mom's family. But I knew that if I went, there would be reminders of her everywhere. Not like there wasn't one every time I looked in the mirror.

So the only escape I had was school. When I got the message that I was to report to the main office before class, I was worried I'd be faced with another year of forced visits with the school counselor, looks of pity from my fellow classmates, and well-meaning but oblivious faculty members who kept telling me it was "important to keep her memory alive."

Like I could ever forget her.

I wasn't ready for any additional drama that morning. It was already the first day of a new school year *since*.

“Do you want me to go with you, Macallan?” Emily asked after I received my summons to the office. A tight smile on her face gave away the concern she thought she was hiding.

“No, it’s okay,” I replied. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

She studied me for a second before adjusting my hair clip. “Well, if you need me, I’ll be in Mr. Nelson’s class.”

I gave her a reassuring smile and kept it on my face as I entered the office.

Principal Blaska greeted me with a hug. “Welcome back, Macallan! How was your summer?”

“Great!” I lied.

We both stared at each other, neither knowing what to say next.

“Well, I’m going to need your assistance today with a new student. Meet Levi Rodgers — he’s from Los Angeles!”

I looked over and saw this boy with long blond hair pulled into a low ponytail. His hair was even longer than mine. He tucked a loose strand behind his ear before he reached out his hand and said, “Hey.”

I had to give him credit — at least he had manners . . . for a surfer dude.

Principal Blaska handed me his schedule. “Could you show him around and take him to his first class?”

“Of course.”

I led Levi out into the hallway and started giving him the five-cent tour. I wasn’t in the mood to play *What’s Your Life Story?*

“The building is basically in the shape of a T. Down this hallway you have your math, science, and history classes.” I

started motioning my arms like a flight attendant. “Then behind you, English and language classes as well as study hall.” I started walking fast. “And there’s the gym, cafeteria, and music and art rooms. Oh, and there are bathrooms at the end of each hall as well as a bubbler.”

His eyebrows shot up. “What’s a bubbler?”

My immediate reaction was one of disbelief. How could he not know what a bubbler is?

“Um, where you can get water. To drink.” I walked him over to it and turned the handle for the water to come out of the spout.

“Oh, you mean a *water fountain*.”

“Yes. Water fountain, bubbler — whatever.”

He laughed. “I’ve never heard it called a bubbler before.”

My response was to walk faster.

As his eyes swept the hallway, I noticed they were light blue, almost gray. “It’s so weird,” he went on. “You could fit this entire school in my old school’s cafeteria.” His voice went up at the end of everything he said, like it was a question. “It’s, like, going to be a lot to adjust to, ya know?”

I knew this was supposed to be the point where I politely asked him about his old school, but I wanted to get to class as soon as possible.

A few friends passed by to say hello, everyone checking out the new guy. Our school was fairly small; the majority of us had been together since fifth grade, if not kindergarten.

I stole another glance at him. It was hard to decipher if he was cute. His hair was practically white in places, probably from the sun. His tan made his light hair and pale eyes stick

out even more — but this wouldn't be for very long, since in Wisconsin we rarely see the sun past August.

Levi had on a checkered button-down paired with long cargo shorts and flip-flops. It was as if he couldn't decide whether to dress up or be casual. I luckily had Emily to help me pick out my first-day-of-school outfit that day: a bright-yellow-and-white-striped sundress with a white cardigan.

Levi gave me an eager smile. "So what kind of name is Macallan? Or is it McKayla?"

My initial instinct was to ask him if the name Levi came from the jeans his mom was wearing on the day he was born, but instead I behaved like the good, responsible student I was supposed to be.

"It's a family name," I said. Which wasn't a total lie — it was someone's family name, just not mine. While I loved that I had a unique name, it was always a little embarrassing to admit it was because my dad liked a certain kind of Scotch whiskey. "It's *Ma-cal-lan*."

"Dude, that's cool."

I couldn't believe he'd just called me *dude*.

"Yeah, thanks." I finished the tour at his first class, English. "Well, here you are."

He looked at me expectantly, like I was supposed to find him a desk and tuck him in good night.

"Hi, Macallan!" Mr. Driver greeted me. "I didn't think I had you until later today. Oh, wait, you must be Levi."

"Yes, I'm showing him around. Well" — I turned to Levi — "I've got to catch class. Good luck."

"Oh, okay," he stammered. "See ya around?"

It was at that moment I realized the look he had was fear. He was scared. Of course he was. I felt a pang of guilt but quickly shook it off as I walked to my first class.

I had enough problems as it was.

Emily got down to business the second we were in line at lunch that day.

“So what’s the deal with the new guy?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. He’s okay.”

She examined a slice of pizza. “His hair is *so* long.”

“He’s from California,” I offered.

“What else do you know about him?” She discarded the pizza and picked up a chicken sandwich and salad. I followed suit.

I was so thankful that I had a girly-girl friend like Emily. My dad, as much as he tried, couldn’t really help me out with things like hair, clothes, and makeup. If left to his own devices, I’d wear jeans, sneakers, and a Green Bay Packers T-shirt every day, and eat pizza for every meal. And Emily was as girly as you could get. She was easily one of the prettiest girls in our class, with long, shiny jet-black hair, and dark brown eyes. She also had the best clothes, and I was so glad we were the same size so I could borrow them, although she was already way more developed than I was. At least I would have someone to go to once I needed a bra. I couldn’t even imagine how awkward that would be for Dad. For both of us.

“Um . . .” I tried to think about what else I learned about Levi. Now, too late, I felt I should’ve made more of an effort.

Danielle joined us, her honey-colored curls bouncing along

as we walked into the cafeteria. “Is that the new guy?” She pointed to Levi, who was sitting by himself.

“He’s so skinny,” Emily remarked.

Danielle laughed. “I know, right? But don’t worry, if the ButterBurgers don’t fatten him up, the cheese curds and brats will.”

The three of us started walking to our regular table. Levi’s gaze followed us. We were used to this. Usually people liked to make little comments like “a blonde, a redhead, and an Asian walked into a . . .” But I always saw us as “the one you want to sit next to because she’s hilarious, the one you want to cheat off of in class, and the one all the guys have a crush on.”

I gave Levi a quick smile, hoping to undo some of the rudeness from the morning. He returned with a sad wave. I paused for a second, and in that second, I noticed the look of gratitude on Levi’s face. He was expecting me to sit with him or at least invite him over. I hesitated, unsure what to do. I didn’t want to play babysitter, but I also knew what it was like to be alone. And scared.

“Guys, I feel bad. Can he sit with us?”

When nobody argued, I approached Levi.

“Hey there — how was your morning?” I asked, trying to smile and be welcoming for a change.

“It was good.” The tone in his voice indicated that it was anything but good.

“Do you want to sit with us?” I gestured to our table.

“Thanks.” He exhaled deeply.

Soon the attention turned toward gossip of the *I Really Know How You Spent Your Summer Vacation* kind.