

Chapter One “Alarm!”

Today was a day for curling up in a cozy bed with hot chocolate—not trudging through depressing drizzle to Thursday’s biology lab. “Rain, rain, go away,” Jeri McKane chanted, “but *don’t* come again another day.” She pulled open the door to Herald Hall.

Abby Wright, in her matching blue school uniform, sprayed droplets as she shook her pink umbrella. “But April showers bring May flowers, right?”

“So far only April mud.” Jeri plodded up the creaking wooden stairs after Abby, yawning as they reached the third floor.

Near their lab, a fifteen-year-old boy was mopping, dragging his bucket on wheels behind him. Jeri watched three sixth-grade girls pass by. One kicked his bucket, and another knocked off his baseball cap. The third girl laughed and said, “Think you can handle the job, retard?” before ducking into the lab.

Jeri clenched her jaw. Why did the special ed kids get picked on all the time? Just because they had learning problems didn’t mean they had no feelings!

Tim stooped to grab his cap. Arms waving wildly, he slipped on the wet floor and fell hard on one knee.

Jeri hurried to give him a hand up. “Just ignore them,” she said, flipping her straight brown hair over her shoulder.

“It’s okay.” Overweight and pockmarked with acne, Tim Norton towered above her. “I don’t mind.”

Through a jobs program for special needs students, Tim and three other teens worked mornings at the girls' boarding school. In the afternoons they attended classes at the New Hope Academy, a school in Landmark Hills for those with mental disabilities.

"You okay, Tim?" Abby asked, her light blonde eyebrows raised in concern. "Those beastly girls are so blinkered."

Jeri nodded, totally agreeing with her British word for narrow-minded.

"They just like to tease me." Tim blushed and then held out his cap. "Wanna see something new?" His ball cap was covered with colorful buttons with sayings like "Hollyweird" and "Future Movie Star." He pointed to a smiling strawberry button called "Merry Berry." Another one showed a dolphin with a club called "Golphin Dolphin."

"Awesome buttons," Jeri said, turning the cap around and around to read them.

Abby touched Jeri's arm. "I need to measure our bean plant before class. Maybe that Miracle Grow did its magic over the weekend."

Jeri grinned. "Hopefully it looks like the one in 'Jack and the Beanstalk'."

"No! Jeri and the Beanstalk!" Tim laughed so hard at his own joke that his eyes watered.

With posture fit for the Queen of England, Abby glided down the hall and disappeared into the science room. Because the lab was so small, only eight students were scheduled at a time.

Tim pushed his mop in a circle, the gray strings smearing more than cleaning the mud. "Somebody made tracks all over. I'm cleaning it up."

"Sorry we're so sloppy."

“But I like to mop! I like rain too. It makes the grass grow.” Tim stood taller and grinned. “Mr. Rankin said I can clean the lawnmowers this week.” He puffed out his chest. “I like Mr. Rankin.”

Jeri tucked her lower lip under. Personally, she thought the loud, droopy-eyed groundskeeper at the boarding school wasn't much friendlier than a snake. But if Tim liked working for him, great. She stuck Tim's cap on her own dark hair. He swiped at it several times, but Jeri ducked out of reach.

Two girls passed them. One whispered, “You two make such a cute couple.” The girls dissolved in laughter. “A match made in heaven,” the other one said.

Jeri's face grew warm. Normally she wasn't bothered by what people thought about her, but those girls' teasing bugged her. She was suddenly embarrassed about befriending Tim—but why? Why care what they thought now?

She handed back his cap, waved and followed the girls to the science room. Something wispy caught her eye, and she glanced up. Gauzy gray strands floated out the transom window above the door. Was that *smoke*?

Before she could decide, an explosion blasted her eardrums. The heavy wooden door rattled on its hinges. Glass from the transom shattered, raining down like sleet. Several shards skittered across the black and white tile and hit Jeri's feet.

“Fire!” someone screamed in the lab.

Simultaneously the fire alarm sounded. The clanging was deafening. *Abby!* She had to find her! Was she hurt? Tim clutched her arm, but Jeri peeled him off. He covered his ears and twisted side to side.

Smoke poured into the hall. Five or six students ran from the room, coughing and choking. Their biology teacher, Ms. Todd, sprang from her office next door and raced to the lab. She herded the coughing students to the exit at the other end of the hall.

Jeri pressed back against the wall, out of the flow of traffic. Next to her, Tim rolled his eyes while rubbing his knuckles against his mouth. Jeri squinted through the smoke and peered into the lab, hunting for Abby. *Where is she?* Overhead sprinklers were spraying the room, soaking books and papers. “Abby!” she called, her eyes stinging.

Within seconds, Lyndsey Brooks staggered out, tears streaming down her flushed face streaked with black. Her spiky brown hair was plastered to her head, making her brown eyes look enormous.

“Don’t worry,” she said, gasping. “I’m the last one out.”

“No, you’re not,” Jeri said. “I haven’t see Abby!” She started into the room.

