

## CHAPTER ONE

First period is way too early for Miss Donabrowski. Especially first period, first day, first year of high school. Really, she should come with a label. “WARNING: Contains toxic levels of perkiness. Liable to boil over with glib encouraging phrases. May cause permanent psychological damage if taken in large doses too soon after waking.”

Miss D. is my first experience with a high school teacher, and she is seriously freaking me out.

Yesterday, the actual first day of high school, we spent the hour “expressing ourselves” with finger paintings that were supposed to represent our spirits. Today, we were learning names and taking attendance. I guess Miss D wanted to get to know our spirits before she actually figured out our names.

“Madeline Lewis—should I call you Maddie?” Giggle.

“No, you definitely should not.”

“Oh, OK.” She pronounced it “Oh-keey.” “What do you like?”

Um, I liked sleeping late. And seriously cold root beer. And when my mom spontaneously decided to take me to the bookstore in Chicago on a weekend trip. But I suspected she meant as my name.

“Arwen?” I tried. If anyone might go for it, this bundle of joy should. I mean, she had an “Express Yourself through Art” poster right behind her. It had a picture of a Harry Potter type kid with so much paint on him it looked like a rainbow had barfed.

“Is that . . . your middle name?”

Sigh. “It’s what I *prefer*. But I’m also Madeline. Stress on the i.” I slumped in my seat. My name *would* be Arwen if my insanely inflexible parents would let me change it. It’s not like I asked to change it to Lizzie Borden or something. Or Britney Spears. So, for the next four years until I turn eighteen, or until I have some youthful indiscretion to hold over my parents’ heads, or until the Titanic hits an iceberg in the underworld because it finally froze over, I have to legally remain Madeline. Like there aren’t enough of *those* running around.

I just thought changing my name might be a good way to get a new start in high school. So, I’d given it a shot yesterday, day one at Bradford High. Shouldn’t teachers want to encourage a kid to read and be creative? Some of my teachers yesterday found this unacceptable. Most of them just went with it. They probably had bigger worries, like the kids who preferred arson in the locker room garbage can over simple name changes. As Mr. Mathis my new social studies teacher said, “As long as you keep your last name Lewis so it doesn’t screw up my grade book, I don’t care if you call yourself Mussolini.” Did I mention we’re covering World War II in social studies? *Again?*

But back to the name thing. The one teacher with no sense of adventure at all, Mrs. Hall in health, insisted that “Your name is Madeline and it’s a perfectly good name, so I intend to *use* it in my class.”

“Fine,” I’d told her. “But please remember that it’s Madeline as in fine, not ‘lin’ as in sin,” which it is how that woman has no sense of humor. I mean, she’s a health teacher, for goodness sake. Don’t you kinda have to have some spirit of adventure to teach “family living” (and you know what *that* means) to a bunch of freshmen? If you don’t, I feel really sorry for you. For her, I will sign my papers Madeline Arwen Lewis, with a dash over the ‘i.’ I don’t know why she already says I’m her personal challenge.

Personally, I don’t see how she can talk about challenges. She didn’t start high school yesterday. Actually, I’m pretty sure she didn’t start high school within the last century. But never mind.

See, I was *supposed* to be ready for this, according to the experts. They told us through most of eighth grade that they were preparing us for high school with bigger homework assignments and responsibilities. They said the same thing about eighth grade when we were in seventh, and seventh grade in sixth. Go figure. By my account, I should’ve started preparing for kindergarten when I was three, which I didn’t, which might explain some things in my academic record.

I think art will be my personal challenge. I mean, who can expect you to create a smooth, even pot on a wheel or an invisibly soldered copper pin at an hour when normal people don’t even open their eyes? Let alone get entrusted with combustible objects. But Miss D stood there waiting, as if I might redeem myself with a profoundly artistic explanation for my preference.

“Arwen,” I tried, “is how I express my spirit most happily.”

“Well . . . I guess that’s what we must call you, then.” She sounded less than convinced. Apparently, some personal expression baffled even Miss Donabrowski.

“OK, now, we’re going to have some *fun* with our names. Names are the windows to our spirits. Pick some material in this room—anything!—and *create* your name with it.” She quit taking attendance. After me, I guess she wasn’t discovering the windows to anyone’s else’s spirit today. I wondered if I could create my name with a combination of the dust on the windowsill and Sydney Evans’ bright orange lipstick. The woman did say *anything*.

At least there’s no homework in art (I think). I really, really hope they take it easy in the homework department tonight, because Tuesday is when my mom and I go down to our church and teach English to a bunch of people who don’t speak it very well. Which is, by my observation, about seventy-five percent of the American population. I mean, immigrants are hardly alone in their failure to grasp the basics of our semi-official language. And they have an *excuse* at least.

Mom had begun the summer with her pronouncement about us “failing to do our civic duty” or something like that. Mom liked to make pronouncements, particularly if it meant some kind of extra effort for me.

“We need to do some volunteering as a family,” she had insisted before dinner one night. “And now that you’re going into high school, you need to have some community service for those college applications.” (Of course. Now that I’m in high school it’s time to prepare for college. How did I not see *that* coming?)

“But I’m really busy, Mom. School, homework, friends, extracurriculars—all that. It’ll all be harder this fall. I’m booked. Really.”

“‘All that’ is for you. You need to do something for someone besides you.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what we do in this world if we’re decent people.”

“Then let all those already decent people go at it. Somebody else can do it.” Which was the perfect cue for her to pull out her favorite phrase.

“I am somebody, and sometime is *now*.” I think someday she’s going to put that on a poster and sell it.

