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| Not Mary Jane |
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| She thought a new name could change her life, but it happened the other way around. |

**Chapter 1—News***100 days until Amanda Day*

Will this stinky school bus never reach my stop? I keep tapping my feet (left, left, right, right), ready to fly off my seat. Isabella sits next to me, silently staring out the window, which is super awkward. Usually she talks non-stop about cute boys, or the school play, or becoming a star. Last summer, she did a TV commercial for cookies, and she said it was the most fun ever. After high school, she wants to move to New York City and be a famous actor. I get nervous just reading a book report, with the words right there in front of me. People staring at me makes my head buzz. I don’t know how she thinks it’s fun, but that’s Isabella.

Applying to the Boulder Magnet Middle School was all Isabella’s idea—she wanted to be in the drama program, and said I could do visual arts. We’ve been best friends since second grade, so we just had to stay together. Obviously. I got in to the visual arts program, but Isabella is on a waiting list for the drama program. Am I a bad friend for wanting to go anyway? I’m trying to not get too excited in front of her, but my feet keep moving in a rhythm all their own. Dad’s going to be thrilled for me, and Mom will finally be proud. Even my big sister Elizabeth might be impressed (okay, probably not). This is the biggest thing that has ever happened to me! As soon as I get off this noisy bus, I’m going to run to my room and full on celebrate.

 I rush upstairs and plop down on my bed. Before I do a happy dance, I pull the letter from my backpack, just to be sure I read it correctly. Yup, it still says:

*Dear Mary Jane Adams,*

*We are pleased to tell you that you have been selected to enroll in
the visual arts program at the Boulder Magnet Middle School . . .*

There’s more, but that’s the important stuff. I’m in! I’m on my way to becoming a real artist. I dance on my bed, just because I can—Mom and Dad are still at work, and I have fifteen minutes before Elizabeth’s boyfriend drops her off. I hug my stuffed giraffe and whisper, “Sixth grade is going to be awesome.” I toss the giraffe into the air and shout to universe, “I’m awesome! Look out world, here comes Mary Jane the Artist.” Hmm . . . could I ever be a real artist with such an uninspired name?

Your name is practically the first thing a person learns about you. Before anyone knows if you’re kind or honest, smart or creative, caring or curious, they decide whether to even bother finding out who you really are based on your name. Mom says all I need to do is smile, but there aren’t enough smiles in the whole state of Colorado to make up for my dorky name. Mary sounds like a whisper, all timid, like “May I?” Jane makes a dull sound, like the thud of a refrigerator door closing, all uncaring and painfully blah. Put them together, and you get a name that says, “I’m nobody special.” It’s a disaster of a name, disguised as something perfectly normal.

Maybe kids think differently at the artsy middle school.

We’re that weird family that eats dinner in the dining room, and we each talk about what’s happened during the day. Mom says family is important, and we need to support each other in our successes and in our failures. I usually don’t have much to say, but today is different. It feels great to hold my news inside myself before sharing—like waiting for the birthday girl to open a present I’ve wrapped so carefully. My ears tingle with anticipation. I can wait until dinner to show everyone the letter. I’ll let Mom read it out loud, and then Dad will swoop me into the air. We’ll all dance around the table, just like last year when Elizabeth was elected class treasurer.

Taco Tuesday makes the whole house smell like a party. I put the fixings on a lazy susan in the middle of the table. Something always goes flying when one of us (usually me) spins it too fast. I’m pretty sure that’s going to happen tonight. I am just too hyped up to be careful.

As soon as we start making tacos, Dad says, “Big news for the whole family. This is huge!” He pauses dramatically, looking first at Mom, then at Elizabeth, and finally me. “I got the job in Virginia. Say hello to the next American History professor at the College of William and Mary.” He thumps his chest, like he’s Tarzan or something.

Mom jumps up to kiss him. “I’m so proud of you. Now I can tell Ginny I’m coming.”

“Who’s Ginny?” Elizabeth asks, one eyebrow twisted in confusion.

“My roommate from college,” Mom says. “She started her own accounting firm in Williamsburg, and she’s been begging me to join her.”

“Williamsburg? That’s so far away . . .” Even my words sound far away, like in a dream. A very bad dream. I want to ask if I can stay in Boulder, but I know that isn’t possible.

Elizabeth snorts. “We’re moving to Virginia? Now? Right before my senior year? That’s so not fair!”

