

CHAPTER ONE



WHAT HAPPENS TO MY MIND SOMETIMES is complicated. First, my nose completely bails on inhaling. Then, it's like I even forget how to open up my mouth to take a breath. All respiration stops and my brain panics. If it worked right, my mind would slow down and remember: the nose, mouth, and lungs are waiting to hear, "Go."

Once I realize I need air, my brain screams to me, "I can't breathe!" The respiratory parts hear, "*can't*", so they don't. My mind thinks I must be dying. Some smallness in me is usually right there, whispering: *calm down, open your mouth, breathe, calm down, open your mouth, breathe.*

But the thought of dying grows so big, so fast, that my chest starts hurting, maybe from lack of oxygen. Then, I think that I am having a heart attack. I am only thirteen; I am afraid to die.

Mom thinks this is a panic attack; I call it my fear of dying. I don't think that's really what it is though. I think it's more a fear of never belonging.

I am looking at the back of Drew Walker's head. Even now, after everything, I want to touch the waves of his hair. There is not a girl who doesn't love him, who doesn't imagine being kissed by him, who doesn't rush to enter a doorway just in front of him. He likes to place his hand in the small of girls' backs as a protective gesture—except mine. Not once has he placed his hand in the small of my back. Well, he did once, but it wasn't for real.

I force myself deaf to the too-close-to-me sound of Drew telling his friends about a girl he met over the weekend. I hear where this conversation will end. I look for a way to really go deaf, just until I can get home. I pick up my hands, all casual, and put them under my hair, over my ears. Then my leg itches and as hard as I try not to scratch it, I reach down just to touch the spot on my left calf that itches and I hear the rude boys again.

“Was she like, hot at *all*?” One of them asks.

Drew laughs, “No, she was disgusting.”

“Like a three?”

“Worse than a three,” Drew answers.

Without lowering his voice, the worst of those boys asks, “Was she as bad as Mary Harold?”

I keep my silence and scratch my leg. For the fifth consecutive school day, I keep my silent vigil. Then I stop breathing; my chest pinches so tight that I feel sure I am having a heart attack this time. I wish had my phone to text Mom to help me because the smallness is able to ask for help from Mom.

“I’m afraid of dying,” I might manage to squeak out. Mom can always look at me and see how tense my neck is, how frightened my eyes are, and see I am in a world of trouble.

The boys sit right in front of me, wondering right out loud, if there could ever be a girl more disgusting than me. My face turns violet, I’m sure of it, because I fear that my skin will not hold in all of the blood rising up into my face. I seal myself completely inside my hair canopy, so no sound can get in and no sound can get out.

People shouldn’t bind their hair to stupid promises. Even five year old people should know better, but my ex-best friend Krystal and I made a hair pact in kindergarten. Back when we both had real short hair, back when we

both said *I love you*, we vowed that as long as we were friends, we would never cut our hair. Krystal cut her hair a long time ago, even before she dropped me. My hair has kept growing.

I hide deep in the silence of my long black hair. Drew and his posse aren't talking about the gross weekend girl. They are talking about me and my favorite sweater and ripping about how my mom must never do laundry.

I wear this navy pullover every day to cover my boobs because they're getting big. I'm the one who forgets to wash the sweater; I do our laundry since Mom works so hard. The stupid sweater is hand wash only. I hate hand washing; we have a shitty laundry room without a good place to let hand-wash stuff dry.

I fight my own urge to kick Drew's desk over and over until he shuts up. Instead, I sink way away. I imagine that I am not one of them; I am the blackboard, or the desk, but not the grossest girl.

"Miss Woods, please answer the question."

I am not the grossest girl; I am the pencil.

Every desk squeaks; I feel all of their heads turn to face me. I need air. I keep on staring at my college-rule paper thinking maybe I can write myself between the blue lines.

* * *

“All right, Mary Harold enough is enough. If you can’t come to class prepared, don’t bother showing up.”

I vanish, again, into the forest of my hair, where no light can get in. I wish I could block out these sounds; I crawl deeper, and still, I hear the desk drawer open. My teacher’s pen rips across the demerit slip. She tears the demerit off its pad and flicks it up above her head. “Get out of my classroom.”

All of them laugh; I leave. In the hall, I press my cheek against the cold cinderblock wall to jolt myself into a new pattern of breathing.

I duck past the office window and run into the library. The librarian notices me sneaking in, but doesn’t ask for my pass. She never asks. I give her my usual thank-you eyes and rush to find a corner where I can fall into the earth and never come out.

