

JESS, THE MESS



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Chapter One

Jess was a mess. She knew it was true, because that's what everyone told her. It's not that she looked so bad. Short auburn curls flip-flopped around her just-round-enough-but-not-too-round face and her eyes were what her grandmother once called "sunflower hazel". At five feet and two and one-quarter inches, Jessica was just the right height for a seventh grader, as far as could be told from all the seventh graders Jess had experienced so far. But she'd missed the first full month of school. Today was her first day at the new school. There might have been several other seventh graders, other than the two boys who sat with her in the principal's office.

The office door was opened just wide enough to let in a whiff of coffee and the sound of the school secretary's phone ringing. "I'm sorry," Jessica heard the secretary say, "Mr. Peters is tied up right now."

I wish he were tied up right now. Real tight. With a rope that smells like fish guts. Jessica smiles.

"Yes," the secretary continued. "Dealing with those kids from the bus incident. I'll have him come down to your room when he's through, although from the looks of it, it may take a while."

Rolling her eyes, Jessica sank deeper into the vinyl on her chair and pretended not to look at the two kids across from her. Principal Peters was writing so fast and so hard on the paper in front of him that Jessica almost thought she could see steam coming off his pen. *Burn it, baby. Write that referral as fast as you can. The faster you write, the faster I'm outta here.*

"Miss Burns." The principal said her name as if it were more of a burp than a title. "Miss Burns."

All right, I'll look at you. Jessica lowered her eyebrows and scowled toward Mr. Peters.

"Do you understand, Miss Burns, it is a privilege to ride the bus to school each day? That the little stunt like the one you pulled today not only wasn't funny, but quite dangerous?"

Dangerous? Since when is stinking like poop dangerous?

Wrinkling their noses, the boys in the office kept from making eye contact with Jess.

The principal's chair creaked as he leaned forward. "Do you see the trouble you've caused? These young men are here to learn, right? How are they supposed to learn if they're maliciously attacked on their way to school?"

Does he really expect me to answer all those questions? What a lame sermon. Of course, I see the trouble I've caused these two precious students. I created that trouble. I am trouble. I am Jess the mess. It's who I am.

Scraping his chair behind him, Mr. Peters stood and moved around his desk until he was just inches from Jessica's face.

Gee, he really needs to trim his nose hair.

“Look at these two students, Miss Burns.”

Jessica sighed and looked at the boys across from her. She couldn't keep her lips from smiling again. The boys' hair looked like it had been moussed with snott, but the odor from their heads warned that the mousse was something far worse than nose excrement.

One boy hadn't looked up since they'd all been brought to the office. Now he raised his eyes to meet Jessica's. With a start, Jessica realized he'd been crying. For a moment she felt what she imagined must be shame then her attention was taken by the other boy.

“We weren't doin' nothin', Mr. Peters. She just reached over her seat and smeared that, that, that...cow dung or whatever... all over us. She had it in her lunch bag.”

Actually, it was on my shoe. I didn't have anything for lunch today. If you call tripping me on my way to my seat nothing, then this school is gonna be just like my last one.

“You boys are dismissed. You may use the showers in the gym to remove that...uh... hair dressing. And you,” Mr. Peters growled, “Give me your home phone number. Now.”

Jessica felt her nostrils go in and out. *Here it comes.*

“I don't have a home phone number. We don't have a phone.” She fixed Mr. Peters with her steadiest look.

“Then where do your parents work? There must surely be a number there.”

Parents? I haven't seen my dad since I was four and you don't wanna meet my mom, mister. Jessica's third smile of the day slipped over her face.

“My mom doesn't work. She's kind of unemployed right now.”

Mr. Peters let out a frustrated “humpfth” and grabbed his notes from his desk. “You just wait right here.”

Jessica watched the last of the principal's suit swish around the office door before allowing herself to relax. If Mr. Peters had glanced back in the office, he might have seen the smallest hint of uncertainty trace itself down the side of Jessica's face, in the form of a single tear.

Chapter Two

Vinyl is vinyl, Jessica thought. She ran her hand over the red, plastic-like surface of her new seat outside the principal's office. Before they'd moved her outside the office, she'd heard most of the conversations among the office staff. Familiar words like "trouble maker" and "I can't believe a twelve-year-old child would..." just bored her, but when she'd heard them start to mention calling in the social worker, she started to get nervous.

