

## CHAPTER 1

### *Autumn*

**Y**ou ever like a boy your friends thought you shouldn't like? Maybe he short. Or his ears stick out. Or he got a face full of pimples. But you like him anyhow. No matter what they say. That's how I feel about Adonis. My best friend, Peaches, say I barely know him. She right. But I been watching him, the way you watch the clouds sometimes and see stuff in 'em that nobody else notices.

I wait for Adonis every morning. He ride to school on a van with eight other kids. I watch the driver lower the lift. Down come a boy in a wheelchair that got a tray attached to it. His arms is frozen in place. His head wobbles, like there ain't no bones in his neck. I try not to stare at the girl coming off next. But I do anyhow. She walking. But not so good. Two canes and leg braces

help her get around, but she always look like she gonna fall down.

I'd be embarrassed to ride in that van. Adonis ain't. You can tell by the way he comes off. Pushing himself. Sitting up straight and tall like he headed to a meeting with the principal or the head of the school board, even.

I wave. He don't pay me no mind. I go up to him, saying hello. "I saw the van coming, so I waited for you."

Looking at the pink feather sticking out my hair, he yawns. I stare up at the sky. When he turn his wheels to try to get away from me, I follow. Smiling. Punching the arms of his chair, he stops. "Quit it, Autumn!"

"I just wanna ask you a question." Inside I'm telling myself to think of something quick and make it good. "Do we got practice Friday?"

Adonis is the team manager. I'm one of the wrestlers. The only girl.

Shaking his head. Talking like he grown, he say, "I've texted everyone. The time has changed, that's it. The date is the same." His hands go on those wheels, and he's moving again. Leaving me.

When his new black leather jacket start falling off the back of his chair, I catch it. Handing it to him, I

think of all we got in common. Our Snickers bar candy-brown skin. Wrestling. And my friend Peaches — who he don't like.

I'm standing right in front of him. Smiling. Blocking him.

"Autumn Knight. You agitate me!" His chair is rolling my way, so I move before I get run over. He don't go inside the building, though. He stop to talk to one of the kids from the van, laughing after a while. He is always nice to them. Always tutoring or working with them to get them better at something like chess or Scrabble. He's different with me. Always mad like I did something horrible to him. Liking him is a good thing. I tell Peaches that all the time.

"Autumn." Peaches runs up, hugging me. "A ninety-eight on my human geography test." She holding up her paper for me to see.

I ask about Adonis. "What he get?"

She cutting her eyes at him. "What's he always get? A hundred. Plus the extra-credit points."

Under my breath, I whisper, "One day, he gonna be my boyfriend." I look over at him. "Seriously — he will."

When Peaches smiles, you can see her pink gums and small teeth. They not showing now. 'Cause she ain't smiling. She upset with me, asking why I'm worrying

about some boy when I'm behind in school. Reading, especially.

Besides, she say Adonis ain't good enough for me. "He don't treat you right. And he's handicapped. Look. No legs." She grabbing both my arms, turning me in the opposite direction. "Plus he's only nice to *them*." She points to Roberto Martinez sitting in a wheelchair, with the wind mussing up his long, black hair. "And grown-ups." She waving at Mr. Epperson, our math teacher.

She not exactly wrong. Teachers love Adonis. The principal shakes his hand most every time he see him. Adonis will do anything for them and the kids on the van. He always trying to get away from me.

Hugging me, Peaches ask if I'm ready for Miss Baker's test. I make a face. "I don't know. I studied."

She and me like sisters. She come to all my matches. I let her wear my clothes. She help me with homework. I'm teaching her how to cook. We gonna open a restaurant one day. I'll be the chef. She'll run the business. We gonna be rich.

Opening her locker, Peaches brings up Emily. Adonis's girlfriend from last year, eighth grade, at that other school the three of 'em went to. Peaches and Adonis go here now; Beacon Academy. It's remodeled. Got a greenhouse. Solar panels on the roof. A fly caf.

She talk about Emily all the time. How her brother beat Adonis up. When Peaches gets to the part about the pond and how he pushed Adonis in, I look at the books in her locker. Lined up. Alphabetically. *Algebra I. Biology. French III. Human Geography.* She in GAT — the Gifted and Talented program. Taking AP and honors classes. Except in math. She flunked that last year. Me and her in Mr. E.'s class. I'm repeating algebra, too.

"Emily had big ones." Peaches holding her hands out past her chests.

Looking at my chests, I'm wondering if maybe that's why Adonis don't like me. "Pancakes," a girl said about them once. They not that flat. But biscuits ain't much better.

Peaches get to the part about his wheelchair — how they found it four blocks from where Adonis was. I sit cross-legged on the floor, thinking 'bout practice last night. This guy on my team quit 'cause he couldn't get with wrestling no girl, he said. "Even at practice." He not the first boy to quit on me. Won't be the last, either.

Adonis got what he deserved, being tossed in that pond, Peaches say.

Shouldn't nobody be treated like that, I tell her. "Even if he did snitch on his girlfriend's brother."

She pokes me in the side when she see Adonis and Mr. E. up the hall. Talking. Like they do every morning. “He always has to have the highest grades,” Peaches say. “And be head of everything. Maybe people get tired of that!”

I tell her, “A person’s allowed to be smart, you know.”

“He’s not smarter! He just didn’t have six cousins, their parents, plus their two dumb dogs living with him like I did last year!” She slamming the locker so hard, the other ones shake. Stomping off, she say, “That’s why I didn’t pass math. There was too much racket going on at my house!”

Walking up the hall, we both keep our opinions to ourselves. Then who do I see? Miss Baker. My reading teacher. Peaches shaking her head when I duck around the corner. Yesterday Miss Baker showed me my file. I’m three years behind in reading.

I’m a great cook and wrestler. Gonna make Adonis a great girlfriend, too. But reading — that’s gonna take me down. I try not to think about it. Or read too often. That way I feel better about myself.