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Chapter 1

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Wednesday, November 30

“Slow down,” Josie’s social studies teacher called as the entire class raced for the door. The final bell had just rung, and everyone was ready to leave the steamy classroom in Frost Ridge Middle School.

As the kids pushed through the door and out into the crowded hallway, Josie waited quietly at the back. She had somewhere else to be, too, but she’d rather wait a few minutes than risk getting trampled. But just then, Oscar Madison shoved past her, with Dev Gupta right behind him, his elbow smacking Josie’s nose. She rubbed her face as the boys flew out of the room, not even noticing.

Students were still streaming down the hallway when Josie finally made it out of the classroom. People were clustered in groups or in pairs, talking and laughing together. Josie stayed to the side of the hall and made her way to the sixth grade locker alcove. She packed up her stuff, put on her big blue

down jacket, and headed for the exit. There was a slight spring in her step by the time she finally pushed through the heavy metal doors of the school and out into the biting cold of the late November afternoon.

“I love your coat,” Aisha King called right behind Josie.

Josie turned automatically—but of course popular Aisha wasn’t talking to her. Josie wasn’t exactly setting the fashion scene on fire with her puffy coat. Aisha had been talking to Gabby Chavez, a Frost Ridge fashion icon with her sleek, glittery outfits that all the girls tried to imitate. Gabby was also smart and beautiful, with glowing bronze skin and silky black curls. But Josie thought the true key to Gabby’s popularity was the way she smiled at a person like she’d never met anyone more fascinating in her life. Gabby had once beamed at Josie like that, when Josie had picked up a pen Gabby had dropped, and that grin had lit up Josie’s whole day. Whatever it was, Gabby was a sixth grade celebrity, always surrounded by a group of adoring admirers. Pretty much the opposite of Josie.

But that was okay. Josie wasn’t into crowds, anyway. She shrugged it off and headed down the ice-crusting sidewalk, snowflakes landing softly on her cheeks as she walked. Frost Ridge was a small

town tucked into the side of a gently sloping mountain. The west side of town overlooked the valley below and the east side viewed the peaks of more impressive neighboring mountains. It didn't take long to walk from the school to Main Street, where stores and restaurants lined the wide sidewalk leading up to the big town square. Josie inhaled deeply as she passed Snickerdoodle's. The bakery always smelled like a delicious combination of chocolate, cinnamon, and fresh-baked bread. Josie debated stopping in for one of their signature treats, a rich butter cookie coated with sugar and cinnamon, but she was already running late. Josie was eager to get to Frost Ridge County Hospital, where she volunteered almost every day, performing short skits and songs for the sick kids staying on the pediatric ward.

But she had one stop to make on her way. She turned off Main Street onto Dandelion Drive. All the streets in town, except for Main Street, were named after flowers, which was kind of funny for a town in the mountains of northern New York, where gardens bloomed less than two months of the year.

Josie walked up the path to the small gray and burgundy house that she and her mom had lived in with her grandparents for the past five years. The

minute she opened the front door, she was tackled by an exuberant dog.

“I missed you, too, Clementine,” Josie cooed to her beloved pet, kneeling down so she could hug her. Clementine was a mix, but she was mostly Shiba Inu, with a tan coat, a creamy white belly, soft pointed ears, and a fluffy curlicue of a tail.

Clementine was so overcome at their reunion that she yipped and danced around for a moment before snuggling close and licking Josie on the chin. Josie scratched behind Clementine’s ears, the way her dog loved, and Clementine wriggled with contentment.

“You’d think we kept her locked in a closet all day,” Josie’s grandfather said as he made his way into the entry hall, leaning heavily on his cane.

“I know you spoil her when I’m gone,” Josie teased, standing up to give her grandfather a hug, too.

“It’s really coming down out there, isn’t it?” her grandfather asked, patting her back and then peering out the window next to the front door. The snow was falling thick and fast.

“Yeah, it doesn’t look like it’s going to stop,” Josie said.

“Make sure you wear a hat,” Josie’s grandmother said as she walked into the hallway.