

# Chapter One



**O**f all the punishments my parents could have chosen, I can't believe they went with this one.

"Riley," Mom says from the driver's seat of our SUV, "I don't want to see you sulking today. You brought this on yourself, and part of the agreement is that you're going to have a good attitude."

I sink farther into my seat, the memory of myself and my best friend, Hoshiko, in these very seats still strong in my mind. Only a few days ago we were blasting the original Broadway cast recording of *Waitress*, laughing and debating whether the actors would come out for autographs after the show. And now ...

"Are you sure we can't rethink this, Mom?"

"No." She glances at me and back at the road. "I still don't think you're understanding what a dangerous decision you made Friday

night. How are your father and I supposed to trust you at home alone after this?"

Okay, it wasn't the *best* decision to take Mom's car without her permission while she was out of town on business. And yes, I drove multiple hours on the highway at night to get to Columbus, with Hoshiko ... and without a driver's license. But we didn't get pulled over or get in an accident! In fact, you could argue that I should've driven faster because then I would've beaten Mom home and I wouldn't be getting this lecture right now. I don't think I'm going to use that argument on her any time soon, though.

"But working at Dad's *store*?" I whisper.

She presses her lips together like she wants to sympathize but is fighting it. "Your father suggested you spend the afternoons with him since I'm too busy at work to be home after school with you. It's not my fault he's so attached to this store of his."

The tinge of bitterness when she mentions Dad's store only adds to my frustration. Mom has never liked the store. It was one of the main reasons for their divorce, and I've always been firmly on Mom's side about the whole thing. It never even occurred to me that she'd agree to have me work there as a punishment. I really figured Mom would understand about my love for musical theater outweighing my logical decision-making (and state driving laws). Where Sara Bareilles is concerned, there is no line I'm unwilling to cross.

I'm about to argue more when she pulls into the parking lot. We both sit for a second, taking in the store. It's not a particularly pleasant sight, despite the blue skies and sunny September weather. His store is in a run-down shopping plaza in Scottsville, my rural Ohio hometown, which has more than its fair share of run-down plazas. Quite a few of the other storefronts here are empty, though there is a local pizza place next door, and some of the letters have fallen off the signage. It's not inspiring me to be in a better mood.

"Your father's waiting," she says.

I haven't been in this parking lot since we drove by five years ago when Dad first scouted the location and they were still married. A dark, sinking feeling falls over me as my feet hit the concrete.

"Shannon." Dad nods to her as she steps onto the sidewalk.

She nods back, though she keeps more of a distance than is strictly necessary. “Hey, Joel.”

They couldn’t be more different. Mom is as stylish as ever, with her blond hair pulled back in a low bun, wearing a blouse, wide-legged trousers, and heels that are too high for most people to pull off. Dad, on the other hand, has on ill-fitting jeans and a T-shirt with Deadpool riding a unicorn. I have no idea what brought them together to begin with, but it certainly wasn’t a similarity in looks—or interests either.

“And how’s my pumpkin?” Dad asks, his big smile reserved for me.

Hesitantly, I walk over and give him a hug. “Hey, Dad.”

“Ready for your first day as the newest employee at Sword and Board Games?”

He grins broadly at the idea, as if I’m joining him for summer camp instead of spending the next eight weeks working here as “probation,” grounded from extracurriculars and friends. I can only grimace and stare at the cracked concrete sidewalk.

“Sure you’re up for this?” Mom asks Dad, and juts her chin at me like I’m a convicted criminal ready to dig my way out of prison with a rusty spoon.

“I’ve been trying to get Riley to come here for years. I was hoping it wouldn’t take a rap sheet to make it happen, but I’ll take what I can get.”

I groan. “Okay, for the last time, I didn’t *steal* Mom’s car! I just ... borrowed it for one evening. It was more like joyriding, not grand theft auto or something.”

“Are you certain about that?” Dad asks with a raised eyebrow.