“Fine,” I muttered. “If you’re somebody, then you do it.” But I knew from her raised eyebrow that firing my parting shot wouldn’t really change the outcome of the battle. Mom is usually pretty laid back, but sometimes arguing with her can be like trying to batter the Great Wall of China with my head. Painful and incredibly ineffective.

So for two hours each Tuesday night I spend my time repeating “I have to go to the store,” “I need to open an account,” and “I need medical assistance,” to some lady who really wants to know these things. (Geez, haven’t they heard of internet and 911?) Her name is Rocio, and she told me she’s 37. That’s about all I’ve gotten so far. Actually, she seems really nice, and I can tell from the way her dark eyes sparkle sometimes that she’s probably smart and could crack some pretty good jokes in Spanish if I could understand them.

It’s a two-way street, too. She’s taught me some Spanish. So I can now tell that guy in math class who sticks his pencil in his ear all the time that he’s a cheese-headed mountain goat and that girl who jabs me in the back of the neck with her binder all through science that she’s an idiotic buffalo butt in *Spanish*, and no one knows any different. Maybe I will learn Spanish after all. I declined to take a foreign language this year after my petition to have elvish included on the list of language classes was denied. Administrators are so short-sighted.

This, however, is art class. I’m staring at three colors of crepe paper, some metallic glitter, and green india ink, and I have no idea how these things are going to jump together to form my name. Miss D is looking at me with that encouraging little smile of hers that says, “C’mon, you can do it.” I think I detect a little wobble in the smile.

“Transportation.” The heading on the workbook promised a Tuesday night of stimulating English/Spanish conversation. I read, pointed to the corresponding cheap four-color copied picture that looked like it had been rubber stamped by a blind monkey, and Rocio repeated. I felt like I was back in the “Babysitting for Success” course I took to make me a certifiably trustworthy sitter for random babies I might meet. Trouble was, all the CPR and baby safety lessons failed to make me a success at one thing—actually liking to be around small children for more than, say, about seventeen minutes.

But Rocio I did like. Her accent always made me feel happier somehow, like the feeling I got listening to my dad's jazz saxophone CDs. "I need to get my driver's license."  
"Please, where is the bus stop?" she repeated, and smiled.

"How did you get here?" I suddenly asked. The travel words made me curious.

"I walked," she replied. "Not far. Cuarenta . . . Oh, como se dice . . . forty. Forty minutes." Forty minutes? She walked forty minutes to get here? Most of my friends and I would consider a forty-minute walk some sort of parental torture disguised to be good for you. Definitely not "not far."

"No. I mean, came here . . . from Mexico? A bus? Airplane?"

Rocio's smile disappeared, and I saw a strange look in her eyes before she stared down at her hands on the table. Like something had spooked her. Me? What could I have said to scare a grown woman?

"I . . . I don't understand," she mumbled. "No comprendo."

"Then how . . ." I began. She'd understood my first question. She 'comprendoed' fine, I was pretty sure. I shrugged. It wasn't really worth pursuing, with our limited understanding of each other's native language. "You walk here? That's a long walk to me." I went back to a safe subject. "Forty minutes is, um, muy faro to me." Rocio laughed. "Lejos," she offered. We were friends again, whatever I had done.

"You all talked out tonight?" Mom guided our old van home from church with practically no attention since she'd driven this route so many times. I think, statistically, I've probably logged more trips to church and back than anyone in my entire high school, with the possible exception of the Mormon twins in my social studies class. Not needing to pay attention to the road meant, however, that she had more attention to zero in on me.

"Yeah, I guess."

"But . . .?" She drew out the word, waiting for me to fill in the blank. How did that woman always know?

"But, well, Rocio acted kind of funny tonight. I'm afraid she was mad or something."

"Why?"

"I don't know. If I knew I wouldn't be confused about it, would I?" That's when I got *the look*. The look that said, "I know you're upset, but don't push it, babe." My mother does not need words to communicate. I think she could make big bucks as one of those mimes that never talks. Her facial expressions say plenty. Except I'd never go see her cause mimes creep me out. No normal person should ever look like that. I've got a secret theory that they're serial killers hiding for life behind makeup and silence. It's a valid theory, I think.

"We were talking all about that bus, plane, train stuff and I asked her how she came to the US. She wouldn't answer me. Why?"

"Well, maybe she didn't understand."

"I think she did. She got real quiet and scared-looking."

"Maybe her trip was difficult. Crowded, or . . . A lot of people who come from Mexico, Madeline, go through terrible things. They're separated from loved ones. Or made to walk long distances in the desert. Or . . .or get taken advantage of by the people who bring them. Maybe she wants to forget."

"Do you think she left someone she loved behind?"

"I don't know. She could have."

"What do you mean, "taken advantage of"? What aren't you telling me?" I may not have her interpersonal radar, but I knew when I was being "protected" from the truth. "You're dissembling."

"Where'd you learn that word?"

"I read."

"Maybe she was afraid. Madeline, you know about illegal aliens."

"Like, you mean, some double-parked UFO?"

"People in the US without the legal documents to stay here. Sometimes, when they have to sneak in the country, they do it under terrible conditions."

"Don't need a civics lesson, Mom. I know what they are." I just didn't ever think. . . "You think Rocio's here illegally?" It honestly had never occurred to me. I mean, illegal aliens happened in the city, or Texas, or California, or they swam from Cuba or something. Not here. Not someone I knew. I potentially knew a federal criminal? It felt kinda cool, actually. Like I should be going around arching one eyebrow and glancing sideways. Illegal people had to be dangerous, right? Though I really couldn't see a truckload of terror in sensible-shoed black-pony-tailed Rocio.

I wondered what topics I'd have to steer clear of next week. I didn't want to know if Rocio was hiding something. That was her business. I had enough of my own.