Chapter Two

This could be happening to anybody. Maybe a girl gets caught picking her nose and that day, at that moment in time, it's the worst thing to do. The next day a different girl might stand in the same corner of the same hall and dig even deeper — so deep she ought to call MISS UTILITY. Maybe, even more people see her, yet nothing happens.

One boy might own a case of dandruff so intense that it's either a significant meteorological snow event or a real medical problem, only nobody but his parents and his doctor know that it's a real disease kind of thing. Maybe

until Thanksgiving nobody really notices because the kid is kind of quiet and to himself, anyway. But on the day that the loud-mouth boy whose dad is also on the school board notices — on that day — it's all over. After that, it doesn't matter that once you get to know him he's funny and smart and that in a week the dandruff will be gone, forever.

That's how it was with me in the fourth grade. In one phone call, it was all over. I didn't get it right away.

I mean, I don't dig so deep that I gotta have a license; my major hygiene issues are under control. Sometimes I forget to brush my hair or my teeth, but only because I'm running late and because I'm having so much fun or at least I was.

For the longest time, none of these things ever mattered to any of my friends because all of us were sort of rough and tumbling around outside in the dirt and grass; soap, water, and hair ribbons didn't much matter. And then one day everything mattered.

I think of the black ribbon bracelets that everyone in my grade is wearing now — black ribbons — simple, elegant black ribbons. Last Friday, I worked up the nerve to ask my ex-best friend Krystal for one, she being the sole ribbon-giver.

When I asked for a black ribbon, Krystal curled her

lip at me. “You want one of these?”

She pulled one out of her back pocket and dangled it in front of me. I mean, she was keeping them in her pocket like she was one of those balloon clowns at the Golden Coral on Thursday nights when kids eat free.

I didn't get it.

Krystal moved to Virginia from Tennessee in kindergarten. She was named for the hamburger chain; it's my favorite place to stop in Knoxville on the way to Wren when we visit Ayma in Alabama. The burgers there are so tiny that I eat three, or sometimes four, which I sometimes do because I like to save up for Exit 398 off of I40. Mom's the same way; we buy a whole sack and load up on itty bitty cheeseburgers and just split one order of fries, because well, you can get fries anywhere, really. Every time we get close to Exit 398, I tell myself I'm going to try a hot dog all-the-way this time; but I never ever do because I cannot bring myself to breakaway from my favorite cheeseburgers on Earth and you cannot buy them in Virginia.

Krystal didn't know anybody at all when she moved here, and I was the only one who had ever heard of burgers with a girl's name. I have evidence, in the form of photographs and a two page letter with nineteen hearts and way too many exclamation points to count,

that Krystal and I really were best friends; it's not my imagination. I thought we were true friends who truly loved each other and told each other so, often.

When I hang up the phone with someone I love, like Mom or Ayma, I pretty much always end the call by saying, "Love you." That was our friendship. When Krystal broke her arm, in the fourth grade, I wrote on her cast: Get Well Fast, I Love You, with hearts all over the place. She told me, "I love you, too." We were best friends.

Krystal got teased so badly about what I wrote; the boys said we must be funny together. I mean, I was ten. I did love her. Krystal outright dumped me. She didn't just float away from me toward the other girls like what sometimes happens with friends. She flipped from being my best friend to hating my guts overnight.

Everything had changed because everything mattered. Even things that I didn't understand mattered. To people who used to like me, I was like a game to them. The thing is, though, I hadn't changed at all from one day to the next; I was the same girl. I will never understand.

Since Easter break of the fourth grade, it's been like this. Now, every time I eat my lunch I get hit up side the head with a carton full of chocolate milk from somewhere

I cannot see. The milk bomb comes from a different table every day. In the mornings and afternoons, I sit in the front seat of the bus to avoid being tripped up.

So I didn't get it that the black ribbons are about me, too.

"You're not like us; you're not one of us. Every time you see this ribbon, you know what it means? Everybody hates you. Everybody." That's what Krystal said when she handed me a black ribbon.

The black ribbons make hating me an official club. I said nothing to Krystal. What could I say?

Don't hate me. Look at me, I'm the same; we're the same. I love you, don't you remember?

Don't you remember?

Monday I just stopped talking to anyone because who cares? School is finished next week. I was finished, obviously, long before. In some ways, this week has been easier with no one looking at me or speaking to me. In one week, I have almost learned to disappear into the day; I wish I had figured this out a long time ago. I wish Mom and I had moved back to Wren a long time ago, too, or I wish we had never left.