

CHAPTER 1

Danika's Purple Flurp



Tonight I'm going to win the Miss Teeny Pop Pageant. There's no easy way to explain that absurd thought except to say that I'm growing up in Marion, Ohio. It's the Popcorn Capital of the World, and life revolves around the annual Popcorn Festival.

"Good luck tonight, Teeny Pop!" mocked Chad Ferner, slamming his locker shut. Ferner was once the awkward boy I'd survived second grade square dancing with. He wasn't so awkward anymore with his wavy chestnut hair and deep blue eyes. We have never liked each other, though, since those totally embarrassing do-si-dos.

"Here she is . . ." he sang, waving his arms dramatically toward me to the tune of the Miss America theme song, ". . . she's Miss Teeny Pop!" Everyone in the hallway was laughing, and I couldn't decide if they were laughing at him or at me.



I glared really hard until I was sure that my dark-brown Asian eyes might possibly pop from their sockets. When Ferner didn't back off, neither did I. I leaned in to his face until I could smell the Nerds on his breath.

"Chillax, Da-neeka," Ferner said, mispronouncing my name on purpose. He always does that.



Then, as suddenly as he disrupted my day, he slipped silently away. I watched him walk down the hall and through the big red doors that led to the microcosmic world of the Rutherford B. Hayes Middle School cafeteria.

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I opened my locker and carefully placed my *Advanced Pre-Algebra* textbook to the far left of the top shelf, right next to *Biology for the Young Scholar*. Arranging my books in alphabetical order seemed only natural to me, but Mom says it's odd even if my IQ rivals that of Einstein. I knew he was really messy based on those famous pictures of him and his wacky hair. I didn't want to end up like that, so I alphabetize my books . . . and my nail polish.



Adjusting my bright yellow headband, I checked my look in the pink marabou-trimmed mirror hanging on the door of my locker. For a moment, I dreamed of what

my black-as-night hair would look like topped by the Teeny Pop crown.

It doesn't matter what Chad Ferner or anyone else thinks, I want to win that crown! I thought.

My mom entered me into my first Popcorn Festival pageant when I was six. That was the same year they found out just how smart I was, and Mom thought it would be good if she and Dad let me do something “frilly and superficial” to “balance me out.” Those were the actual words my dad used. I remember.

So, that year I dressed up in a golden yellow dress for the modeling competition and then, like a can of Jolly Green Giant peas for the commercial presentation. I sang, “Peas, say you’ll love me!” It doesn’t get much more frilly or superficial than that! I got first prize in my age group, as I have every single year since then. This is the first year I’m old enough to win the big title, Miss Teeny Pop, and I want it so badly!

After all, this year’s big prize is four front-row seats to the Alayna Rayne concert. She’s a totally fab singer who sells out concerts in minutes. Even my dad, who’s richer than Daddy Warbucks and would pay *anything*, hasn’t been able to get tickets. He’s tried five times. Alayna’s coming to

Cleveland in two weeks and I really want those tickets.

When I had decided that every hair was in place, I grabbed my hot pink and lime green Vera Bradley lunch bag and a brown sack out of my locker. I slammed the door and headed for the cafeteria. The brown sack had an extra-special dessert. Inside was a container filled with Mom's legendary Purple Flurp. It's a legend because it's the only food to ever win the Popcorn Festival blue ribbon that *didn't* have popcorn as an ingredient. It's *that* good!

"Hey, Laney," I said sitting down next to the most popular girl in sixth grade, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, genetically perfect Laney Douglas. She was wearing all pink, which she says is her "signature color."

"Hey," said Laney and her stuck-like-glue sidekick Riley Peterson. They always say hello in unison. If I didn't like them, it would honestly make me toss my cookies.

When I first stepped into the jungle of middle school, I quickly learned the first lesson of survival: you're not defined by who you are, but by who is sitting next to you at lunchtime. That week, Rachel, Chondra, Kiley, Abigail, and Kelsey—the other regulars who are seated with us

GO TO
secretkeepergirl.com
and type in the secret word
"Flurp" to get the recipe
for Purple Flurp!

today—took a vote led by Laney and Riley. They decided I could sit with them.

Our conversations never go any deeper than the pink clothes on Laney's back and the topic of boys. In a crunch, we talk about the food on our table.

"So, like, what exactly is *in* powdered soup?" asked Laney. She watched me pour the energy-boosting powder my mom had packed for me into a Thermos of hot water.

"Hmmm?" I said. "I dunno."