Social workers had gotten involved at her last school, and that was part of why she was here. It had taken a lot of steady pleading with her mom to get her to move again, but Jessica knew if they didn't they were likely to be split up. She knew her mom drank too much, but wouldn't anybody in her situation? *I might do a lot of wrong things but I'm not so disloyal that I'll betray the one person in this world I've got.*

Jessica looked up at the sound of jangling car keys. "All right, Miss Burns, let's go have a talk with your mom." Mr. Peters rocked back and forth on his dress shoes as he continued to swing his keys.

"I'm not sure she's home." Jessica used what she hoped was her sweetest, most genuine voice.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

With a sigh, Jessica followed Mr. Peters out the large doors of Bentley Middle School and into the parking lot. The November sun was bright and Jessica shielded her eyes as she prepared to shield her thoughts. *You have to be careful with people. Sometimes they'll act all nice just to get information out of you. It isn't good to let your guard down.*

To her relief, the principal seemed more focused on following the Googled directions to Jessica's apartment than on talking with her. If it weren't for the too-classy classical music coming from Mr. Peters' radio, she could have almost enjoyed the ride.

Finally, they pulled up in front of the long row of apartment buildings Jessica currently called home. Jessica shifted in her bucket seat, and noticed the leather under her was much softer than the vinyl on the chairs at school. Its color was softer, too, more like something real than the loud reds and oranges used in the school decor. *More like something real. That fits. What Mr. Peters is about to see is more like something real, that's for sure.*

Chapter Three

Jessica didn't even realize she was holding her breath as Mr. Peters pressed the doorbell. She waited with him, her back to the sun's glare. That was one nice thing about living in the south. The skies stayed so clear and blue you almost always could count on sunshine somewhere.

Mr. Peters waited a few moments then pushed the doorbell again, twice. "Like I said, she may not be home," Jessica smiled innocently.

"Is your mom's car here?"

Jessica groaned inwardly. *He just had to ask that.* "No, sir."

"Why didn't you say so, then?" His voice rose with impatience.

Jessica lowered her eyes. "We don't have a car, Mr. Peters."

At her old school, there had been plenty of people whose parents didn't have cars. Most of the families got along fine riding the city buses. She should have known coming to a more rural area would mean most people had at least one car. If it weren't for her mom's old boyfriend, she had no idea how they'd have gotten here.

"Well then." Mr. Peters seemed to be doing some kind of mental figuring, his head cocked to one side now as he looked down at Jessica. "Where else do you think your mom could be?"

Well, she could be on the couch passed out again. She's usually pretty wasted after the vodka and orange juice she drinks for breakfast.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Peters, but if we could just go back to school then I could..."

"Hello, there." Jessica's mom appeared as if on cue from behind the apartment building.

Jessica's mouth hung open. Her mom looked normal. She was wearing blue jeans that at least looked like they'd been washed lately and the light sweater she wore seemed to point you toward the bright blue of her eyes. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail and she was smiling as if it were natural to find the principal of her daughter's school waiting for her on her front porch steps.

"I didn't know I had visitors," Jessica's mom continued. "I was out back hanging some laundry, it's such an unusually warm day. Did you bang on the door? The doorbell's broken but I'm sure Jess told you that."

Mr. Peters raised his eyebrows knowingly at Jessica, who quickly closed her gaping mouth and tried to look innocent.

"Ms. Burns, I'm the principal at Bentley Middle, and..."

"Well of course you are. I read your name in the student information papers that Jess had for school. Come in, won't you? And call me Julie, will you? 'Ms. Burns' sounds so old."

So Mom's not drinking today—yet. Go figure. The one day I get personally escorted by the principal to my house, my mom's actually coherent. Maybe there is a God. Maybe there's some hope. Maybe...

“Ms. Burns...”

“No, now, I told you, the name's Julie. May I get you something to drink?”

Jessica put her hand to her face to hide a laugh. *Now that's funny. If he only knew.*

“Sure, some water would be nice.” Mr. Peters actually seemed to be warming to her.

Good thing it's only water you want. The only other beverages we have around here I don't think you'd be allowed to drink on the job.

Jessica's mom returned from the kitchen, which was only a few steps away from the small living area, with a tall glass of ice water.

The ice cubes rattled together as Mr. Peters took the glass with thanks, cleared his throat and began. “Ms...Julie...It seems that your daughter has decided to get herself into trouble on her first day of school with us.”

Julie's hand seemed to float of its own volition to rest lightly on her throat, a look of motherly dismay spreading appropriately across her face.

That's it, Mom. Play the good mother. That surprised look'll do it every time.

