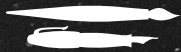


THE  
BEAUTIFUL  
SOMETHING  
ELSE

ASH VAN OTTERLOO



Scholastic Press \* New York

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Chapter One

# *Sparrow, Disrupted*

Sparrow Malone

Mrs. Garcia

English Language Arts Homework, Purple

Mimicry in Nature

Animals don't mean to lie about who they are. It's how they're wired. The anglerfish didn't wake up one day in the deep sea and think to herself, "You know what? Today, I'll hang a lantern on my head and lure my neighbors to their death." Millions of years ago, the first anglerfish accidentally caught a bacteria that caused her dorsal fins to bioluminesce.

Then evolution did its thing over many generations, and the fish became mimics, luring their prey with glowing bait-like appendages. The anglerfish doesn't even know she's a trickster—she just knows that she needs to survive . . .



Mom is in rare form this morning, and I don't need to go downstairs to know it.

From my room, I can hear the metallic *shhhhlink* of our little apartment's old, dusty blinds opening and closing, over and over. Every time a siren wails or muffled voices travel down our complex's rain-slick sidewalk, my mother peeps through the window to see what's happening. I try to shut out the noise as I scribble the last bit of my English homework and scan it for errors.

*Shhhhhlink!!* My face scrunches in exasperation. *Who does she expect to see out there anyway?* I give up and slide my homework into my backpack. I can finish the proofread at school. The front door whines open and shut as Mom steps out onto the stoop. Seconds later, sweet-smelling vape smoke dances up

from the scraggly boxwoods and past my open window like dragon breath. I roll my eyes. So much for her quitting.

Today's too important for me to get caught in one of Mom's whirlpool moods. I need my game face on for my first language arts presentation at Candy Creek Middle School. Turning her angst into a silly game usually helps. I relax my neck and let my voice slide to the deepest end of its register, imitating the famous nature documentarian David Attenborough.

“Like a groundhog on the first day of spring, the wild Nervous Mom peeps out of its habitation, checking for predators,” I narrate as I paw through the mound of laundry at the foot of my bed. “Meanwhile, inside their cramped domain, her offspring busies itself with its never-ending search for suitable clothing,” I continue, switching up my accent to sound more like Ze Frank, my favorite silly nature YouTuber. *“And that’s how the Malone family do.”*

Other ways of the Malone family include Mom working irregular shifts, this month as a companion for elderly folks. She changes jobs a lot. I've only been at Candy Creek for three weeks, since she left her last one because a coworker saw her crying in the grocery store after she'd had too much to drink.

Don't get me wrong, Mom's a hard worker—we both are. It's just that her anxious perfectionism and her messy personal life go together like Cheetos and milk. Eventually, she melts down in public or makes a huge mistake, and she quits because she's too mortified to ever go back.

So today, I, Sparrow, need to make an excellent impression on new teachers so Mom looks good, and folks won't get nosy about her twelve-year-old being home alone at night while she works.

I cast a longing look at my ratty, oversized gray Wolverine sweatshirt in the corner, wishing it were chilly enough outside to disappear inside it. Paired with flip-flops and shorts, it's my favorite outfit. It's comfortable like a blanket, and the furthest Mom lets me stray from girly clothes without flipping her lid, if she's in a good mood. Today she clearly isn't, though, so I'm tempting fate here.

Plus, even if it weren't a million sticky Southern degrees outside already, *despite* the rain, I might not get away with wearing it to this school. Candy Creek Middle has a loose-but-official dress code of khaki pants and polos. And this year, since I now wear the same size clothes as my tiny mom, I've been rotating through her hand-me-downs from her last

job at the Dollar Saver, to cut corners. But today, if I have to wear them one more time, I feel like I might scream.

My sweatshirt is halfway over my head when Mom tops the stairs and passes my bedroom. “Oh, honey, you are *not* wearing that raggedy mess.”

“Plenty of people break dress code,” I complain, my voice smothered under a layer of cotton. “Two girls in my class wore dresses and sandals yesterday!”

“Well, I imagine they looked *nice*, not like a sack of potatoes,” Mom scoffs before shuffling away again, her voice trailing off. “Wouldn’t kill you to try a dress sometime.”

“Not likely,” I mutter, but Mom’s already gone.

