



# CHAPTER ONE

(present day)

Plum lip stain with a hint of metallic gloss. Yup. It's working nicely with my deep brown complexion and my metal-frame glasses. Only, under the bus shelter's fluorescent lighting, the shade looks . . . extra. Way glossier than I'm comfortable with for 6:30 a.m. at a headlights-streaked intersection. What if I see Gavin on the bus? He'll think I'm trying way too hard. It doesn't have to be *that* obvious that I want him to notice me. I dab my lips with a square I yanked from Mummy's Marie-Antoinette-looking tissue box before I left the house.

"Typical Simone, dulling her shine," shouts a familiar voice. I close out of the camera mirror and brace for the storm that is my cousin Gabby.

"I knew all this quiet wouldn't last long," I call out to Gabby, who is powering up the flat city street like it's a hill. She heaves out a breath cloud when she reaches the bus shelter. The few commuters trailing behind her arrive with far fewer theatrics.

Despite the March chill in the air, Gabby's black puffer coat is unzipped and sliding down one shoulder. Her navy-blue uniform skirt is identical to the one I have on, except hers is extra crinkled. An early riser Gabby is not. It takes all the tools in her bag—including a bangin' morning playlist and bacon-scented candles—to get the girl up and out the house.

"Hey," she says, louder than necessary, because her earbuds are no doubt on full blast. I give her a wave.

Gabby nods across the street at the bus picking up passengers headed to Newark. "Just imagine! That'll be your bus next year."

I purse my lips and give my cousin a side glance. "*Hmmph*, no, it won't," I protest, not willing to concede that I'll be commuting to the Rutgers Newark campus for my freshman year of college.

"So you've spoken to your parents about living on campus?" she asks, and then leans an ear toward me to catch my non-answer. My silence rings loud and clear. Gabby gives a shoulder-bounce chuckle and plugs her earbud back in.

"For your information, I'm planning on talking to them . . . soon," I mumble to myself. The first and only time I brought up my desire to live away from home for college, things didn't go over so well. Thankfully, the paramedics had been called off in time, and blood pressures went back to baseline. For now, I'm letting things breathe for a while before I mention it again. It's only been a few weeks—*er*, months. Okay, fine. It's been a year, but who's counting?

Mummy's old-fashioned like oatmeal. If you don't believe me, check my life—it's sealed in a boy-proof container, down to the no-dating-until-college rules and the all-girls Catholic high school I go to.

At my ripe old age of seventeen, I've never had a boyfriend. And the only time I've kissed a boy was during the Christmas play when I was fifteen. Technically, Mary and Joseph weren't scripted to kiss, but the choir boy was so moved by the Holy Spirit, he went for it. No one noticed, though. A woolly lamb scampered in the way at just the right moment. If I'd known that would be my only lip-lock so far, I would've used more tongue.

A New Jersey Transit bus pulls up, but it's not ours. *Why is the number 60 always the last to come?* I guess it's a "perk" of going to a tucked-away school most people in our neighborhood have never heard of. Just because Anne graduated from St. Clare Academy, I'm expected to, too. And I will, in just a few months. My mother convinced her kid sister—Gabby's mom—that Gabby should go here as well, and I'm grateful for that.

Pretending to be unbothered by the long wait, I lean against the bus shelter's plexiglass. Instead of making contact, though, I fall right through an empty frame! Status update: The plexiglass is missing! My butt meets the concrete and my legs hang over the low metal bar.

That's when it goes off like a firecracker: the cackle and pop of Gabby's unbridled laughter. She is the last person you want around when something embarrassing happens.

“Ohmygod, I’m done! Bye!” she screams, stomping away, and then jogging right back.

“Really?” I hoist myself to a standing position, right my glasses, and smooth down the strands of my puffy blowout. Thank God I’m wearing my New York Mets boy shorts under my skirt. But I’m sure the sight of my spindly long legs slung over the hollowed-out frame is forever etched in my fellow commuters’ minds.

“My bad,” Gabby says. The vein on her forehead gives away that she’s fighting another outburst. “I should’ve asked if you’re okay first.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, dusting off the back of my coat.

“Aw, come here, my clumsy cuz,” Gabby coos, walking over with her arms outstretched. I want to duck, but I don’t trust myself not to trip over my feet because I’m feeling unlucky. My ego’s too wounded to hug her back. My one solace is that Gavin wasn’t around to witness my literal downfall.

My face still feels tight with embarrassment moments later when we finally board the 60 bus. I follow Gabby absentmindedly and almost bump into her when she stops halfway to grip a pole. No more seats. I grab the pole and stare neck-brace rigid out the window. I get so lost in the passing city scenery that I almost miss it when Gavin boards the bus.

I hold my breath and watch as he makes his way down the aisle. His broad shoulders, intense eyes, and the glistening waves in his hair instantly make my heart *go beat-beat-beat all through the town*. Gavin looks over my head, scanning the back of the bus. Not

seeing any space there, he claims a standing spot. Right next to me.

I can't believe my sudden change in luck. As more commuters climb aboard and pile up behind Gavin, I mentally rehearse my intro.

Gavin peels off his backpack and rests it between his feet. He's wearing his Millwall Prep Lions jacket, which gives me an in. He may not be aware that I know he just started at Millwall this semester. His uniform and his bus stop have been dead giveaways. Plus, he seems to have a lot of friends—some of whom are loud talkers, which is how I learned his name. Thanks to his school jacket, it won't seem so creepy if I start a conversation with "Oh, cool—Millwall is our brother school." Maybe then he'll ask if I'm coming to the basketball team's house party tomorrow. (Answer: St. Clare's varsity basketball team is invited, so all the seniors plan to crash.) And then *bam* . . . love connection! Next stop: kissing.

Before I speak up, I let my neck go slack and do a tongue check for anything in my teeth.

"Step all the way in, people!" The bus driver is eagle-eyeing his ginormous rearview mirror like a detention monitor. "The sooner you make room, the sooner we can get going."

Gavin takes a step toward me, and we are now only inches apart. The dangling gold "G" pendant at the end of his necklace swings back into place.

I catch a wonderful whiff of coconut and argan oil, and recognize the hair product he must've used this morning. Does that mean he smells me, too?