

# Chapter One

*Pop! Pop! Pop!* My dad's beat-up van sounded like exploding fireworks. I ducked down, hoping none of the teens in the schoolyard had heard us. I peeked out the window. *Bad idea.* Noah Benson had stopped in the middle of taking a free throw and was now staring right at us. I stared straight ahead and pretended I didn't notice or care. But I did.

The van farted another pop, then shook as the engine rattled. With my luck, the engine would die in the middle of the school parking lot. *Please don't look. Please don't look.* I had to. I turned my head and eyed the scene on the school basketball court.

Noah waved the rest of the kids over to the chain-link fence to watch us pulling up to the front of the school. With his perfect hair and teeth, Noah was the guy everyone looked up to, and not just because he was taller than most kids. He was the captain of the basketball team, head of the debate club, the guy who decided if you were cool or a fool. I knew where Noah would put me on his list. If I could have turned invisible right then, I would have. The next best thing was to slide down into my seat and try to shrink myself out of the van.

Instead I pulled my silver dollar out of my jeans pocket. Mom had given me this coin for luck before she died. She'd told me it was the first thing she

had ever won. Rubbing the old coin helped calm my nerves.

I peeked through the window again. Everyone in the schoolyard now watched the slowest and noisiest parade in the world. Three cars ahead of us inched to the drop-off point.

"I can get out here," I said.

Dad shook his head. "School rules. I can't let you off until we get to the drop-off. We're almost there, Jennifer."

*Pop! Pop! Rattle.*

I could hear the laughter even through the crack of the window. I rolled it up to shut out the sound. Oh great, I thought. Noah and his pals were never going to let me hear the end of this.

I imagined the whispers behind my back. *There goes Jennifer Mah, the kid who came to school in the van that yesterday forgot. Hey, your dad's car is as old as my grandpa. I've seen beaters in junkyards*

*that were newer than your dad's car. I've seen dinosaurs that are younger than your car.*

I rubbed the coin so hard I thought I'd scratch the etched date on it right off.

"Jennifer," Dad said, "remember. Meet back here at three thirty. I'll be waiting."

I turned to face my dad. The brim of his dirty baseball cap cast a shadow over his tired face. His eyes had dark circles under them, and his scruffy beard still had the remains of breakfast in it. Or was it last night's dinner? I couldn't tell.

I checked myself out in the mirror in the sun visor. I didn't look much better. My hair was straggly. I hadn't showered in a couple of days, and my face was the map of a country I called Zitistan. I tried to smooth out my hair with my hand, but it felt greasy under my fingers.

"Do you have to pick me up here?" I asked. "I could meet you a block over. There's less traffic down there."

"No," he said. "We have to act normal."

*Pop!*

Normal? We were the furthest thing from normal right now.

"Dad, how about you pick me up at four? Most parents will have picked up their kids, and there won't be anyone around. I can hang out in the school library until you show up."

"No," he said. "Be here at three thirty."

"Why?" I asked.

"You know why, Jennifer," he said.

Silence. I stared out the window as the van lurched ahead. *Rattle! Pop!*

Finally Dad spoke again. "I don't want you to do anything out of the ordinary. Don't bring any attention to yourself. Please."

I wanted to point out that the van was doing a fine job of that. But I kept that comment to myself.

"Yes, Dad," I mumbled.

“No side trips. No talking to anyone. Be right here at three thirty,” he said. “Don’t be late.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know the drill, Dad. Trust me. I won’t be late.”

He reached down to the passenger seat and held up a tied grocery bag by its handles. “Don’t forget your lunch.”

I stared at the plastic bag. *Isn’t the junker van bad enough?* Most kids, if they didn’t buy their lunch in the cafeteria, had cool lunch bags. I just got a recycled bag from Walmart. I waved it off.

“I can buy something healthy from the cafeteria,” I said. “Just give me five bucks.”

He shook his head and said, “We don’t have the money to spare. Take it, Jennifer.”

I glared at Dad. I began to spin the silver dollar on the palm of my hand.

“Then I’ll go without,” I said. “I’m not that hungry.”

“Jennifer, you need to eat,” Dad said. “No arguments.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

“You’re going to need your strength today,” he said, holding the bag in front of me.

I didn’t budge.

“I don’t want anything to happen like last time,” Dad said. “Please take it. You know you have to eat.”

I hated that he treated me like a kid. I gripped the coin and spun it again on the palm of my hand.

“Fine,” I finally said, grabbing the bag from his hand.

“I’m sorry, Jennifer, but I’m looking out for you. We have to be careful right now. Please don’t do anything to bring attention to yourself.”

I ignored him as I watched the coin spinning. It kept turning and turning until it began to float up from my palm. The silver dollar spun faster as it rose. Higher and higher. I started to breathe harder as I watched the coin floating in the air.

Dad snatched the silver dollar out of the air. “And definitely do not do that!” he said.

## Chapter Two

As soon as I stepped into the school, I shuffled to the nearest garbage can I could find and quietly placed my lunch in it. No way was I going to be caught dead with the bag of sad. Bad enough that Noah Benson and his friends had seen me arrive. I glanced around the hallway to see if anyone had spotted me. The coast was clear. I walked

away from the garbage and lost myself in the swarm of teens in the school hallway.

I had to grab my books and get to class before Noah and his pals zeroed in on me. I was sure they'd have a thing or two to say about my family's vehicle. I cut through the chatty students that filled the hall and finally reached my locker. I looked left and right as I spun the dial on my combination lock. No sign of Noah and his buddies.

Why wasn't the lock opening? I spun the dial again, but the lock wouldn't crack open. One more try. Sweat started to bead on my forehead. I pulled on the lock again. Still nothing. This wasn't my day.

"Wrong locker," a boy said behind me.

I recognized Noah's voice, but I wasn't about to turn around. I ignored him and tried the combination again.

“Wrong locker,” Noah said again. And then, to his friends, “I think she’s deaf from sitting in that noisy beater for so long.”

My cheeks grew warm, and I felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of my neck. Still, the best thing to do was ignore a bully. Right?

Noah leaned against the locker beside me and grinned. “So, Jennifer, tell me, are you really trying to break into Taj’s locker?”

I glanced up at the locker number. *Wrong one.* My locker was the one Noah was leaning against. I had been in too much of a rush to pay attention. I let go of the lock.

Noah patted my shoulder and flicked his shaggy hair out of his eyes. “It’s okay,” he said. “Happens to the best of us. Right, Taj?”

The skinny kid standing near Noah nodded. “Yup. I keep telling the principal she should make the numbers on the lockers bigger. I can barely see them sometimes.”

A burly boy who looked like he was glued to Taj’s right hip laughed. It sounded more like a wheeze. “That’s because you never wear your glasses, Taj. You’re trying too hard to look cool, but you just end up looking squinty.”

Taj shoved the kid against the locker. “Shut up, Dudders,” he said.

Noah laughed. “He’s not wrong, Taj. Ease up on Dudders.”

Clearly Noah was in charge. As soon as he spoke, Taj backed off.

“Sorry, Taj,” I mumbled. “I wasn’t trying to break into your locker, you know?”

“No worries,” he said.

I relaxed. Maybe they weren’t going to be jerks after all. “Can I get to my locker?” I asked Noah.

“Sure, sure.” Noah slid over to give me enough room to reach my combination lock. I glanced up at the locker number just to be sure I didn’t make another mistake.