“Now, there's no need to be alarmed. Though the matter is serious and will require a short-term suspension as a consequence, we do understand we're dealing with preadolescents here. This being her first day of school, we will be able to make certain allowances...”

Mr. Peters rambled on in educator-ese about serving the students' needs, while Jessica's mom listened with proper attention, understanding and surprise, as needed. She even lifted her eyebrows in shock as Mr. Peters euphemistically explained what had happened on the bus that morning.

Jessica's mom turned to her. “Now, Jess, you understand you can't be pulling stunts like this in the future. We have a certain amount of family pride here.”

Family pride? What do you know about family pride? I almost died with embarrassment when I found out Mr. Peters was bringing me home, since you're usually wasted or sick from being wasted. And now you talk about family pride.

“Yes, ma'am.” Jessica mumbled an apology to Mr. Peters, as her mother guided the principal to the door.

“If you have any more trouble, you just let me know. We'll take care of it,” Jessica's mom was reassuring Mr. Peters. “And thank you so much for taking time out of your busy, busy schedule for us.”

Jessica rolled her eyes and turned toward her room.

As Ms. Burns closed the door behind the now-appeased principal, she grunted in a more familiar voice, “Jessica Marie Burns. How could you do this to us?” Her whole body seemed to sag now, as if she'd used up all the strength she had to hold up appearances for

the last twenty minutes. Even her hair was sliding out of its neat ponytail as if rebelling against being controlled. “I need a drink.”

Jessica shut her bedroom door so she wouldn't have to hear the sound of her mom screwing the top off the liquor bottle. *No worries. The mom I know so well will soon be back.*

Chapter Four

After rearranging the pillows on her bed and looking through some of her favorite teen magazines, Jessica sighed and reached for her drawing tablet. When she was sketching, even though she often got in awkward positions, she could feel the tension leave her shoulders. She liked drawing pictures of her mom before—well, before her mother had started drinking. Jessica felt her hand slide against the smooth, cool surface of the paper as she drew simple, confident lines. She raised her pencil from the page and looked at the outline of a face she had created. She'd drawn this face a hundred times before but each time she drew it, something seemed to be missing.

Bump. Through the apartment's thin walls, she could hear her mother moving around in the living room. It sounded like she was talking to herself again. "I dunno why I shouddun' hava 'nuther lil drink," she could hear her mother slur. *Dang. She's drunk again.*

Moving her pencil with purpose now, Jessica made quick, angry marks on her paper where the face's eyes should have been. She drew the pencil back and smiled grimly at her drawing. In lieu of eyes, she had chosen liquor bottles that were pouring their contents down and across the face, the face's mouth stretched wide to catch each drop. In her neatest but what she hoped was her most sarcastic-looking cursive, Jessica wrote under her picture, "My Dear Mother".

Immediately feeling guilty, she tore the sheet from the sketch pad and wadded it into a tight ball before throwing it across the room. *I'd best go check on her. I haven't heard any noise from her in a while.*

Feeling the tension coming back into her shoulders, Jessica slid off her bed and headed the few steps around the corner and into the living room. Her mom was lying face down on the couch, one arm and one leg dangling off the edge. *I hate it when she passes out like that. She always looks as if she's dead.*

Jessica knelt next to the couch and listened until she heard the soft sounds of her mother's snores. *Ooooo-K, you're not dead, thank goodness. But your breath smells like a rotting corpse.* She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she pulled an empty liquor bottle from under her mother's shoulder. *No wonder she feels so lousy all the time. I'm sick just from smelling this stuff.*

With a tired sigh, she moved toward the kitchen to find something to eat. As she set the liquor bottle on the counter and pulled open cabinet doors to decide between mac 'n cheese or cereal, she suddenly froze. *It's my fault.*

Her arms lowered to the kitchen counter and she wagged her head from side to side. *If I hadn't gotten in that mess this morning at school, maybe Mom wouldn't be drunk right now. Maybe she was going to quit drinking for a change. She looked so good when the principal and I first got here. It's me, not her. Jess the Mess, you jerk. You're only getting what you deserve.*

Forehead creased with worry and hazel eyes watering, Jessica stifled a sob. She wasn't hungry any more. Besides, she thought she really didn't deserve to eat. She tiptoed into the living room, covered her mother with the wool afghan from the foot of the couch and pulled back a couple of blonde strands of hair that were saliva-stuck to her mom's cheek. Then she dropped to the hard gray carpet beside the couch, pulling her knees in tightly to her chest. She watched her mom breathe: in, out, in, out. *I'm here, Mom. I'm here.*

Chapter Five

Three days' suspension passed quickly. Jessica had had plenty of time to dread her return to the new school but because today was a Friday, she figured she could make it through one seven-hour stint at Bentley Middle before having time to regroup that weekend. Besides, sometimes it was nice being away from home—she could pretend her life was more like a 1950's television show than a showcase for “Drunks are Us.”

