

## CHAPTER

### I

The very first thing Margaret said when she sat down next to me on the bus Monday morning was that I looked terrible. “You have droopy eyebags and a pasty complexion. Absolutely no glow. What’s the matter?”

“I’m having a nervous breakdown,” I told her. “Our FAMILY MEETING! sign is up, and I have to wait until tonight to find out if I’m in trouble.”

“Of course you’re in trouble,” Margaret said. “Probably something really big. Bright pink blush and a sparkly eye shadow is what I recommend.”

This winter vacation, Margaret visited her father

in Hollywood, California. When she got back, I had to listen for three hundred hours to how great his new girlfriend was. “She’s the makeup artist for his commercials,” Margaret said all melty-voiced, as if *she* was the one who was in love with this Heather person.

“Someone who puts makeup on people isn’t an artist,” I informed Margaret. “My mother is an artist. Not her.”

“Heather is too an artist,” Margaret snorted. “And she’s been teaching me some of her professional techniques.” Then Margaret had blabbered on and on about advanced lip-gloss tips and the proper application of eyeliner until I thought I would die of bore-dumb.

Whenever Margaret talks about makeup, I feel exactly the way I felt when we took my grandparents to the airport so they could move to Florida: lonely. Even though Margaret isn’t going

anywhere, when she talks about makeup, I feel like I'm back at the airport again and she's getting on a plane for a long trip to somewhere without me.

"I don't need any blush!" I yelled, a little louder than I meant to. "I don't need any makeup at all! I just need to know what I'm in trouble about!"

Margaret rolled her eyes at me and then dug around in her pocketbook. She pulled out a pointy silver tube that looked dangerous, like a bullet.

"Margaret!" I gasped. "Are you putting on lipstick?"

Margaret smeared the lipstick on, pooched her lips out, and smucked them at me. "Yep," she said. *Smuck-smuck-smuck*. "So what? I'll take it off before we get there."



*“Mar! Ga! Ret!”* I cried. “You are *ten! Years! Old!*”

Margaret had had her tenth birthday while she was on that Hollywood vacation. Since then, she’d been acting like she was twenty-five or something. Sometimes I didn’t even recognize her. Plus, I didn’t get to go to a party for her.

Margaret smucked her shiny pink lips at me again. “Heather says I am very mature for my age.” She waved the lipstick tube in front of my face. “You want some?”

I tapped my lips. “Mouth germs,” I warned her. “I can feel them crawling around.”

Margaret yanked the lipstick back in horror. She spent the rest of the bus ride wiping everything in her pocketbook with hand sanitizer. Being a germ-maniac was about the only thing I recognized about the new Margaret.

I opened my backpack and pulled out my

IMPORTANT PAPERS folder and found a good surprise: the science fair project report Waylon and I had written was still in there! I'm supposed to keep it until the end of the project, and every day that it's still in my backpack feels like a miracle.

As I started reading over the report, I calmed down. This is because lately I really like science class.

I didn't always. In the beginning, science class was a big disappointment, let me tell you.

On the first day of third grade, Mrs. Resnick, the science teacher, had started talking about what a great year it was going to be.

I looked around the science room.

No monkeys with funnel hats and electrodes. No alien pods leaking green slime. No human heads sitting on platters under glass jars talking to each other, like I'd seen in a movie once, and don't bother telling my parents about it because I

was grounded for a week already and so was Uncle Frank, who brought me to the movie.

No smoking test tubes, no sizzling magnetic rays, no rocket launch controls. Just some posters on the walls and a bunch of tall tables with sinks, as if all you would do in a room like this was wash your hands. Margaret had told me she liked science class, and now I knew why: Margaret says “Let’s go wash our hands” the way other people say “Let’s go to a party and eat cake!”

“Does anyone have any questions?” Mrs. Resnick had asked that first day.

I sure did. I wanted to ask, “You call this a science room?” But instead, I just said, “Excuse me, I think there’s been a mistake,” in my most polite voice.

“A mistake?” Mrs. Resnick asked.

“Right,” I said. “I’m in the wrong science room.”

“The wrong science room?” she repeated.

I nodded. “I want the one with the invisibility chamber and mind-control buttons and mutant brains spattered on the ceiling. The one with the experiments.”

“I want that one, too,” Waylon said. I gave him a big smile.

“Oh, there are plenty of experiments going on here,” Mrs. Resnick said. “We’re going to have quite a year.”

Mrs. Resnick seemed nice, so I didn’t tell her the other bad news: that she had the wrong hair.

Scientists are supposed to have wild science-y hair—here is a picture of that: But hers was just kind of normal supermarket-y, television-mother-y kind of hair. Probably she was embarrassed about that.



