

C H A P      E R . 1

“OH NO!” ELLIE SAID. SHE GRABBED MY ARM AND dragged me toward the huge magnolia tree. “Come on, Bitsy, we’ve got to hide!”

I yanked my arm from my friend. “What?”

“Shhh! He’ll hear you.”

We reached the ivy-covered tree, and Ellie crouched down, making her eleven-year-old body as tiny as possible. “Did he see us?”

I knelt beside her and pulled back a branch of waxy green leaves. “You mean that skinny kid with the spiked hair? The one over there by the cemetery?” I twisted the gold “B” hanging from my necklace.

“Yeah.” Ellie nodded, a stray lock of blonde hair falling in her face.

“I don’t think he saw us,” I said, “but so what if he did?”

She stared past me and barely whispered, “That’s Ernie.”

I took a second look. “Do you mean—”

“Yep, he’s the one. The male half of the demon duo. Believe me, you don’t want to mess with him.”

I have to admit, when Ellie and her brother, Garrett, first warned me about Ernie Van Tache, I was a little nervous. After all, he was the neighborhood bully. And his twin sister, Bernie, didn’t sound much better.

But now that I had seen him, he didn’t look so tough. I stood, brushed off my knees, and wrapped a brown curl around my ear.

Ellie frowned. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to show him I’m not scared of him. I’ve heard that’s the best way to deal with a bully.”

“Are you crazy?” Ellie whispered. She grabbed my shirt. “Get down.”

By now, Ernie was only a few steps away. I snatched my shirttail back from Ellie. She hunched over, buried her head in her knees, and hugged her arms around her legs.

I straightened my shoulders to full height, stuffed my hands in my pockets, and confidently stepped out from behind the tree. “Hi,” I said, real nice-like.

Ernie jumped back and his mouth dropped open. He was surprised. *Good!* I smiled real big.

He didn’t say anything. He just studied me, first looking down at my small feet and then up to the top of my head. After a second, his lips curled together and he smirked.

I'd seen that kind of look a bunch of times. Like a lot of other people, he thought I was only a wimpy little girl. He thought he had nothing to fear from me. *Well, he'd better think again.*

I might be short for a twelve-year-old, but everybody knows what they say about small packages. Obviously, Ernie didn't know he was dealing with dynamite.

He crossed his arms over his skinny chest.

I took my hands out of my pockets.

His lips curled again. "Did you say something to me, squirt?"

Ellie whimpered, but I just bit my tongue. Oh, I could think of all kinds of smart-mouth things to say back to him, but I decided this was a good time to try out my new Bible verse. It's in Romans and it says, *As far as it depends on me, I will live at peace with everyone . . .* or something like that.

Sure, I'd rather tell him off, but I really wanted to do the right thing, for once. So I smiled. "Yeah, I said 'hi.' I just wanted to meet you, that's all."

He scrunched his eyebrows. "You what?"

I took in a deep breath and smiled again. I could tell my kindness was starting to work on him. "I just wanted to meet you. I'm staying here on Amelia Island this week with Garrett and Ellie. We're best friends, you know."

"Best friends, huh?"

"Uh-huh. I'm from South Carolina, where they used to live."

“Then how about giving your best friends a message for me.”

*Hey, this is going pretty good,* I thought. “Sure,” I said.

Ellie pulled on my shirt and whispered, “Forget it, Bitsy. Let’s go!” But I jerked back without even looking at her.

Ernie squinted his hazel eyes until they were tiny slits. “Tell Smelly-Jelly-Belly-Ellie and Garrett-Carrot to keep out of my way, and I might let them live.” He crossed his arms even tighter and smirked again.

I glowered back at the bully. “What?”

“You heard me. Hey, what’s your name, squirt?”

I took a small step toward him, peered up at his dirty face, and put my hands on my hips. “Bitsy.”

“Oh, as in Betsy Wetsy?”

This time I took a giant step right to him, stretched to my tiptoes, and glared up into his beady eyes. “It’s Bitsy. B-I-T-S-Y. Now, you take that back.”

“Make me, squirt.” That’s when he pushed me.

I reached up and pushed him back. So much for being nice.

Ernie lost his footing and fell against the big magnolia tree. Before I knew what was happening, he was back on his feet. He grabbed me and threw me down. My elbows and knees scraped the ground, and my right cheek hit against a rock as I landed, hard.

“Bitsy, watch out!” Ellie yelled.

Ernie leaped toward me.

Ellie took off running.

I rolled out of his way at the last second, flipped over, and jumped onto his back. My bloody knees pressed against his white T-shirt as I tried to grab his arms. But he was too strong, and I wasn't heavy enough to keep him down. I tried to hold on to his bloody shirt as he struggled up on all fours, but I lost my balance and fell face-first to the ground. I didn't stay down long. In one continuous motion, I spit the black dirt out of my mouth, jumped to my feet, and put up my fists.

Now that I've had time to think back on it, it was a pretty dumb thing to do. The problem is, I have a hard time admitting when I'm out of my league. And I was definitely out of my league on this one.

Determined not to back down, I kept my dirty fists in the air as I gasped for breath, my eyes locked with his. He glared back at me, huffing and puffing, holding up his own bloody fists. But before either one of us could make the next move, I heard the sound of running feet slapping the pavement. The kids began yelling before they reached us.

"Ernie! You stop right this very minute, or I'm telling Aunt Myrna!"

*Grief. This must be Bernie*, I thought.

"Bitsy!" Garrett yelled.

Ernie and I both held our positions and continued the stare-down. Within seconds, Bernie jumped

between us, facing her brother. Then she whispered to him through clenched teeth, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Garrett grabbed my shirt and dragged me back to the tree. “Are you crazy? Don’t you know who that is?”

I kept my fists up and faced Garrett.

He gasped. “Bitsy, you’re bleeding.”

Ellie ran up to us, saw the blood, and screamed at Ernie, “Look what you did to my best friend, you . . . you . . . bully! I’m telling my mom!” She took off back toward the house.

Bernie shoved her twin brother ahead of her. “Now, you get on home and clean yourself up before Aunt Myrna gets there. She’s not going to be happy when she sees you looking like this.”

As Ernie approached the tree, he slowed and then stopped, glaring at me again. I held my breath and didn’t blink, still keeping my fists up. My arms felt like they were going to fall off, but I didn’t move a muscle. It seemed to take forever before he turned and headed toward the sidewalk.

Bernie stopped in front of me, her light brown hair dancing around her face. “Not too smart, are you?” she said.

I kept my mouth shut.

Once they got past us, I dropped my fists and started breathing again. “Well,” I sputtered, “that wasn’t too bad.”

“How can you say that?” Garrett asked. “Look at you.”

I inspected the damage. My arms were dirty, but it was my elbows that were screaming in pain. I tried to wipe away the blood, but it just smeared into the black dirt covering my arms. Then I saw my knees. Both were scraped and bleeding, but at least they didn’t hurt very much. “Well,” I said, “it could have been worse.”

“Sure. It could have been a *lot* worse,” Garrett said. “You could have been killed! What were you thinking?”

“For your information, I didn’t start it. He did. Besides, he didn’t look all that strong.” I shuffled my feet around in the powdery black dirt. “I thought I could handle him.”

“Oh, you handled him all right. Wait till you get a look at your face.”

“My face?” Until that very moment, I hadn’t even noticed the stinging pain. But once I did, I knew things were pretty bad. Not only did my forehead feel like somebody had slid into home plate on it, but my nose was already swelling, and my right cheek was keeping rhythm with my heart. “Grief,” I muttered.

Garrett took my arm, and I limped toward the sidewalk.