As the school bus hissed open its doors, Jessica tried to ignore the hoots and laughter coming from the back of the bus. She ground her teeth together, raised her chin and mounted the dusty black steps. Everyone on the bus was privy to what had happened the last time she had been a passenger...and Jessica knew she couldn't act intimidated.

Most of the kids in the front seats just smiled at her as she passed but she could already hear snorts from the middle and back like, “It's the poopie girl.” or “Does something stink in here?”

“Find a seat, please,” the bus driver said in a disinterested monotone.

Just as Jessica was thinking she would face the humiliation of “no seat syndrome,” a girl with wavy red hair, bright freckles and even brighter green eyes slid closer to the bus window and patted the seat beside her. “Sit here,” she smiled.

Is this a setup? Maybe she's a friend of the boys I gave the hair treatment to.

Jessica plopped down beside the girl, relieved but still somewhat wary. “Thanks.”

“No prob. My name's Anna, which is a palindrome. You know, it's the same thing backwards and forwards. Like Bob, or Mom, or...”

“Whatever.”

Anna smiled again. “No, ‘whatever’ wouldn't be a palindrome, ‘cause it's...”

Jessica opened her mouth to interrupt, but someone else beat her to it.

“Hey, Poop Girl. Got any new hairstyles for our boys today?” asked a heavy-set guy in the seat behind them. Hiking his thumb toward the seat across the aisle, he smirked, “‘Cause home boy here has been waitin' for ya' to come back.”

A glance sideways revealed that “home boy” was one of the guys she had smeared with the dog mess; he glared at her and nudged the guy to his right. “Yeah, looks like our ‘friend’ is back, Scotty.”

Ah, Scotty. Poop victim number two.

“Better watch where you step, girlie, ‘cause from now on you're rated PG, as in Poop Girl. You've gotta be careful with a rating like that. Right, Scotty?”

Scotty's lips were pressed together in a thin, straight line and his only reply was a sharp nod in the affirmative.

Suddenly Anna was up on one knee and leaning over Jessica to talk to the tormentors. “Your attitude stinks worse than your hair, Josh. Yours too, Scotty. I saw how you tripped her on Tuesday, so don't go acting like she started this whole thing.”

“Butt out, Red,” Josh threatened.

“Oh, that’s funny.” Anna laughed hysterically, rolling her eyes at Jessica. “You two had poop on your heads and now you’re telling me to ‘butt out’. Oochie. Maybe that dog doo is affecting the way you think.” Anna continued, chuckling as she slid back into her seat.

The bus’s air brakes let out a whoosh as they came to another stop. Josh and Scotty, unable to offer a comeback, just shook their heads and looked at each other. The heavysset guy behind Jessica and Anna guffawed, “She told you.”

Anna raised an eyebrow at him and he quickly quieted.

Is she the queen bee around here? It’s like they’re scared of her or at least she’s not scared of them. But why on earth is she defending me?

“Ah, thanks,” Jessica muttered, “But I can take care of myself.”

“Sure you can, Ssej. Get it? Ssej is ‘Jess’ backward. It’s just a thing I like to do with names sometimes, if someone’s name is worth the time, that is, and your name is definitely worth it. It gets boring just using the same old words, don’t ya think?” Anna crossed her arms, her thick red hair bobbing around her smile.

How does she talk that fast? “How do you know my name is Jess?”

“Boy, have you got a lot to learn. We’d have known your name just because you’re a new student but top that off with what you did on your first day and everybody in school knows who you are. It’s a small middle school world, Ssej. A new girl is News around here, especially one who gets suspended on her first day.” Anna’s voice wasn’t mocking or sarcastic, just factual.

The bus groaned to a stop in front of the school and Jessica chewed on her bottom lip. “Well, thanks for the seat and the nickname. Ssej is better than PG, I guess.”

“It’s more creative, that’s for sure. Did ya’ notice they could only come up with one thing to call ya’? It’s disappointing, really. They could have used ‘stinky student’, ‘doggie defecation’ or ‘new pew’, or maybe even...” Anna stopped with a laugh. “I’m not helping, am I?”

“No, you’re really not.” Jessica felt her face enjoy its first real smile of the day. “But thanks anyway, Anna.”

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