



## CHAPTER

# 1

**THE** empty cafeteria table snapped in half at the middle and shot up off the ground. Its hinges shrieked as the whole table slammed shut, spinning a little on its wheels. All on its own.

Ben leaped away from it, stunned, while the rest of the students in the cafeteria fell silent. Everyone stared at the table like it might open back up and attack any one of them, including the guy who'd just been threatening to beat Ben into the ground. Ben had only been at this school for two weeks, and he'd already run afoul of the class bully. But the table seemed to have changed that, at least for the moment.

Ben felt a tug on his arm as a boy came up and pulled him away.

“Move.” The kid nodded toward the cafeteria’s double doors.

Ben followed him, but glanced back a couple of times at the table. The bully was still staring at it.

Out in the common area, Ben asked the kid, “Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I saw.” He shrugged, wearing a T-shirt printed with WANTED: SCHRODINGER’S CAT, DEAD AND ALIVE. “Perfect timing, wouldn’t you say?”

“I . . . guess so. But what if somebody had been sitting on that thing?”

“I’m Peter.”

“I — I’m Ben.”

“I know. You’re in my third period.” Peter turned and walked away, threading the crowded common area with ease, without touching or interacting with anyone.

Ben got lost on his way home.

He couldn’t find his own apartment. True, they’d only moved to town a couple of weeks ago, but still. He should’ve known better. After all the places they’d lived, he *did* know better, yet there he was, wandering the sprawling and utterly confusing campus family-housing grounds, trying to look like he knew where he was going. The apartments were clustered in two-story buildings, arranged haphazardly, a maze of sidewalks running among them.

At one point, Ben actually thought he'd found it, but realized quickly it was the wrong place when his key didn't work. Then he heard a stirring on the other side of the door, probably because whoever it was had heard him jiggling the lock, and he hurried away.

He eventually spotted a sad little playground he recognized. The sand was mixed with things that weren't sand, and packed down hard. He remembered seeing the edge of it from his bedroom window, so he figured out the right angle and headed in that direction.

When he finally got home, Ben felt and heard the scrape of cardboard boxes on the other side of the front door as he tried to push it open. His mom was still unpacking. The apartment was paid for by her scholarship. It was small, but it was newer and cleaner than some of the other places they'd lived.

"Mom?" Ben squeezed through the opening.

"In my room!"

Ben tossed his backpack onto the couch that was still missing a cushion, and went past the little kitchen to his mom's bedroom. She stood by the bed, where she had laid out a bunch of clothes Ben recognized from the last time she'd gone to school. Back then it was a master's degree in art history. This time, if she finished, it was going to be a master's degree in medieval literature. She would never use either.

She scanned the bed, her hands on her hips. "I hope

these still fit. I can't exactly wear my stained overalls as a teaching assistant." She looked up. "How was your day? Still liking your school?"

"Sure."

Between the last graduate program and this one, they'd lived in an art commune where Ben's mom worked on a blueberry farm and did found-object sculpting on the side, and the overalls she wore every day showed it.

She picked up a navy blouse and held it out in front of her by the shoulders. "Make any friends?"

"Maybe. This kid Peter kind of helped me out."

"With what?"

"Just some guy."

She brought the shirt down to her waist. "This other guy hassling you?"

"Not bad."

She looked him in the eyes. He looked back. She did this thing where if she wanted to know more, she'd just sit and stare, trying to wait it out of him. Ben had learned he could outlast her. And the last thing she needed to worry about the night before starting classes was some bully at school. He smiled.

She gave up and turned her attention back to the bed. "You let me know if it becomes a problem."

"I will."

She shook out a pair of black pants. "Are you hungry? What do you want for dinner?"