I am, actually. Hoshiko Googled it once we were on the highway and headed for the show.

“Well, you won’t be doing any joyriding for the next two months, young lady,” Mom says with a shake of her head. “Or having much *joy* at all.”

“I’m choosing to think of this as a twisted type of blessing,” Dad says, careful to look at me rather than at Mom. They almost never make eye contact. “I get to spend quality time with my daughter, and you can broaden your interests while you’re here.”

I sigh and hunch my shoulders. Half of me wants to kneel on this sidewalk next to the discarded napkins and cigarette butts and beg

them to rethink this, but I bite my tongue. The other, rational half knows my punishment could've been worse. But the thing is, I don't want to spend more time with Dad, and I don't want to work at his game store. For the past five years I've spent every other weekend at his apartment—watching TV, eating frozen pizza, and barely talking—and that's all the bonding time I'm up for. He made his priorities known when he chose this store over Mom and me. He shouldn't be allowed to have his cake and eat it too. But it's clear that the time for debating this is over.

“Well ...” Mom rocks back on her heels. “Have a good first shift. I'll be back at nine to pick you up.”

I wave goodbye and try to keep a neutral expression as I follow Dad to the entrance. In the grand scheme of things, eight weeks is nothing. A blip in time. And luckily, preparations for our high school's annual spring musical won't start until late fall, so—if I'm on my best behavior and win back their trust these next few months—I should be ready to earn my place as the show's student director before Starbucks stops selling PSLs.

“Here we are!” Dad says loudly, making me jump.

I peek over his shoulder. The store is dim and quiet, though it's bigger than I thought it would be. It kind of looks like a hole-in-the-wall from the outside, but the interior is actually spacious ... or it would be if it wasn't absolutely crammed with stuff. There's a long checkout counter to the left that's up on a platform, maybe so the employees can see the entire floor. The rest of the space is filled with wooden shelving units. They don't look professional, so maybe Dad built them himself. I vaguely recognize some of the games, like Warhammer, from Dad's apartment. There are tons of D&D manuals and figurines, boxes of Pokémon and Magic cards, and displays of brushes and paints in every color for the tabletop game models Dad loves to collect.

I try to conjure a smile on my face, but I'm struggling. For years, Dad's been asking me to come to this store. He's obsessed with gaming. Board games, role-playing games, video games, it doesn't matter. I don't mind a round of Monopoly during the holidays, but that's about as far as my interest goes. Over the years, it's led to lots of frustration and disappointment for both him and me.

Dad walks me through the store, pointing to all the products and telling me a bit about each. I'm dizzy from it. How am I supposed to learn all this stuff? What if someone comes in asking me for a board game? He doesn't exactly sell Candy Land here.

"Hey, Joel? Which of these would you recommend for a twelve-year-old?" calls a skinny man in his late twenties from across the store. "Forbidden Island or Ticket to Ride?" He holds up two board games I've never seen before and gestures for my dad to join him and a middle-aged woman who stands next to him. A little boy, probably no older than five, is with her. The woman looks as bewildered by the shelves as I do.

"Just a sec, Riley," Dad says, and walks over. I shove my hands in my pockets and follow behind. "Well, Forbidden Island is great if you like cooperative play, but if you're looking for something more competitive, I'd recommend the other." The woman nods, but I recognize that expression. It's the same one I make when Dad spouts off facts about 40K armies.

"Um, what do you mean by *cooperative*?" she asks.

Dad and the younger man share the slightest of looks before Dad launches into an explanation. In her concentration, she's let go of her son's hand and he wanders away. I take a few steps in his direction. There's merchandise precariously stacked on the shelves, and a little kid could do a lot of damage very quickly. I'm not interested in reshelving on my first day here.

"Pikachu!" he cries, and grabs a box of cards sitting on the checkout counter.

I step up to him, not sure what I'm supposed to do but knowing that I need to do something. He stares at me. "You're bright."