"Potato starch." I began reading the packet out loud. "Salt. Dried minced onion. Powdered pork?"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Laney. "Bad ending for that pig!"

We laughed much louder and longer than we should have. Why? Because we knew everyone in sixth grade was watching our table. As I fake-laughed, I caught the gaze of Katie Harding walking toward us. Our moms are practically best friends. I guess we used to be, too.

Katie was wearing a really cool T-shirt with a red heart on it over a striped long-sleeve shirt. I thought it looked really great. Apparently, Laney didn't think so.

"I wonder where she shops . . . UglyRUs?" Laney said almost loud enough for Katie to hear.

"I think it's UglyRHer!" whispered Riley.



The whole table laughed again really hard.

Keep walking, Katie! I pleaded in my head. I put my left hand up to my forehead like a visor and looked down.

Keep walking!

She took the clue and abruptly turned and walked to a table where she sat all by herself. She looked lonely.

I suddenly felt **sick**.



"Hey, Da-neeka," teased a guy's voice from behind me. I was going to ignore it, but when I felt someone flick my hair, I looked back. Ferner!

"Hey," I responded coolly. He moved on.

"He likes you," whispered Laney, leaning across the table and into me.

My eyes grew wide in fear.

"You like *him*," she accused.

"No way!" I said. Dad would kill me if I got boy crazy. I might as well start carving the tombstone.

"We just danced together . . ." I started to explain about square dancing in second grade and hating it, but Laney didn't let me finish.

"You danced together," she teased. "Hey girls! Danika and Ferner danced together!"

The laughter erupted even more loudly this time, drawing the attention of the world's most bizarre lunch lady, Mrs. Hefty. She lives up to her name quite easily. I'm not sure what body mass index really is, but I think Mrs. Hefty has it. The seams on her white uniform work really hard to hold everything in place.

"What's going on over here?" she asked as she waddled over to our table.

No one answered her.

"Was that joyful laughter?" she asked. She didn't stop for an answer, but started talking at a breakneck pace like she always does when she gives her infamous Cafeteria Life Lessons. "There is joyful laughter. Yes. That is laughing *with* people, and then there's another kind. That's when you laugh *at* people. We can't have any of that in my cafeteria. Can we? No, no, no. No we can't!"

She drew out that last word and when she cut it off with a sharp "t," she sprayed enough spittle from her wet lips to shine my dad's red sports car.

After a moment of staring at us to make her point, her cheeks burst into red bulbs as she smiled. Then she waddled off.



Laney quickly scrawled something on a scrap of paper and passed it to me. In curly handwriting it said . . .

ìMrs. Hefty is a big _____.î

Just as I read it and imagined what the blank would say, I felt the chill of a shadow looming over me. Mrs. Hefty was back.



"Well, Ms. McAllister, let me see that note there!" She paused to read it. "Oh, troublesome! Why don't you finish that sentence for me?"

14 "But, I-I d-didn't write it," I stammered.

"I didn't ask if you wrote it," cooed Mrs. Hefty as she tried her best to be angry. She shook the note in her hand for effect. "I asked you to finish it."



"But!" I pleaded.

She just stared down at me.



"Ummm . . . well . . . Mrs. Hefty is a big . . ." I stalled for time drawing my answer out, then I suddenly blurted out a terrible, no-good word . . .

" . . . meanie?" I said it more as a question.

Mrs. Hefty's smiling face dropped. Her big, rosy cheeks sagged into puffy wrinkles. *Uh, oh*, I thought.

"Ms. McAllister, your lunch period is over," she announced as happily as ever. "Let's go! You and I have an appointment with Principal Butter. Up you go. This way. Follow me."

Fine! I thought. *I'll go, but I'm taking my mom's Purple Flurp with me!*

I grabbed the little brown sack and marched off.

"Hold it!" I heard Mrs. Hefty say from behind me. "What's in *that* bag, Ms. McAllister?"

I turned to look at her. Her chubby finger was aimed right at my prized sack of **Purple Flurp**.

"Is that *food*?" she prodded. "Ms. McAllister, what does *that* sign say?" She used her finger to emphasize the big sign above the red doors. I looked up to read it: *Positively No Food Outside the Cafeteria!*

Suddenly, a surge of anger flashed through every inch of me, turning my normally dainty, girlish twelve-year-old self into a hulk of fury. I placed my precious brown bag into my right hand. I wound my arm up like I'd seen softball pitchers do and aimed for the garbage can two feet to the left of Mrs. Hefty. I threw the bag like a slow-pitch softball with a long rainbow arc.