A hand grabbed her. “Don’t go in there,” Ms. Todd ordered, her slender fingers digging into Jeri’s arm.

“But Abby—”

“*Stay here.*” The teacher entered the smoky lab, and Jeri watched her search the small room. Despite the sprinklers, the fire had spread from the metal waste basket over by the window and was consuming everything on the teacher’s desk. Dashing to her file cabinet, Ms. Todd knelt down and helped Abby up from the floor. Supporting her around the waist, they stumbled from the lab, coughing. Both were dripping from the sprinklers. Jeri put her arm around Abby’s other side.

Suddenly Lyndsey pushed Tim aside and wheeled his sloshing bucket of water into the science lab.

“Come back!” Jeri shouted.

Lyndsey ignored her and rolled the bucket across the lab’s tile floor. She hoisted the bucket in her arms and dumped some of the water in the trash can. A long hiss was followed by more smoke billowing out the door. She poured the rest on Ms. Todd’s burning desk.

Jeri turned from the smoke in time to see Abby and Tim going down the stairs together. *Good.* Covering her mouth and nose, Jeri stepped just inside the lab.

Two windows were blown out, helping the smoke to clear. The fire was extinguished, thanks to Lyndsey’s quick thinking, but the overhead sprinklers continued to rain in the lab. Student experiments and papers were soggy, the microscopes were wet, and water dripped from the skull of a life-sized skeleton hanging on a hook.

Ms. Todd dashed past Jeri and ushered Lyndsey out. “What were you *thinking?*” the teacher demanded.

A trickle of blood ran down Lyndsey’s arm, but she didn’t seem to notice. “I was feeding my minnows when there was this *boom,*” she said, her voice hoarse. “Glass flew everywhere, and your papers were on fire.”

“The fire’s out now,” Ms. Todd said, “but you should *never* have run back in there.” Each of the teacher’s freckles stood out distinctly against her milky white skin. “Leave firefighting to the firemen!”

Sirens wailed in the distance as Jeri followed Lyndsey and Ms. Todd down the stairs. She felt sorry for Lyndsey getting chewed out by their teacher. She’d put the fire out way faster than those dinky sprinklers, and the building could have burned down before the firefighters got there.

Jeri stopped at the second floor landing. “Oh no. I forgot my backpack.” She ran upstairs, grabbed it, and hurried down and outside. Ms. Todd and Lyndsey were already swallowed up by the crowd evacuated from Herald House.

Ms. Long, the headmistress, stood on the building’s steps. Raindrops spotted her gray suit as she shouted into a bull horn. “Clear the drive for emergency vehicles!” Her half-glasses swung on a chain around her neck. “Students! Move immediately!”

Jeri slipped around her and searched the crowd. Where was Abby? Was she all right? What a morning! At least the rain had stopped, although a fine mist shrouded the campus in fog. Finally she spotted Tim’s bright orange jacket and head sticking above the crowd. She squinted. Was Abby with him? She couldn’t tell. Jeri weaved toward him through small clusters of students.

He was in earnest conversation with a seventh grader, Lisa Poole. “But I *want* you to wear it,” Tim said, holding her arm. “It’s my favorite button.” In his palm was a pin with a kitty on it.

“I don’t want your dumb pin. Let go before somebody sees you,” Lisa hissed. She glanced at Jeri and then dismissed her with a beady-eyed look.

“But I bought this pin for you.”

Lisa shook her streaked hair, making her dangling turquoise earrings dance.

“What if I buy *you* a new pin instead?”

“Really?” Tim’s face lit up.

“Yup, it’s perfect for you. It has a brain walking on crutches.” She snorted. “Get it? A lame brain.” She smirked as she moved away.

Tim laughed too, but Jeri knew he'd just been insulted, even if he didn't get it. Mean people like Lisa really fried Jeri.

But Tim's attention was already on two yellow fire trucks and a police car rolling up the hill to the school. "Look, Jeri, just like TV! It's a pumper tanker and a ladder truck."

Jeri scanned the area, worried about her friend. "Did Abby go back to the dorm?"

"A teacher took her to the firmry."

Jeri blinked, hoping she'd misunderstood. "The *infirmary*?"

"I didn't have to go." Tim pounded his chest like Tarzan. "I'm too strong."

Jeri grabbed Tim's jacket sleeve. "Listen to me! Did Abby get burned? Was she cut by flying glass?" Jeri gave up. Racing around puddles and slipping on wet grass, she headed to Clarke Hall, which housed the student hospital. At the desk in the waiting room, she asked the elderly nurse about Abby.

"Yes, she's here, but what about your own cough, dear?" The plump, gray-haired nurse stood. "Were you near the fire, hon?"

"Yeah, but I'm fine."

"Let's get you an oxygen mask. You're short of breath."

"I was running, that's all," Jeri said. "I don't need oxygen."

"Dear, I'll be the judge of that. Is your saliva black or gray?" The nurse's double chin quivered. "Spit into this tissue for me."