I look down at myself. Today's OOTD isn't even one of my bolder styles—I was mostly going for comfort after a rough few days. I'm wearing orange jeans with a cobalt-blue ruffled shirt, chunky jewelry, and my favorite purple checkerboard Vans. I know my style isn't like most people's, but I decided long ago that I want to wear clothes others will notice. No black, beige, tan, or navy for me. I don't like blending in.

"Well, thank you." I point at the cards. "Do you play Pokémon?"

"No, but I watch the cartoon."

I smile and nod. I did too when I was younger. You don't grow up as the daughter of a serious gamer without being introduced to a lot of IPs.

"My favorite was always Jigglypuff."

He squints at me. "What's Jigglypuff?"

I feign shock. "Only the cutest Pokémon ever! It's pink and round and loves to sing, but whenever it does, it puts people to sleep. And then it gets grumpy and puffs up its cheeks like this." I puff out my cheeks like I'm a squirrel with too many nuts in my mouth. Then I hit my cheeks with my hands so all the air blows out. I smile to myself, remembering how I would do that with Dad when I was little. Those were better times between us.

The little boy giggles and pulls my attention back. "You're making that up."

I'm really not, but there's no time to argue because he's already wandering off again. I remember a candy bowl I saw behind the counter.

"Do you want a lollipop?"

His eyes shine. "Um, yeah!"

"Excuse me, is it okay if he gets a sucker?" I call to his mom.

She nods thankfully. "That would be great."

I lead him over to the checkout counter to grab the candy bowl but jump when someone else squeezes behind me. It's a white kid from my high school—Nathan Wheeler. He's got on a black T-shirt and jeans, his dark hair is flipping in different directions like he's run his fingers through it too many times, and his wide black glasses are falling down his nose. We've been in school together since junior high, but I barely see him around. I don't think he's involved in much—definitely not in the music or theater programs where I spend all my time.

He quickly grabs a sealed pack of cards from behind the counter and slides them into his back pocket. He nods when he sees I'm staring, then grabs a lollipop from the bowl.

"Root beer's my favorite." Then he takes off toward the back of the store.

I'm dumbfounded. Did he actually come behind the register without asking? And take something? I look at Dad, hoping he saw

that, too, but he's still with the customer. I can't believe someone stole from him in my first five minutes of being here.

"Just a second," I say to the boy, and walk toward Dad.

"What about my lollipop?"

"What?" I turn back to the boy, who is pointing at the counter. "Oh, um, sure." I grab the bowl and lower it to him, keeping my eyes on Dad while also making sure Nathan hasn't snuck out of the store yet.

The man with Dad gestures for the woman to follow him to the register, and Dad waves me toward a door at the back of the store. I frown and follow him.

"This is the game room, where we hold events during evenings and weekends and where people can come to play with the products," Dad explains as soon as I'm close enough to hear him. We walk into an open room filled with large tables and chairs. A gigantic dragon head is mounted to the wall. "We have a lot of regulars who use the space." He gestures to two men standing by a table in the back corner.

"You finally got a new girlfriend?" one of them calls, and waves at me. He's got thinning gray hair and an Ohio State sweatshirt on. My eyes fly open in horror at his words.

"Behave yourself, Fred. This is my daughter."

"Nice to see a new face here. I'm used to staring at this old fart all the time," the other man says, and points to his table mate. He's shorter and round with an old Batman shirt on.

Dad chuckles and lowers his voice. "That's Fred and Arthur. They're both retired, so they're here almost every day playing Flames of War."

I shake my head in confusion. I can't keep up with the names for all the games, particularly when I'm distracted by what happened with Nathan. Should I interrupt Dad now to tell him or wait to find someplace away from customers?

