

Chapter One

We were officially the weirdest family on the block.

The thing was, life had already been bad enough for me before that crummy afternoon when Uncle Danny parked his rusty Ford Escort in the driveway and started unloading pet carriers filled with furry brown ferrets into our garage.

But that didn't stop our two wiener dogs (Babs and Roger) from going ballistic, barking and leaping as high in the air as their stubby legs could carry them (like they'd actually know what to do with the ferrets if they caught them). And it didn't stop Grandma from rushing outside in her pink *nightgown*, practically foaming at the mouth because all the commotion was ruining *Oprah*.

When she saw the ferrets, Grandma let out a high-pitched scream that sounded almost exactly like the teakettle she boiled every afternoon. Then she started raving about a rat infestation.

And she kept going, even when Uncle Danny told her over and over again that they weren't rats at all (which they weren't. In fact, aside from their creepy hunched backs, they were surprisingly cute, which I realize is kind

of beside the point), but Grandma was too busy freaking out to listen.

Dad pulled into the driveway, his Honda still making the funny banging noise that not even his mechanic could figure out. He looked confused as he climbed out of the car and adjusted his belt. (His belly was bigger than I'd ever seen it and even though I liked the solid roundness of it, Mom said it "had to go." For weeks she'd been trying to make him do morning calisthenics and pour flaxseed on his cereal.) His dark hair was neatly combed, the way it had to be at the bank, and his eyebrows were squished close together with concern.

He squinted through his new glasses to get a better look at the situation, and that was when he spotted the ferrets. His face, which was usually a completely normal color, turned the most amazing cartoon red. I half-expected steam to shoot out of his nostrils and I was sure that if anyone so much as tugged on his earlobe, his whole head would have exploded.

This all came as a shock because Dad was usually the calmest person within a twenty-mile radius.

Actually, make that forty miles.

Mom called him "the voice of reason."

I watched him take a deep breath, so deep he could have spent the next two weeks underwater.

And in the water was exactly where *I* would have rather been right then (and all the time, as a matter of fact).

The pool was the only place where I felt like nothing else mattered, and as I glanced away from my crazy front yard to the Elliots' house, knowing there was a beautiful crystal

blue one (with a slide and a diving board!) behind the fence that no one even used, it almost drove me bonkers.

Some people didn't even know how lucky they were.

But I knew exactly how *unlucky* I was.

I sighed and turned my attention back to Dad, who was about to speak. When he did, he sounded like he was choking.

He asked Uncle Danny why on earth he'd brought the ferrets to our house when Danny himself was barely welcome in the spare bedroom. After all, Dad reminded him, he owed my parents over two thousand dollars in rent and they were starting to wonder if he was ever going to pay it back.

Uncle Danny didn't have a chance to say a word in his defense before Dad threw in a bit of guilt by reminding him that the money was supposed to go toward braces for my older brother, Kenneth. Even though Dad didn't say it out loud, we all knew what that meant: Kenneth would spend the tenth grade as bucktoothed (and weird-looking) as he'd been in the ninth.

Maybe even worse.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been bad enough, but Kenneth went to Edgevale High School, home of the Edgevale Beavers.

You do the math.

Then my mom raced around the corner in our minivan, the tires squealing like the freaking Indy 500, with a police car chasing her. Its lights were flashing and the siren howled loudly enough for Mr. Owens next door to run outside, where I could tell he was doing his best not to look at Grandma in her nightie. (What I couldn't tell was whether it was because, like me, he was scared of the bulging dark

blue veins that ran down the backs of her legs or if he had some kind of old-people crush on her. The truth was, I probably didn't want to know.)

Anyway, Mom got out of the van and started explaining herself to us and the policeman, jabbing her car keys in the air with every third word, like she was stabbing mosquitoes. It turned out that she'd rolled through a stop sign, then refused to pull over for the policeman when he turned on his lights. She thought she had a good reason, though: My baby brother, Clayton, was going to wet his pants and she'd needed to get him home.

Fast.

Clay unbuckled his car seat himself, jumped out of the van, and ran across the lawn, tugging at his zipper. As she watched him, Mom sighed and told the policeman to go ahead and write the ticket. She raised her hands in surrender and admitted she was guilty, but wanted to make sure he understood that she couldn't let almost six months' worth of potty training go down the toilet.

Then Kenneth, who always has to be what Grandma calls a "smart aleck," reminded Mom that the toilet was exactly where she wanted it to go.

Mom grounded him on the spot.

This meant that, along with being stuck with his buckteeth for no one knew how much longer, he also wouldn't be able to go to some stupid concert he'd already bought tickets for.

My big brother, who looked like a ghost after spending most of his time locked in his bedroom listening to music and daydreaming about being a rock star, threw the kind of

temper tantrum fifteen-year-olds don't usually throw in public because they're too busy trying to look cool, even when they're not.

And Kenneth was *not* cool.

Not even when he stood in front of the open refrigerator.

The policeman's mouth hung open, and I was pretty sure he was wishing he could turn around and walk away from the whole scene, just like I wished at that moment (and many others in the past eleven years, but that's also beside the point).

Instead of backing away slowly and trying to convince himself that my family was a figment of his imagination, the policeman pulled out his pad and started writing the ticket.

So, between the flashing lights of the squad car, the ferrets, the frantic wiener dogs, my hysterical grandmother, the toilet training, and Kenneth's spontaneous meltdown, the neighbors didn't have to take a vote, or even talk it over.

Everyone on the street just kind of *knew* that the Boone family was the weirdest.

Aside from the obvious but temporary embarrassment, all of this would have been okay, it really would have, but at that exact moment, when everyone seemed to be going crazy at once, I saw *them*, and the whole situation suddenly felt about ten times worse.

My very best friend since the first grade, Amy Higgins, was walking past the front of my house with her new best friend, Samantha McAllister.

I froze in my flip-flops.

Oh, fish sticks.

My mouth dried up and everything slowed down, like an instant replay on *Monday Night Football*.