Suddenly the tacos no longer smell like a party—more like a dodge ball hitting me in the face, the smell of old rubber and sweaty hands. I look down at the envelope in my lap, and slowly scrunch it into a tight ball. It falls to the floor, and Mom picks it up before I can stop her.

“What’s this?” Mom wants to know. She smooths out the creases and unfolds the letter. I see her lips moving as she reads to herself. “Oh, Mary Jane, this is such an honor.” She tries to give me a hug, but I push her away. “Maybe they have a program like this in Williamsburg,” she says with a shrug. Like it’s no big deal.

My heart is pounding with hurt and disappointment, and my stomach tightens into a hard knot. Elizabeth is arguing with Dad. Her face is all angry red and Dad’s face is pale, but I can’t actually focus on their words. “May I be excused?” I mumble. “I’m not hungry.” Nobody even notices me leaving. I might as well be invisible.

*82 days until Amanda Day*

It’s been more than two weeks since that taco dinner. Since my life was ruined. No Boulder Magnet Middle School for me. We left Colorado yesterday morning, barely a week after school let out. So far, it’s been the worst summer vacation ever. I was way too busy packing to do normal summer stuff with Isabella. Now I’ll probably never see her again.

We sold the old Jeep before we left Colorado. Mom says we won’t need an SUV in Williamsburg, and that we’ll buy something practical after we get there. Now the whole family is in a too-small car. The trunk is crammed full of suitcases and duffle bags, and Elizabeth’s stuff is all over the backseat—makeup, high school yearbook, photo album—things too “precious” to trust to the movers. There’s even a box from the kitchen that Mom crammed under my feet (because I’m the smallest), and my knees are twisted all sideways.

Mom and Dad take turns driving, and Elizabeth whines about everything. She wants a pillow, she’s too hot, she’s too cold, my bony elbow is poking her (which it isn’t), my colored pencils are in her way (which they aren’t). Today she is extra-complainy. Or am I extra-touchy? Maybe both.

“Cheer up,” Mom says. “You’ll both make friends in Virginia.” I hope she’s right. Just thinking about everything I’m leaving behind, I can feel my lower lip push out, even though I try really hard not to pout.

Things I Hate about My Life

1. Leaving Colorado
2. No Boulder Magnet Middle School for me
3. My messy, tangly hair
4. Being stuck in the backseat with my sister
5. MARY JANE

Making up lists is absolutely better than real writing. No need to bother with complete sentences, grammar, or punctuation. No paragraphs. No beginning, middle, and end. That’s all way too complicated. And lists are so much easier to read. What you need to know is right there in front of you, not buried in a bunch of extra words. Lists are the best. My list is a work of art. I circle number five. Seriously, I’ve got the worst name ever.

I stretch my neck to look out the windshield. So many cars and trucks, all rushing to go someplace new. I don’t want to go anywhere new. My friends are back in Boulder. I make a list of what I already miss about them (because writing a list makes everything better).

Isabella—our secret words
Liam—oatmeal cookies
Sierra—the tree club

Back in Boulder, Isabella and I did everything together. We rode our bikes all over the neighborhood, we took art classes (for me) and drama classes (for her), we liked the same books, and we shared our deepest secrets. Isabella told me she was still afraid of noises at night, and I told her I was scared of spiders and big bugs. And we had secret words—we said “golden” when we meant ugly and “dazzling” when we meant stupid. I can’t imagine having another friend as special as Isabella. How can I start middle school without her?

Sierra talked our fifth-grade teacher into forming a tree club. Mrs. Liu knows everything about trees. I joined the club because trees are so beautiful, and that’s how Sierra and I became friends. Well, sort of. Sierra is so quiet, we never had time to get very close. We met after school every Thursday. Mrs. Liu told me Virginia has wonderful trees, although they’re mostly deciduous. That means they lose their leaves in the fall, and become ugly, lifeless skeletons for the winter. I hope there will still be some evergreens. I really can’t imagine winter without evergreens. And snow. Does it even snow in Virginia?

Liam joined the tree club too. He’s super smart about science stuff. He always brought homemade oatmeal cookies. I think he actually baked them himself. We barely talked outside of club time, and he’s a boy, but I still think of him as a friend.

Mom and Dad keep talking about how great Virginia is going to be, so somewhere around Kansas City, I make a list of positives:

Good Stuff about Virginia

1. Different trees
2. New friends (I hope!)
3. Warmer weather
4. Maybe no one will make fun of my name?

Most of my journal entries are lists (obviously) or sketches (just because). Nana and Grandpop gave me the diary last year for my tenth birthday. They want me to write down my feelings. Drawing counts, right?