Gross. "I don't need to. *Really.* I was only in the hall when it happened."

The nurse held out the tissue and waited, and Jeri spit. Her saliva was clear. After the nurse used a tongue depressor to peer down her throat, she used a tiny light to look up her nose. “No sign of burns. Good.” The nurse stretched forth a veined hand. “Here.”

After drinking some bottled water, Jeri pointed down the hall. “Can I see my friend now?”

“For just a minute. Her ambulance should arrive soon.”

“*Ambulance?*” Jeri’s voice squeaked. “Why?”

“Don’t worry, it’s just a precaution.” The nurse patted Jeri’s back. “She can’t seem to stop coughing. I think she needs a bronchodilator.”

“A what?”

“Something to relax the muscles in the respiratory system.”

“Can’t you do it to her here?”

“No, honey. They want to administer it along with a hospital procedure called a bronchoscopy. A doctor uses a bronchoscope to look into her airways and lungs.” At Jeri’s puzzled look, she added, “It’s a long thin tube with a light and camera on the end that goes down her throat.”

Oh, gag, Jeri thought.

“We need to be careful,” the nurse said. “Smoke can cause burns, but also toxins in the blood stream and lung damage. Your friend seems to have inhaled a lot of smoke.”

“Can I stay with her until the ambulance comes? I know she’d want me to.”

Jeri was pointed down the hall. Through two sets of double glass doors, she found a large room with half a dozen beds—all full. The tile floor squeaked with each step she

took, and the room reeked of rubbing alcohol. Sliding curtains, hung to provide privacy around each bed, were pulled back.

Jeri had never seen the infirmary, but it had been a big selling point to her mom. Landmark School's catalogue had promised two nurses in residence, several hospital beds, and ambulance service to a hospital close by.

Jeri scanned the room, looking for the source of the coughing. Most of the patients were from Jeri's biology lab, and one was on oxygen. The three girls who'd made fun of Tim were there. So was Yolanda, a heavy-set girl with a sullen face who lived in Jeri's dorm. Jeri made a beeline for Abby, who was propped up in the bed by the back window and bent over coughing.

"Halt!"

Jeri jumped, turning to find a middle-aged nurse behind her. Her bulbous nose was so round it looked fake, and bushy red eyebrows met over her nose. Her close-cropped frizzled red hair completed her clown-like appearance. She was lean as a marathon runner, though, sporting an expensive brand of running shoes.

"I'm here to see my friend, uh..." Jeri read the name badge. "Nurse Montgomery."

"No visitors. Zero." Her right hand sliced through the air.

Jeri took a deep breath. "The nurse out front said I could come back."

Nurse Montgomery pressed her lips into such a thin line that they disappeared. "Five minutes then. This is a hospital." She turned to the chattering girls and raised her voice. "Quiet in here!"

Jeri tiptoed over to Abby. The head of the bed was raised, and Abby lay propped up on two pillows. "How are you?" Jeri whispered.

Abby hacked and coughed, holding her stomach. “I feel like honking,” she said, her voice hoarse.

“You need something to throw up in?”

“Nah, I’ve got that.” She pointed to a plastic turquoise container on a rolling cart by her bed.

Abby had been sick all last week with a nasty virus, and she looked awfully frail to Jeri. Perching on the edge of her bed, Jeri reached for a blue blanket to cover her thin legs.

“Visitors do *not* sit on the beds!” the nurse snapped.

Jeri jumped up. “Sorry,” she muttered. She leaned near Abby. “The other nurse said you’re going to the hospital!”

Abby nodded and blinked red, irritated eyes. “Breathed in too much smoke, I guess.” She coughed again, so long her face turned a deep purple. “My head’s really pounding.”

“Where were you at the time of the explosion?”

“By the teacher’s desk. I was leaving our folder and measurements for her.”

As Jeri patted Abby’s back, feeling helpless, two young men pushed through the double doors and headed their way, rolling a skinny bed on wheels. “Hello, young lady,” the short, stout one said. “Heard you’ve taken up smoking!”

Abby smiled at his feeble joke and then bent double coughing again. Jeri moved out of the way so he could take her pulse and listen to her chest with a stethoscope.

“Pulse is a bit slow,” he said, “but your lungs sound normal. Excellent.” He helped Abby crawl up onto the stretcher and covered her with a white knit blanket.

“When will she be back?” Jeri asked.

“Don’t know. Depends on her tests.”

“Can I come with her?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head. “No.”

Jeri picked up Abby’s pink and purple backpack. “I’ll put this in your room.” If only she could go along! “Get better. We still have to practice the limbo dance for the luau.”

Abby rolled on her side and curled up. “Right now I’d rather have a kip in front of the telly than practice bending over backwards,” she said with a wan smile.

“I hear ya.” A nap in front of TV sounded good to Jeri too.

Hands clenched, she stepped back as they rolled Abby away. Her friend made a very small lump under the blanket, Jeri thought. She could hear Abby coughing all the way down the hall.