My Purple Flurp never made it to the garbage can.



It managed to find its way out of the brown bag. As it spiraled through the air in what seemed like slow-mo, the lid of the container disconnected like the launching sequence of a space rocket. In that moment, its purple-gooey contents were unleashed into space.

Then my Purple Flurp-pitch nailed Mrs. Hefty in the left temple.

Apparently, I'll never be a softball player.



Danika's Detention Disorder

As I stood in Principal Butter's office, a big blob of purple goo dripped from Mrs. Hefty's face. She'd already used her chubby little fingers to squeegee the Purple Flurp from her eyes, but the rest stayed right where it had landed as she told the sad tale of what had happened. Principal Butter looked at her in disbelief while the big clock on the wall seemed to tick its disapproval.

"Danika," asked a dazed Principal Butter, "what on earth were you thinking?"

I wanted to tell them both about the number one rule for survival in middle school: you're not defined by who you are, but by who you sit by at lunchtime.

I wanted to tell them how **lonely** Katie Harding looked at lunch.

I wanted to tell them that Laney Douglas embarrassed me when she accused me of liking Ferner.



I wanted to tell them that the other girls were laughing at me for dancing with him, but they didn't understand it was just second grade square dancing and we *hated* it.



Most important, I wanted to tell them that I was aiming for the garbage can, *not* Mrs. Hefty's left temple.

Instead, I just bit my lip to fight off tears.



"Well," said Principal Butter in a quiet voice, "we don't actually have a policy for . . ." He paused and cleared his throat. "Well, for . . . throwing a sack at lunch aides. Let me take a moment to think."

The clock ticked even more loudly.



Mrs. Hefty's face dropped another glob of Purple Flurp onto the floor.



Principal Butter sat down in his big wooden chair. He folded his hands together and just stared at a leaky spot in the ceiling for like five minutes.



"Danika," he finally said with an air of disappointment. "I'm afraid I have some bad news. First, I think I have no choice but to give you a three-day after-school detention."

He pulled a pad of pink slips from his drawer, scribbled on the top one, ripped it off, and handed it to me.

"You'll report Wednesday," he said.

I nodded softly and put my head down.



"Second," he said, "I'm sure you are aware that Mrs. Butter is the chairwoman of the Teeny Pop Pageant. This city has a long history of upstanding young women winning that pageant."

Upstanding? I thought. *What on earth does that mean?* I don't think Principal Butter is that old, but sometimes it seems like he might be a ninety-year-old man who's been locked in a box for the past sixty years. Most of his vocabulary is made up of words only dead people, like Abraham Lincoln, would have used.

"Danika," he said, "I'm afraid I'll have to report this unusual occurrence to my wife so she and the committee can make a decision about your participation."

My head jerked up. My long black hair shook loose from my headband.

"But . . ." I pleaded. "You can't . . . I . . ."

I couldn't hold the tears back anymore. Without even asking, I darted for the bathroom.

Changing classes was miserable for the rest of the afternoon. I was suddenly the most talked about girl in school, a fact that I was pretty sure Laney Douglas would not like one little bit. Everyone looked my way and whispered when I walked by. Usually they were smiling. Often



they'd give me two thumbs-up. A few even gave me a shout out.

"Way to go, McAllister!" hooted Trevor Kenworth, the school's biggest loudmouth.

I felt like my head might explode. Was it actually possible that doing something *bad* was actually . . . well, uh . . . *good*?



When I got to my locker between sixth and seventh periods, I ran into Ferner talking to some new girl with a hairdo I can only describe as a mini-'fro.

"... the Popcorn Capital," Ferner said to the new girl as he plopped his books into his locker. "Ask Miss Teeny Pop to tell you about it," he said in his mock-tone, slamming his locker shut. He tugged on my hair when he walked past me.

"Nice pitch, Teeny Pop!" he taunted.

Ugh!



"Walk with me," I pleaded to the girl, closing my locker door. I wanted to get out of the hall as fast as I could and into my classroom. "OK. Basically, we live and breathe popcorn here. It all revolves around the Popcorn Festival, which is this weekend."



"Cool!" said the girl, whose beautiful chocolate skin seemed to shimmer.



"This weekend, the air in Marion will smell like fresh buttery popcorn," I said. "When I say we breathe it, I mean it!"

I told her everything I could squeeze in between my locker and my Honors Math classroom. "Since as long as I can remember, my mom has been entering the Popcorn Cooking Contest and winning." I began quickening my pace to get it all in. "Two years ago she took first place for her Purple Flurp."