"That's a tabletop game where they reenact war battles," Dad explains, completely oblivious to my uncertainty. He's clearly excited to show off his store after I've avoided it for so long. "Personally, it's not my favorite. I've always liked a little fantasy element in there myself. Anyway, terrain for the tabletop games is in the back, and we have a little vending situation. It's on the honor system." He points to

open boxes of chips and candy and a cooler of sodas along the back wall before turning his attention to a group of boys huddled around a table. “Look who’s here. Nathan, come over a second.”

My eyes widen—I’ve been too caught up in my thoughts to notice him.

He trots over. “Is everything okay?”

“Better than okay!” Dad exclaims, and claps him on the back like they’re old friends. “Riley is joining us at the store.” He turns to me. “And I’m sure you already know Nathan from school?”

My mouth opens a bit and I look from Dad to Nathan. Oh no, this just got so much worse. Dad’s friendly with this jerky kid who steals from him, and now *I* have to be the one to break the news?

I narrow my eyes at Nathan, who’s standing serenely next to Dad like he doesn’t have a care in the world. I might not be on the best of terms with Dad, but that doesn’t mean I think it’s cool to watch other people blatantly take his products and hurt his business.

“Hey, actually, I need to go talk to Curtis about the latest Warhammer shipment,” Dad tells us. “Nathan, maybe you can help Riley get settled?”

Dad heads for the front before either of us can respond, looking weirdly pleased with himself, and I put a hand on my hip. “Look,” I whisper. “I don’t know what’s going on with you and my dad, but just give me what you took and maybe I won’t tell him what happened.”

Nathan blinks slowly behind his glasses, looks back at the table where his friends are ignoring us, and then pats the front pocket of his jeans. “Hmm, I still have this. Will that do?” He holds out his lollipop wrapper to me.

“Very funny. You know I’m talking about those cards from behind the counter.”

Now he laughs, and I might have been charmed by the way he throws his head back if it weren’t for the fact that the action makes me feel as small as one of the miniature models Fred and Arthur are playing with on the other side of the room.

“Wow,” he continues. “Way to jump to absolutely bizarre conclusions without asking a single question. You do realize I work here, right? And that I bought those cards with my own money? Or



did you seriously think I stole them in front of you and then *stayed in the store*? What kind of petty thief do you take me for?"

"I ... well ..." He's an *employee*? I glance around frantically, desperate for anything to save me from this exchange. "A pretty bad thief, I guess?"

"The worst thief to ever walk this earth."

I gather the fraying threads of my dignity and point at him. "Now, wait a second, don't turn this around on me. How was I supposed to know what was going on? I didn't see you pulling out any money. I come in and two minutes later you're walking behind the counter and taking something without a word!"

He waves away my argument like there's nothing to be explained. "Joel said you're joining us at the store—please tell me he meant you're visiting for the next five minutes before leaving forever and not, you know, *working* here."

"Say hello to your newest colleague." I grin spitefully and put my hands out to my sides.

"Seriously? But you play, at least, right? Board games, tabletop, cards, something?"

"Nada."

He groans. "Ugh, not one of those. Of course you don't play."

"Excuse me?"

"You can't work at a game store and not play. Or worse, be *disdainful* of games," he replies.

"I'm not disdainful."

But my tone gives me away. It's not about the games themselves. I'm sure this stuff can be fun; otherwise Dad couldn't afford to live on his own, even if it is in a small apartment. But whenever I think of this store, I think of my parents' divorce. I'm sure they must've been happy at some point, but what I remember is Dad getting it into his head that he wanted to start his own store and Mom trying to talk him out of it because of the expense and time commitment. He had a good job in IT before that. But he was so obsessed with the idea that it tore them apart. I always wished that Dad would just give up the games. How much could they matter? More than Mom? More than me? The answer was pretty clear.

I look up defiantly. "It's not my thing. I guess I didn't inherit the gene."

"Great. Well, I'm absolutely thrilled to work together, then."

He stalks away and I have the urge to bolt out the front door and into oncoming traffic.