

Hedge Over Heels

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ISBN 978-1-338-81046-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First printing 2022

Book design by Omou Barry

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No matter where you live in the US, school buses are all the same. Same yellow paint. Same crazy smell of vinyl and sneakers. The same slightly sticky floor. The same unused seat belts. Kids are either screaming at each other or they're being as silent as the grave with only the sound of the road beneath them.

A school bus is a school bus is a school bus.

The only thing that changed for me was the view outside the school bus window. Last school year, and even last week, the view out the window had been palm trees, faded buildings, and the bright sun rising from the blue-green ocean in Pensacola, Florida. The year before that, the window was filled with the

lush green oak trees of Augusta, Georgia, with its wide yards and a big river running through town.

Now the view from the school bus window was Frederick, Maryland. I wasn't happy about it.

It was my first day at a new school and it was *Friday*. Seriously, who starts at a new school on a Friday? Plus, beginning seventh grade in October after everyone else had already started wasn't exactly going to be fun. It was going to be messy. I was doomed to stick out like a bright red cardinal in a sea of angry blue jays. But there was nothing I could do about it. The US Army dictated just about everything in my life, including when and where I moved. Thanks, Army.

When the bus stopped, a kid with bright purple glasses and a mouthful of gum climbed the steps and headed straight to the back. His sneakers made a sticky, squeaky sound as they passed.

Exactly, I thought. *Sticky*.

I looked back out the window. A colorful mural peeked around the corner of a diner. I hated to admit it, but Frederick, Maryland, looked kinda nice. I could even say that it was downright *artsy*. There was a beautiful canal downtown crossed by small bridges and filled with water lilies. Auntie Jacq was going

to love that. Each bridge looked unique, with colorful mosaics on its walls or ornate railings along its arches.

I tried to peer inside the mom-and-pop shops we passed—bakeries and coffee shops that bustled with early morning activity. We rounded a corner and shuttled down a street alongside a large green park where an outdoor theater with bright yellow seats sat waiting for an audience. A man jogged along one of the park trails with a beautiful collie as another couple played with a corgi puppy.

Wait! I lit up from the inside out. There were dog people in Frederick! I would love to be one of those. Go for walks in the park with my dog. Play Frisbee with my dog. Of course, I'd have to finally, for-the-love-of-all-things-cute, be allowed to have a dog, but it was only a matter of time.

Yep. Frederick seemed like a real nice town. But all of a sudden, the pit of my stomach turned sour. Who knew how long I'd get to stay in this nice town?

Aunty Jacq—that's short for Jacqueline—had suggested we move to Frederick instead of the army base in Fort Meade. She's my mom's older sister and has lived with us ever since I was born. To be honest, sometimes Aunty Jacq feels more like a mom to

me than my mom. Don't get me wrong, I love my mom. It's just that she's a Sergeant First Class and that means sometimes she isn't around.

Thankfully, I had picked the perfect seat on the bus—the seat right behind the driver. No one ever wanted to sit near the driver and that always left a big gap of empty seats between me and the rest of the kids on the bus. It was better that way. There was no reason to try to be social. Like I said before, I didn't know how long I'd even be in the town, let alone at this school.

I'd been moving from place to place and school to school ever since second grade. The army assigned my mom to live where they needed her, and then they'd send her on missions to who knows where for months at a time. That meant me and Auntie Jacq were sometimes left behind in a strange new place, trying to adjust but never quite fitting in. I hated it. I mean, I was really proud of my mom. I just wished we could finally stay put somewhere. That the army could need her to stay somewhere—anywhere—with me.

The school bus stopped and four students climbed on. They were a quiet bunch and grabbed some seats six or seven rows

behind me. *Good.* If I just scowled enough, maybe no one would try to sit with me.

But just as the bus doors started to close, a kid younger than me huffed up the stairs. He lingered near the front, looking at me like I'd stolen his seat.

Forget it, I thought, looking out the front window. *First come, first served, buddy. First come, first served.*

The kid finally accepted defeat and sat on the other side of the aisle, but continued to stare. I did my best to ignore him, watching the road as we drove on. The bus driver eyed me from his review mirror every once in a while, but I pretended not to see him either.

That morning, Auntie Jacq and Mom had been so overly cheery as I'd headed out the door, I nearly told them to eat worms. Couldn't they tell I wasn't in the best of moods? That being dropped into an ocean of cruel twelve-year-olds who were waiting to eat me alive wasn't exactly my idea of fun?

They'd said to have a good day.

Impossible.

They'd said I'd get to take an art class, so I'd probably like this school better than the others I'd gone to.

Sure. Yeah. Right.

They'd also said it wouldn't kill me to make a few friends.

Nope. Not going to happen. Not after being ghosted by so-called friends in Pensacola. Not after bawling my eyes out when I'd had to leave my fourth-grade BFF in Augusta. I couldn't go through all that again.

The only friend I planned to make this year was of the cute, tail-wagging, four-legged variety. Dogs could move with you. Protect you. Fetch. Roll over. But most important, they knew how to stay. Dogs didn't promise to write. And they didn't forget you. Ever.