

Chapter 1

An old lady with a dead parrot in her purse

“THIS IS CRAZY,” my big sister Theresa says. “Never ever ever would I even think about spending the night in that place.”

I focus on keeping my bike steady as I turn my head to ask, “Why shouldn’t I sleep at Elbie’s? Don’t you like him?”

“Liking Elbie has nothing to do with it.”

Since Dad won’t be home until eight, Theresa and her English friend, Kerry, are helping me bring my overnight stuff to Elbie’s house. Like a lot of people with Asperger’s Syndrome, I’m not super coordinated, and I think they’re worried I’ll crash my bike into a tree if I try to lug everything there myself.

For a while, we pedal on in silence as I try to figure out what Theresa meant. Still confused, I ask the same question of Kerry. Like Theresa, Kerry’s in eighth grade, and at six-foot-two, looks a little strange clutching my Spiderman sleeping bag as she pedals down the street.

“Elbie’s pleasant enough,” Kerry answers. “When he’s not being silly.”

True enough. Elbie’s a good friend, but his obsession with pranking people can get annoying. “Well, Dad likes Elbie’s dad,” I say, returning my concentration to the street ahead of us. “He likes their house too.”

With my bed pillow tucked under her left arm like a football, Theresa looks back at me as we turn the next corner. “Yeah, I’ve seen it,” she tells me. “It’s an awesome house. And I’m sure the whole family is great. It’s just that—”

“Is it because they’re black?”

“What? No—I mean . . .” The school Elbie and I go to is coming up on the right.

Theresa waves us into the Fern Creek Elementary parking lot, now empty because it’s Saturday.

"The fact that the Birds are black has nothing to do with it," she says as she and Kerry pull to a stop in the wide-open bus area. "For crabs sakes, Jojo, they live in a funeral home."

My brakes squeak as I pull to a stop in front of her. "Not in a funeral home. Over a funeral home. And it's not the way you think. The living area is on the top floor. All the mortuary stuff is downstairs, the flowers . . . the caskets . . ."

"The dead bodies?" Kerry says.

"Of course, the dead bodies. Why would they bring them upstairs?"

Since all the girls do is raise their eyebrows, I adjust the straps of my backpack and continue my defense. "No, the bodies definitely stay in the basement—except for when Elbie's dad brings them up to the chapel. That's on the main floor. You know, in a way, Dad and Mr. Bird are a lot alike. They're both around forty . . . they both work at home . . ."

"All that may be true," Kerry says. "But your father writes books. He doesn't—"

"Whoa-whoa-whoa." Theresa waves both hands in Kerry's face. "Please, don't go there."

AFTER PROMISING THERESA to never discuss the details of Elbie's family business in front of her, we continue on our way, and, five minutes later, come to a stop in front of Elbie's house. Aside from the white picket fence surrounding the front yard, the funeral home isn't much different than our place. Like our own Victorian, there's a wide wooden porch, lots of detailing, and tons of windows, many of which are bordered with stained glass.

Since Elbie's got ADHD, I'm not surprised to spot him practicing his skateboard tricks a few houses down. I call him over, and he shows off a flip trick as he zooms down the sidewalk toward us. Once everyone says hi, I climb off my bike and Kerry passes him my sleeping bag.

The biggest difference between Elbie's house and mine is the black and white VIRTUE FUNERAL HOME sign sticking out of the lawn behind the white waist-high fence.

Theresa studies it as she climbs off her bike. “Established in 1954? That’s a lot of funerals.”

“Got that right,” Elbie says. “My Great-grandpa Bird bought the place over sixty years ago.” He lifts his chin. “Counting me, that’ll be four generations of Bird morticians.”

“Interesting,” Theresa says. “I wouldn’t think you’d be into that stuff.”

“But why did your great-grandfather name it Virtue Funeral Home?” Kerry says. “Why not Bird Funeral Home?”

“Oh, he did,” Elbie tells us, “but that just confused people. For the first two weeks, the only business he got was a guy with two mallard ducks and an old lady with a dead parrot in her purse.”

The girls trade looks. Never good at reading facial expressions, I ignore it and allow Theresa to give me a quick goodbye hug. She hands me my pillow, and Elbie holds the gate open so I can roll my bike through.

“We’ll chain it up with mine later,” Elbie tells me.

I park my bike and follow him up to the front entrance where a huge fluffy cat waits by the front door.

Elbie grins as it sniffs my shoes. “Aaaaw, Skunky misses you. Go on.

Pet him.”

Black with a white stripe down his back, the little monster is perfectly named. “No thanks,” I say, keeping my distance. “I’m not getting my arms clawed again.”

