

Chapter 2: Mary Valentine

Indianapolis' J B Sterling High School was located on the south side. Because it was in part a magnet school for the arts, its students came from all over the city. Which explained why fifteen-year-old sophomore Mary Valentine, who resided in a less prosperous neighborhood on Indy's east side, could attend such an uppity school. And why she was about as welcome as a Hawaiian shirt at a funeral. No matter: the girl could hold her own. She'd just been called out of history class. Again. She took her time, daydreaming, slowly winding her way through the empty corridors, and then abruptly stopped a few feet outside the outer office of the Vice Principal. Mary pulled herself up into a ram-rod straight posture, adjusted her hair and stuck a wad of chewing gum under the fire extinguisher, then sauntered into the office holding out a pink slip as if it were a medal of honor. The receptionist plucked it from the girl's hand, pinching it between thumb and forefinger as if it might be infectious, then gestured for the girl to sit and waddled over to the main office where Ed Cunningham looked up and frowned. "Guess who?" she said, waving the slip.

"Send her in."

Mary marched in like she owned the place and, without looking, plucked the slip from the woman's plump fingers and handed it over to the vice principal. He looked at the note. "I thought I just took that thing away from you."

"No, you took my blue iPod. This one is white, see?"

"Mary," he sighed, "how does someone on both the school breakfast and lunch programs afford not just one, but two iPods?" She shrugged, as if to say, who knows? "May I see it?" She

pouted. He waited. Eventually, Mary slapped the iPod onto his upturned palm. He turned it over and around, examining it. "This is interesting."

"What?"

"There appears to be a name engraved here, Andrew M. Smith. Why is that?"

"Beats me."

Ed was tired. He'd been down this road with her before and decided it wasn't worth it. "You can go now," he said, "but I don't want to see you back here again today. If I do..." Mary cut him off.

"Hey, like, it wasn't my idea to come here in the first place."

"Just go."

"What about my iPod?" He gave her a look that said don't mess with me then curled his fingers around the electronic device and pocketed it. "Like, okay, just chill."

The bell rang as Mary made her way back down the hallway. Fourth period, lunch, so she headed to the cafeteria. If not for the food, she wouldn't go there at all, but hey, a girl has to eat something. The only thing in the fridge at home was beer. She went through the line and was about to sit down when Jason Michaels, All-City middle linebacker and All-state jerk, bumped into her. On purpose. Moron.

"That looks yummy. What is it?"

Mary tried to ignore him and his big-as-a-house sack lunch, hoping he'd go away, but he didn't.

"Hey, how's your new stepdad? What's his name, Dave? Oh no, that was two stepdads ago, this one's Brad, right?"

“Why yo...” she said, about to let go a string of curses, when a group of cheerleaders flocked to Jason and gathered around him. Mary regrouped and flashed him a smile. “Why thanks for asking, and yes Jason, his name is Brad. He's doing fine.” A brief pause for effect and then, leaning into him, she added, “Oh, and, by the way, how’s your syphilis doing? Are you still contagious?” The cheerleaders’ eyes grew wide, and they backed away as Jason's face turned beat-red. Mary plucked another iPod from her pocket, this one silver, and put in the ear-buds, hoping this playlist would be better than Smith’s. *That dude, like, has no taste at all.*

Jason’s fire-truck red face was spewing curses like water from a hydrant. Mary didn’t bat an eyelash. She just dug into her garbanzo bean casserole.