The room whirls a little as I obediently discard my sweatshirt. My pulse skitters, and my guts feel like I’m on a fast elevator. I hate changing clothes—maybe because it means I’m officially headed to school and I’m nervous?—so I rush through it as quickly as possible. Wrinkling my nose at the way the stretchy lilac fabric hugs my body, I paw my long red hair forward like a safety blanket. I wish I had time to flip it all over my face, too, and pretend to be Samara from *The Ring*, a terrifying movie I regret watching while Mom was at work, but my alarm clock already reads seven

thirty. The door creaks open and shut downstairs. Better hurry.

I twist my hair into wholesome braids that say, “I make good grades, eat organic beans, and I’ll never smoke, chew, or kiss boys who do!” As my fingers work, I picture someone cutting the hair off at my shoulder, my chin, and all the way up to my ears. *Snip, snip, SNIP*. A shiver sneaks down my back. I glance over my shoulder, neck burning with irrational embarrassment like I’ve been caught picking my nose.

Mom’s back in the doorway, watching me with that fragile, too-bright smile on her face. Her sleek ponytail is impeccable as always, with only the barest hint of her graying roots showing beneath her chocolate-brown drugstore dye job. She’s dressed for work, perfectly pressed and neat as a pin, her hands gripping her scuffed pocketbook hard. But I detect the telltale tremble in her fingers anyway, and her lip is bleeding from chewing it too much. She’s still wound up. “I wish you wouldn’t slouch that way—it makes you look like an old man. D’you have all your homework done, Maggie Grace?”

“I don’t know about Maggie Grace, but *Sparrow* does,” I sing, ignoring her dig and slipping into my shoes to putter over and kiss her cheek.



Mom sighs through her nose. “I named you Magnolia Grace after the tree I loved as a girl—” she starts in. The pinprick irises of her green eyes scrutinize my hair, her thin-plucked brows fretting.

“Where you climbed up to escape your horrible, smelly brother and that lonely house where you were raised up,” I finish for her, forcing a laugh. Because we’ve repeated this talk googolplex times—a number so big, you could never write it out in a life span. I roll my eyes, herding us out of my room with my fraying bookbag. “Sparrow’s easier for new folks to remember.” *And it’s the one thing that’s really mine*, I think. I love the feel of *Sparrow* in my mouth, wild and strong.

“It’s just so weird, Maggie. I worry folks will get the wrong idea about us. They might think you’re . . . well, it just sounds a little *funny*.” Her gaze is a cloud of worry, worry, worry, roaming over my body and searching for something to rain on. “Why do you keep wearing that old tight sports bra? You know it makes you look flat as a flitter—” My jaw clenches, but Mom doesn’t notice, just keeps going. “Didn’t we buy you that nice one with the cups in it? And, your eyebrows are looking a little wild . . . let me grab my tweezers, quick—”

I take a step back, fighting the urge to snarl. Sometimes, my mom's worse than the unsettling feeling I get from the mirror. "Mom, *stop*. It's fine! We don't want to be late, right?"

"Oh, shoot, I guess you're right—it's 7:32 . . ."

Mom teeters on her feet in a way I don't like. She's taken something, I can tell—a sleeping pill, maybe? I pretend not to see, but when her back turns and I follow her down the stairwell and out to the car, I bite my lip. *I'm about to get on the road with this woman*. Bless her, but Mom doesn't need to be behind a wheel sometimes. Only four more years before I can drive us on days like this.

"How do you feel about that English class thingy your teacher emailed about?" Mom asks as our respective car doors clunk shut. "You stuck to writing about . . . nice things, didn't you?"

She's trying to sound casual, but instead her tone is like brittle candy, ready to shatter. I know what her question really means. She's not wondering if I feel confident. She's asking: *Will your teacher like it? Will she be impressed by how mature you are? Will they think I'm a good mom? That we're good folks?*

I nod, smiling. "I feel great about it. One of my best yet."

My mom's face brightens the tiniest bit as she cranks the

car and pulls out of the driveway. I wish I could reach over to smooth my thumbs over her beautiful forehead and erase all the worry lines that congregate there. But that would smear her carefully applied makeup and reveal the smattering of freckles underneath, causing her to spontaneously combust.

“And are you going out for any solos this year? Or musicals?” Mom’s Tennessee accent is rolling in thicker, and her words are slurring a little. “I don’t want you . . . chickening out this time. Not when I know you’re sittin’ on all that natural talent. You’ll try harder for your mama, won’t you?”

