

Chapter One

It's the first day of school. Jude doesn't answer when I call her down to breakfast. My heart seizes up briefly, but I manage to breathe through it. I call her one more time before I abandon my lumpy effort at pancakes and run upstairs. As I make my way down the hall, I try hard to convince myself that everything is fine. She's probably just playing music or something and can't hear me. I listen at her door. No music. I knock quietly. No response. I exhale to steady myself and push the

door open. I took the lock off her door a year ago, when she had a bad episode. Really bad. Which is why I get so panicky. I'm always wondering when it's going to happen again.

The first thing that hits me is the smell. People say teenage girls smell like sugar and spice and everything nice, but that's total bullshit. Jude smells as bad as a teenage boy. And to make matters worse, she tries to hide it by applying a toxic level of scented lotion to her body after she showers. It's truly awful.

Jude's room is dark. The floor is covered in a thick layer of clothes, magazines and crumpled paper. Not a good sign. I wade through the mess and pull up her blackout blinds, which are coated in a nasty layer of dust. How long has it been since I've been in here? She usually keeps the door closed and is pretty particular about her privacy, but I shouldn't have let it get this bad. I usually make weekly checks. But I've let it slide because I've been so busy with my summer job at Java World. Someone has to help Mom. She works hard, but there is never quite enough to cover the bills.

The light from the morning sun streams through the window, making all the dust I've kicked up way too visible. I unlock the window and throw it open. It doesn't help much.

I pick up one of the crumpled pieces of paper and open it up. It's a face, so scratched out that the original drawing is barely visible. Another bad sign. Jude only hates her art like this when she's starting to crash.

As I make my way to the bed, I move carefully, trying to avoid stepping on anything. The comforter is pulled so high I can't even see Jude's head. I sit down on the side of the bed and something crunches under me. I don't even bother checking to see what it is. Instead I pull back the covers to reveal my sister, a lump of arms and hair with no face.

She groans, low and long, and rolls over.

"Hey, Jude," I say quietly. It's our little family joke. My mom was a Beatles fanatic back in the day, so she named her daughters Penny and Jude. Kind of embarrassing when people make the connection. Luckily it doesn't happen that often. Most people our

age are clueless about music from older generations.

Jude groans again, this time more of a grunt.

“Fuck off, Penny Lane,” she says.

I’m used to her sass, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t sting. I reach out and touch her shoulder, give her a little shake. “First day of school, kiddo. I’m making pancakes.”

“Your pancakes suck,” she mutters.

I roll my eyes, which doesn’t matter because she can’t see me.

But she’s right. For some reason I have never been able to make good pancakes. I’m a master of all the other breakfast foods. Eggs, oatmeal, even omelets, but pancakes are my mortal enemy. They’re always lumpy or way too flat. I continue to do battle with them though. I’m determined. It’s kind of my thing.

“Seriously, Jude, tenth grade, first day,” I say.

Jude’s two years younger than me. I’m already worrying about what she’ll do if I decide to go to university. Mom works nights at the hospital as a nurse and sleeps all day, so who will wake Jude up

in the mornings? Cook her horrible pancakes? Most important, who will be there when she crashes?

“First day can live without me. I’m too tired.” She rolls over to face me but doesn’t move the hair out of her face.

I bend over to try to see her eyes through the mass of tangled brown.

“Then we have to up your meds,” I reply.

She pushes the hair out of her face finally and glares at me. She’s pale. Too pale. I try to keep my concern tucked away behind a relaxed mask. She can read me too well. I don’t want her to feel like something is wrong. That will probably just make things worse.

“I know it’s not ideal, but that’s what the doctor said,” I say. “Here.” I dig her first dose of the day out of my pocket and hand it to her. It’s part of my morning ritual—get Jude’s drugs, shower, eat breakfast, brush my teeth. “I’ll get you another pill to take with the pancakes.”

She groans again but swallows the pills, then opens her mouth wide to prove it.