I stretch out as much as I can and sketch in my journal. Today I’m drawing trees. I want to remember all the evergreens of Colorado. The blue spruce is my favorite, with layered branches in mysterious shades of bluish green. Or is it greenish blue? I love the way evergreens stay full and colorful all winter. I feel safe just looking at them. They feel like home.

We stop for dinner at a Cracker Barrel and have to wait for a table. I love looking through the gift shop and playing with the old-timey toys. Ugh, there’s that Mary Jane candy. I can’t believe anybody actually eats it. Elizabeth buys a key chain with her name already on it. I look through all the key chains for my name, but there’s only Mary or Jane, or Mary Ann, Mary Sue, Mary Ellen—every name on the planet except for Mary Jane. As always.

*81 days until Amanda Day*

On the third day, we only drive for a few hours before we stop in Maryland. Mom wants to spend time with my Uncle Josh, Aunt Sarah, and my cousin Matthew. As we pull into their neighborhood, I’m all squirmy with anticipation. I try to imagine it’s just another visit with my favorite uncle, like we’re not actually leaving Colorado forever.

Not long after I step out of the car, though, Uncle Josh corners me. “What’s your first name?” he asks. Technically, Mary is my first name and Jane is my middle name, but everyone always calls me by both names. Which Uncle Josh knows, but he can’t resist his stupid joke—every single time we visit.

“Mary Jane,” I say. I do wish he wouldn’t ask.

“And what’s your middle name?” he keeps going.

“You know it’s Jane.” I roll my eyes.

“So you’re Mary Jane *Jane* Adams?” Uncle Josh does this high-pitched laugh and goofy, twirling dance, just like his favorite cartoon character. It’s like he’s not even a grown-up. Crazy!

“Thanks, Uncle Josh,” I say. “I’ve never heard that one before.” I stick out my tongue.

“Don’t be mad,” he says. Uncle Josh gives me a smile, the one that means, “You know you love me.” Which I do, even when he’s being a jerk about my name. “Are you excited about moving?”

“Seriously?” I say. “Excited about what?”

“Your mom and I moved a few times when we were kids. It was always a fresh start. Nobody knew the mistakes I’d made, or reminded me of things I’d rather forget. But you have no idea what I’m talking about. You’ve probably never done anything embarrassing.” He winks.

Like I have to *do* anything. My name is Mary Jane. That’s plenty embarrassing.

My name has always been awkward and annoying, because people get it wrong, and it never fits on a form, and I don’t really feel like a Mary Jane. But I never actually *hated* the name until this year. My tenth birthday was back in September, and because I was entering double digits, Mom wanted me to have an extra-big party. She’s always pushing me to have more friends, so in addition to Isabella, we invited the cool girls I *wanted* to be friends with. (They called themselves the Bold Girls—because we lived in Boulder?). Everyone came. It was a warm, sunny Saturday at the park. We had a watermelon seed spitting contest, and made paper boats to float on the pond. We ate chocolate cake, and make-your-own ice cream sundaes, and everyone said it was the best birthday party ever. After that, my new friends let me sit with them at lunchtime, and invited me over after school. Life was good, until . . .

In October, Ava, leader of the Bold Girls, invited my best friend Isabella and me to a big sleepover. They were all there, Mia, Lily, Zoe, and Olivia, braiding each other’s hair, and all wearing matching blue tees. Even Isabella’s top was blue, though paler than the others (did she know and not tell me?). No one seemed to notice my lavender tee, which was new just for the party. My hair was too short for braids, but Isabella let me braid hers. Then she used gel to brush my hair into fun shapes, which made me feel like I belonged.

When we were done with hair, we all sat barefoot and cross-legged in a circle on the soft blue carpet in Ava’s bedroom. They were laughing about Liam, who was new to our school, saying he wore all the “wrong” clothes. I thought his button-down shirts and dark rimmed glasses made him look interesting, but I didn’t want them to tease me, so I laughed too.

Lily was the first to mention my name. “Did your parents grow up on a farm? Mary Jane is totally a farm girl name.” She looked at Ava, who smiled and nodded.

Before I could answer, Olivia said, “Mary Jane is a pretty name . . . if you’re talking about *these*.” She picked up one of Ava’s shoes, a gray flat with a small flower on the narrow strap, and waved it around. Everybody giggled. Even me, just to fit in.

