

The background is white and decorated with various gray icons: hearts of different sizes and orientations, and snowflakes of different sizes and orientations. Some snowflakes have hearts inside them. The overall theme is winter and love.

HEARTS OF ICE

ADI RULE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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There was always an empty seat on the school bus next to Evangeline Reynolds. It wasn't because she was mean, or had a frightening appearance, or because she oozed poison from her pores like an Australian cane toad. No, Evangeline was a kind, plain-looking person with run-of-the-mill pores, which people would have found out if they got to know her. But they never did. She was never around long enough.

Today, Evangeline was the new kid yet again, at Lakecrest Middle School, or was it Crestlake Middle School? She was dressed to fade into the background—her mother didn't like flashy colors. But just in case someone did notice her and decide to sit down, she pushed her gray knapsack under her seat. She pulled her beige coat tightly around herself so it didn't puff over into the other seat. Plenty of room.

Evangeline took out her pencil case and held it next to her ear against the window, where no one could see it very well. "Yes," she said, as though she were talking on a phone (her mother didn't approve

of cell phones). “I can teach you all about sword fighting. Come to my house next Tuesday.” She glanced at the line of students passing her in the aisle. Nobody cared about sword fighting, apparently. Which was just as well, because in truth, Evangeline couldn’t tell a sword from a swordfish—her mother would never have let her learn anything as interesting as that.

“Cookies?” she said into her pencil case, a little more loudly. “Of course. I have cupboards full of homemade cookies. I can’t possibly eat them all by myself. I really don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Again, nobody noticed. Evangeline watched her classmates board the bus, one by one. A girl with blue-striped hair passed by without a second look. A boy wearing a yellow T-shirt that said *GOLDFISH CLUB* in glitter plopped down next to his friend. Nobody looked at Evangeline and said, “Hi! You’re new, right? What’s your name?” They all just continued to shuffle by and choose other seats until there was nobody waiting in the parking lot to get on.

Evangeline looked away and put her fingers on the window glass. Her stomach felt icy, shards of coldness that spread through her skin, even though it was a warm May day outside. She had that feeling again—a strange, old feeling that there should be *someone* in that empty seat. Not quite a memory, and not quite a ghost, it was something more like a *space*. On the school bus, at the dinner table, in the darkness of her room at night—Evangeline had always had the

peculiar idea that there was someone missing. Someone who would notice her.

The last to board the bus were two girls carrying muddy track shoes. They took the seats across from Evangeline. She caught their eye and they looked over at her curiously.

Evangeline's heart jumped. She smiled and waved. "Hi!"

"Uh—hi," the girl closest to the aisle said, like she thought it might be a trap. "You're Norma Jean, right? The new kid?"

"Evangeline," Evangeline said. "Nice to meet you."

"Okay," the girl said. "Well, I'm Bridget." There was an awkward silence. Evangeline tried frantically to think of something to talk about before the girls went back to ignoring her—if she played sports or had blue hair, or even if she belonged to the Goldfish Club, maybe she'd have something to say. But there was really nothing special about her. Nothing except—

"It's my birthday on Sunday," she blurted. Everyone was special on their birthday, right?

The girls across the aisle laughed. Was that good? "Happy birthday," said the one near the window, the one who wasn't Bridget.

"Thanks." Evangeline swallowed. "Hey—do you want to come to my birthday party?"

She immediately regretted it. Did kids at Crestlake Middle School even have birthday parties, or were they just for babies? Not to

mention, Evangeline hadn't actually *asked* if she could have a party, and her mom would say no. Her mom always said no.

But the girls shrugged. "Okay," not-Bridget said. "As long as there's cake."

"There will be!" Evangeline said before she could stop herself.

The girls laughed again. "I'll text you tomorrow, okay?" Bridget said. "What's your number?"

Luckily, Evangeline already had her new number memorized. She pronounced the digits clearly. "It's a landline," she said, a little embarrassed, but they didn't seem to care.

The bus creaked to a stop at a busy corner store and both girls rose to get off. "See you Sunday!" Evangeline called after them. "Bring your friends!"

"Will do. Thanks, Emmaline!"

Evangeline watched them go, her heart still jumping. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the bus window.

Bring your friends? Cake? I must be out of my mind, she thought.

But then again, she was turning twelve. She was old enough to make her own choices. Maybe—*maybe*—her mom would let her have this one party this one time. She'd never ask for anything again. She and her mom would probably be gone from Lakecrest before her birthday next year. Bridget and not-Bridget and their friends would never

remember her name, even if they ended up ever getting it right. But if she had this one birthday party, then forever after, she would have a memory of smiles and sugar and all the brightest colors.

As the bus groaned to a stop in front of Evangeline's boring, tan house with the boring, scraggly trees out front, she bounced out of her seat, afraid and excited. By the time her feet touched the driveway, it had started to snow glorious, fat flakes. And where her forehead had touched the window, a beautiful spiderweb of frost began to form.

As the snow flurries intensified, Evangeline slid to a stop halfway up the driveway. "Not again!" she said to herself. "Not *now*!" It always seemed to start snowing at the worst possible times, when Evangeline was worried or nervous or excited. And the only thing her mother hated more than flashy colors, cell phones, and birthday parties was snow.