"Purple Flurp? Isn't that the stuff the girl at lunch . . ."

I quickly interrupted her. "You should totally come out to the Festival this weekend!" I told her about Sky Pop, the fireworks finale that my dad always donated each year.

"He does fireworks all over the world," I said proudly.

I never even got to tell her about the Teeny Pop pageant, but we'd arrived at my class.

"Well, umm . . . what's your name?" I asked.

"You-zee." She pronounced her name carefully.

"Right," I said, wondering what kind of name that was.

"Well, welcome to Rutherford B. Hayes."

"Thanks! Well, I guess I'll see you later," said Yuzi, and she walked off. I thought to myself that she was kind of cool.



"Yoo-hoo, Danika!" I heard Laney's voice calling. "Gotta go, Mom!" I looked back to see her snapping her cell phone closed, even though we're not allowed to use them in school.

She walked toward me with her messenger bag on one arm and my lunch bag in her other hand. Of course Riley was with her.

"You're not actually talking to that *African* girl," whispered Riley. Riley and Laney had a bad habit of saying even the most factual things in the meanest way!



"She's from Africa?" I asked, looking toward Yuzi, who was thankfully well on her way down the hall.

24 "Yes, and she smells like it," added Laney, wrinkling her nose. She handed me my lunch sack.



She didn't smell bad! I thought, but didn't have the nerve to say it. In fact, I think she was wearing some sort of berry body splash. She smelled great, actually! It would be a week before I learned that Yuzi wasn't even actually from Africa. She was born in **Texas**.



"Good luck at the pageant tonight," said Laney with a strange tone in her voice.

"But," protested Riley, "I thought you just said . . ."

Whatever Riley had wanted to say, Laney's icy glare stopped her in mid-sentence.

The two turned and walked away. Their little miniskirts swayed back and forth with major attitude.

The big yellow school bus bounced me the whole way home. I hoped that the shaking would help my little brainiac head find a creative way to tell my mom and dad about detention. When I finally arrived, I still didn't know what to say, and the ginormous mansion that everyone in town called McAllister Manor seemed big and frightening rather than warm and welcoming like usual. I reluctantly stepped toward the tall white marble columns that framed the two massive oak doors.

Fear evaporated completely when I pushed into the parlor, and my furry chocolate Labradoodle, Puddles, greeted me with a thumping tail. I patted him on the head and buried my face in his fluffy fur, squeezing his ears.

Feeling totally forgiven, if only by a four-legged creature, I headed straight for the kitchen. I was starved!

My mom was at the kitchen counter chopping up a tomato, but her eyes were red and puffy like they would be if she was carving up an onion. I could tell she'd been crying.





Nai Nai, my grandmother, was also there. She's not my real grandmother. She had been my foster mom when I was in the orphanage system in China eight years ago. Mom and Dad practically adopted her when they came to adopt me on my fourth birthday. They insisted she come with me. Since my dad buys lots of fireworks from companies in China, he had no trouble getting her a visa to come live with us.



Nai Nai was stirring a pot of chicken broth and was about to crack an egg into a bowl.

Oh no, I thought. Egg drop soup! This can't be good.

My grandmother thinks all of life's problems can be solved by a bowl of egg drop soup. She and Mom must have already heard about the Purple Flurp thing and detention.

"What's wrong, Mom?" I dared to ask.

"Oh, Danika," she said with a tenderness in her eyes. "Come here, baby."



She got up from the table and wrapped her arms around me for the longest time. That was certainly not the reaction I expected.

"I just spoke to Mrs. Butter," said Mom. "The Miss Teeny Pop committee heard about what happened at

school. They think it would be better if you didn't compete tonight."

Dropping my bag full of books, I plopped down at the kitchen table and burst into tears.

"Eat soup," said Nai Nai suddenly, shoving a bowl in front of me and one in front of my mom. We just kept crying.

"*Eat* soup," insisted Nai Nai. "Soup make better." Nai Nai took my chin in her hands and made me look into her eyes. "I plllromise!"

Suddenly my tears turned into giggles. Nai Nai knew she could always make me laugh when she tried to say "promise."

Grabbing the spoon, I began to process the worst news **ever**.

"Mom," I said as she reached for her spoon to join me, "none of the routines we worked out will work with an odd number of contestants. They need ten of us."

Mom took my hand and looked me right in the eyes. "Danika, there's something else. The judges have asked Laney Douglas to take your place."

I guess who you sit with at lunch doesn't really mean that much after all.