Mia said, “Mary Jane? Isn’t that what hippies smoke?” She rolled her head around and looked cross-eyed, pretending she was stoned. They laughed even harder, high-fiving Mia and not looking at me.

“Mary Jane is that *nasty* candy my grandpa used to give me,” Ava said. “Ewe!” She stuck out her tongue and grabbed her throat as if she was being poisoned, and then she keeled over. The girls rolled on the floor, gasping for breath, tears running down their faces.

But not me. I stared at my bare feet and couldn’t move. Isabella put her arm around my shoulder and whispered, “It’s okay, Mary Jane. They don’t mean anything by it. They’re just having fun.” But it wasn’t fun for me. I blinked back tears, determined not to cry.

“Who thinks Jackson’s cute?” Isabella asked, turning the conversation away from my awful name. Everyone agreed Jackson was the cutest boy in the fifth grade. Everyone but me. I was afraid that if I said even a single word, my voice would crack, and they would see how upset I was. I would not be cool at all.

I clutched my stomach and doubled over like I was going to be sick, and ran to the bathroom. I’m not sure if I was faking. Ava’s mom had to call my mom to come take me home. I tried to hide my blotchy face so they wouldn’t know I’d been crying. The whole way home, I could hear them laughing at me, but I couldn’t tell Mom. She would have taken me back and told me to stand up for myself. The next day, Isabella said I should have stayed. They watched a vampire movie and pretended to bite each other all night.

I didn’t sit with those girls at lunch after that. They told everyone I was a big baby who couldn’t take a little kidding, and they had everyone making crybaby faces at me whenever the teacher wasn’t looking. I pretended to be sick so I wouldn’t have to go to school, but that only worked once. After the crybaby week, everyone just ignored me, like I wasn’t even there. I don’t know which was worse.

At least Isabella stuck by me. Sierra had just started the tree club, and Liam joined too—he was even smarter than I’d expected. So I didn’t need to be friends with the Bold Girls. But every time one of them passed me in the hallway, or whispered in class, my stomach would tighten up. If only I had a better name!

I head for Matthew’s big swing, the one Uncle Josh hung from a huge oak tree when my cousin was a little kid. I pump my legs to go as high as I can, trying not to think about being Mary Jane. I feel the wind in my hair, and my stomach relaxes. I see Mom and Aunt Sarah putting dishes on the picnic table while Elizabeth and Matthew talk about colleges. Uncle Josh is at the grill, and the neighbor has a new tree house. What is it about swinging that always makes me feel better?

Matthew calls out, “Hey, Jerry Mane, time to eat.” Ugh, another name gag!

Lunch is great, so much better than eating drive-through food in the back of the crowded car. Burgers taste different when they’re grilled in the backyard. I want to stay here forever.

Before we leave, Uncle Josh and Aunt Sarah hand out presents—they call them house-warming gifts. They give Dad a book about Colonial Williamsburg, which he probably already has. He’s totally obsessed with colonial history, which is why teaching American History at the College of William and Mary is his dream job. Whenever Mom or Dad says the name of the college, they emphasize each word, trying to make it sound way more special than it can possibly be. Dad’s super excited about the library, which is probably just a bunch of moldy old books and crumbly papers. Dad even told my friends about his new job, which made me look like a complete dork. I know I should be happy for him, but I’m not. Obviously.

Mom’s present is a small book titled *Birds of Virginia*, a blue and purple glass hummingbird feeder, and a packet of powdered food. “You’ll see lots of hummingbirds in Williamsburg,” Aunt Sarah says. “They’re magical creatures. Like busy little fairies.”

Elizabeth opens her gift—a white silk blouse. She runs inside to try it on, and comes out looking radiant. “I’ll wear it on the first day of school,” she promises, running a hand over the smooth fabric. Will I ever look that elegant?

My turn. I tear sparkly paper from a small box. Nestled inside is a delicate silver necklace with a lavender stone shaped like a heart. It shimmers in the bright sunlight. I feel so grown-up!

“This was Aunt Jane’s,” Uncle Josh explains, fastening it around my neck. Mom has that freaky happy/sad smile she uses whenever we talk about Great-Aunt Jane—her lips smile, but her eyes look like she’s about to cry. Which is why Mom almost never talks about her favorite aunt. I don’t even know how she died, just that it was before I was born, so I got her name. Mom loves my name so much. I can never tell her what happened at Ava’s slumber party.