Elbie chuckles as he tugs open the front door. A sofa and several armchairs decorate the lobby along with three tall plants of different species. As usual, there’s a vase of flowers on the round table in the middle of the room. Sometimes it’s filled with roses from Mrs. Bird’s garden, but today, it’s a mixture of flowers I can’t name. Elbie walks past the table and stops, surprised by the crowd milling around inside the chapel.

“Who are all those people?” I ask him.

Elbie smacks his head like a kid who just realized it was Picture Day. "Doggone it. I forgot the five o'clock service. Upstairs," he whispers. "Fast."

In order to reach the big staircase, we have to walk right past the open chapel doors and a little sign announcing the five o'clock service is for someone named Nelly Dysert. Even though I'm not particularly fond of looking at dead people, my eyes are drawn to the large glass panels separating the chapel from the lobby. The far wall of the chapel is all but covered with flowers, with a pale pink casket resting right in the middle, the top part open wide. Inside, lies Nelly Dysert. A nice-looking old black lady, from what I can see of her profile.

Elbie's dad is standing beside the casket, speaking to some people, and they stop talking as I wave hi. No one waves back, and we reach the stairs as Mr. Bird shuts the chapel doors.

"Uuuuugh," Elbie says, sighing loudly. "I just remembered I was supposed to bring you in the back way."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Naw. My folks are used to me forgetting things."

With an "oh well" shrug, he dropkicks my sleeping bag up the big wooden staircase and jogs after it. I follow, pillow slung over one shoulder like a bag of Santa's toys.

"It always smells good in here." I draw in another deep breath. "Obviously, it's because of the flowers but there's a lemony scent too."

"Dawg, that's just my Mom's furniture polish. I don't smell it or the flowers anymore. Guess when you live your whole life around certain smells, your nose gets used to them."

"More like your brain. When an odor is continuous, the brain decides to ignore it in order to put its processing powers to better use. It's called habituation."

Elbie looks at me sideways. "Okay, brainiac. Where'd you learn all that?"

"My dad is always telling me not to focus my interest on bugs so much, so I watched a TV special on the five senses. I figure since my

Asperger's makes me sensitive to certain sensations, I should learn more about it."

"Smart. My dad loves little fun facts like that. You should repeat it to him."

"Okay." I prop my pillow against the banister and trot back down to the lobby, backpack bouncing.

"Hey, wait." Elbie follows. "Man, I didn't mean right this minute." "Why not?" I stop outside the chapel doors.

"Because there's a lot of sad people at that service. You can't just blast in there chitchatting about nose smells. It would be . . ."

"Unkind? Callous?"

"If callous means rude, then yeah." He herds me back toward the staircase.

"No worries. Saved by the bell, right?"

"I didn't hear any bell."

"Me. I'm the bell."

I look him up and down. "You look nothing like a bell, so I'm guessing that was a metaphor."

"Meta-who?" Elbie grins. As always, his slightly gapped teeth remind me of swollen Tic Tacs against his dark skin. "Come on, dawg. Let's get on up to my room. I wanna see what you brought."

But before our feet touch the first step, a familiar feeling tickles the back of my neck. "There's a ghost nearby."

Elbie nods. "Most spirits like to attend their own services. It's probably Mrs. Dysert."

We look around, but don't see any ghosts yet. Halfway up, we spot the old black woman. I know it's her because she's wearing the same pink dress as her body down in the chapel.

Mrs. Dysert smiles at Elbie. "Hello again. Who's your friend?"

"This is my little brother, Joey."

She glances down at his brown arm, which is right next to my pinkish one.

"Oh, uh," Elbie smiles, "he's adopted."

"Isn't that interesting. Pleased to meet you, Joey."

Why did Elbie say that? I'm not his brother, and certainly not his little brother as I'm three months older and two inches taller. Since I'm used to people saying things that make absolutely no sense to me, I let it go and answer with, "Nice to meet you too, Mrs. Dysert." Theresa says it's good to compliment people, so I add, "I saw your casket down in the chapel. It really matches your dress."

"My casket?" She checks her watch and groans. "For heaven's sake. I'm missing my own funeral." Muttering to herself, Mrs. Dysert clutches the railing and hustles down the steps.

"Ma'am," Elbie calls after her in a loud whisper.

"Yes, dear?"

"Don't forget to put yourself on stealth mode."

Her gray head tips to one side. "Stealth what?"

Elbie holds up his hands, fingers waggling. "Someone might see you, ma'am."

"Oh, my!" She creases her brown forehead. "So many things to remember now. I certainly don't want to give somebody a heart attack." With a waggle of her own fingers, she gives me an embarrassed smile, then vanishes.

"I'm not sure why," Elbie says, "but for some reason dead folks find it really hard to keep track of time."