Now, though, I like science class. Mrs. Resnick is a good teacher, even with her normal hair. I like our science fair project, and I like our rat, Eighteen. I like that I got Waylon for a partner. All the kids begged him to be their partner, because he's the scienciest kid in third grade. But he picked me, because I'm the only one who believes he's going to be a superhero when he grows up.

And today, I had an extra thing to like about science class: for forty whole minutes, I wouldn't have to think about our family meeting or Margaret's lipstick smucking.

"We're here," I said. "Wipe your mouth off, Margaret."

Margaret scowled, but she wiped off the lipstick and we went into school.

It was an extra-boring day, but finally it was time to line up to go to the science room. As soon as we got there, I saw that something was

wrong. I ran over to the rats' cages. "Eighteen's missing!" I cried.

I shook the trail mix we used as treats and called for him, while Waylon poked through the sawdust. "He's really missing, all right," Waylon announced.



Mrs. Resnick came over and frowned into the cage. “They were all here Friday when I left. Check through the bedding again—I’ll bet he’s just hiding.”

I feathered away the wood curls more carefully.

And then I saw. “Look,” I said. In the back corner, under the water bottle, a rat-belly-size hole had been chewed through the plastic floor.

Mrs. Resnick was really frowning now. “He’s probably been gone all weekend. Still, let’s search the room.”

We looked everywhere. We looked in the second graders’ volcano models. We plowed through the trays of seeds the fourth graders were germinating. We poked through the fifth graders’ crystal collections. We even looked in the paper-towel dispenser.

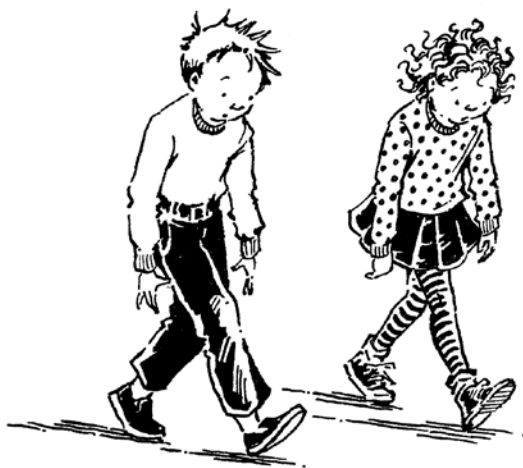
No Eighteen.

After a while, the other kids had to go back to

their rat-training, and only Waylon and I kept looking. When the bell rang, we still hadn't found him.

"Maybe he'll show up when I feed the other rats this afternoon," Mrs. Resnick said. "You two head back to your class now." Waylon and I said all right and went back to 3B. But it wasn't all right.

A little while ago, my kitten, Moisturizer, got lost in Boston. All the bad feelings I had when he was missing—worrying about him being scared,



or getting hurt, and about whether it was my fault—came back over me.

All day long, I worried about that little rat. I had to hear about a hundred “Clementine, pay attention!”s from my teacher, and every time, I *was* paying attention.

I was paying attention to Maria’s chunky boots that looked like tires on the bottom, and worrying about someone stomping on Eighteen. I was paying attention out the window to all that ice and snow and imagining how cold Eighteen would be if he’d gotten outside. When the janitor came down the hall, I was paying attention to his gigantic vacuum cleaner and thinking how he wouldn’t even notice if a little tiny white rat got sucked up inside. After that, I started wondering if our school had a trash compactor, and that got me so worried I almost gave myself a heart attack.

Finally, after three hundred hours, the school's-over bell rang. I got my stuff from the coatrack and asked Mr. D'Matz if I could go back to the science room.

He pointed to the clock. "Don't miss the bus."

The bell rings at two fifteen and the buses open their doors at two twenty and my bus is the second to leave, which is at two twenty-eight, so I had thirteen minutes. "I won't," I said. I set my inside clock for twelve minutes, because one had already been wasted talking to my teacher. My inside clock keeps perfect time, and so I am never late for anything. Okay, fine, I'm late a lot, but it's only because I forget to *set* my inside clock. But I was remembering now.

I ran down the hall even though the rule is no running in the hall, and I was there in fifty-one seconds.

I dumped my coat and stuff on top of the bookshelf and skidded over to the cage. "He didn't come back?" I asked.

"Who?" Mrs. Resnick asked back.



“Our rat, who’s missing,” I reminded her in a patient, kind voice, the voice I wish people would use with me if I forget something. “Didn’t he come back when you fed them?”

She said, “No, sorry.”

I sprinkled some trail mix outside his cage in case he came back, and then my inside clock said it was time to go. On the bus, I worried about Eighteen so much my head hurt.