I swallow hard and hesitate. I don’t say that the stage makes me nervous, or that all this adjusting is tougher than it looks. Because I *need* Mom to be okay right now. She’s already starting to get cagey, and we’ve only been in Candy Creek a few weeks. In the corner of my eye, I see her pocket-book unzipped on the floorboard, and my gaze is pulled as if by gravity. And, sure enough, my heart skips at the sliver of a plastic zip baggie inside.

Mom approaches a red light a little too fast, slamming the brakes down hard at the last minute. I snap my eyes back upward. We both lurch forward and are caught by our seat belts. Mom gasps down air in surprise, her bony chest heaving and threader earrings still swinging. “Well, *that’ll* wake

us up!” She chuckles nervously, then looks around the intersection to see if anyone saw us skid a little past the crosswalk line.

But me? I’m staring at the plastic baggie that has fallen all the way out of Mom’s purse onto the carpeted floorboard. It’s full of familiar little white circles with lines on them, like flathead screw tops made of chalk. The medicine Mom took a couple years back, after her thumb was crushed on a car assembly line in South Carolina. The ones she’s not supposed to take anymore, because her thumb hasn’t hurt her for ages. *How’d she get ahold of them again?* Mom finally checks to see if I’m okay and notices me staring at her bag. I jerk my attention politely to the window, heart racing.

“Sweet old Mr. Hemphill left his heart pills in my car after I drove him to his checkup,” Mom chirps. Her smile’s too big, like she can’t remember how many teeth a person shows when they’re honestly happy. Fifteen? Twenty? *All of them?* “I need to remember to put them back in his cabinet.”

“Better write it down, so you don’t forget!” I wag my finger in mock sternness. Inside, I want to pummel the dashboard with the heels of my shoes, over and over. *Heart pills, my butt.* Instead, I twist the radio knob and groove to the beat, waggling my brows at Mom until she gives in and laughs. She’s lying about the medicine, and we both know it.

I shouldn't be hurt—I already suspected. She loves the stuffing out of me, and we're as close as Bonnie and Clyde. We're all each other has. But there's stuff we just don't talk about.

It's better that way. Back when she used to drink every night, tearful, broken-edged words poured from her like water. I didn't know how to handle them, because we didn't have rules for Mama being honest.

“My shadow's chasing me again, Maggie Grace,” she'd sob, curled into a tiny ball on the sofa. “We can't stop movin', baby girl.” And Mom never meant “We can't stop moving” in the fun “can't stop, won't stop groovin'” T-Swift sort of way. She meant find a new town, burn old bridges, make another start.

First time Mom said it, I'd just read about a creature called the Hidebehind in a school library book. The folklore, it said, originated in North America. Legend went, the evil Hidebehind stalked lumberjacks through forests thick and dark, matching their every step. But when they turned around, the Hidebehind disappeared behind the nearest tree. Some folks believed keeping a little flask of moonshine with you kept the Hidebehind at bay.

In my eight-year-old noggin, Mom's shadow and the Hidebehind got mixed up, and I thought the Hidebehind

was why Mom took so many drinks and medicine she didn't need. Mom's shadow was real enough to me then, and still is now—a sticky, sad secret she can't ever shake off, following us everywhere.

Mom's quiet the rest of the way to school. As we pull up to the drop-off line, my toes curl up hard inside my shoes, tiny hidden turtles of anxiety. But my posture straightens, and I force a relaxed, sweet expression onto my face.

“I'm thinking of tryin' out for choir. Miss H heard me singing in the hall, and said she has a spot for a voice good as mine, if I want it.” This is Sparrow-and-Mom code for: *Please don't fall apart, Mom. I know it's hard. If you hang in there, I'll give you something to brag about to your new coworkers and church choir members, so they know you're a perfectly normal, highly successful mom.*

Mom smiles a little. It's small this time but real. “We'll have to fix you up a dress for concerts, Maggie Grace. And you'll have to actually *wear* it.”

I cringe inside at the dreaded name and think *Sparrow!!* But I grin, too. I can already see the wheels whirring in Mom's head about the cheapest place to buy clothes, and how she can make them glitzier. My toes uncurl a little.

Busy is good. Her green eyes are sparking with Mom-fire, and she looks almost alert.

If I can distract her with concerts and grades, maybe her itchy feet will settle in. She'll see that folks really do like us. We can conjure a sunshine life so bright, Mom's Hidebehind shadow might disappear for good. I'll go through her purse and hurl every last baggie into the dumpster, if I have to.

“Love you! Do good!”

“I love you, too, Mom. Pick me up at four!”

As she drives away, I whisper, “C'mon, sunshine.”