

CHAPTER 1

I want to *not* ride the bus to school every day, but that would be a waste of a really big want—it'll take care of itself eventually. Until then, I put up with it, like today.

What do I want? I want a copy of *Giant-Size X-Men #1* in Mint condition.

I would settle for Near Mint, I guess, which would definitely be cheaper, but I'd really like to be able to say that my copy is pretty much perfect. On eBay, a Mint copy starts at at least eight hundred bucks, which is way more than I can afford, but maybe once I get my driver's license I can get a job after school and put together the money. Sounds crazy, I know—some ancient comic book from the 1970s. But it's important.

I also want a new computer. Multi-processor, maxed-out memory slots, wireless everything... When my parents got divorced, my mom got custody of me, and I got custody of the old Pentium clone that used to sit in the den at our old house. Thanks to the very best in Microsoft/Intel engineering, it crashes every time you exhale too hard in its general vicinity. It's tough to accomplish the kinds of things I want to accomplish with that going on. I want Flash animation! Video editing! Heck, I just want to be able to use Photoshop or Illustrator for ten minutes without rebooting.

Thinking about a pristine *Giant-Size X-Men #1* and a humming new computer usually gets me through the bus ride to school. Today's an exception. Today, I don't need to spin fantasies because a living, breathing fantasy has just gotten on-board: Dina Jurgens, who manages to make climbing the steps onto the bus look like something that crazy parents' groups boycott.

It's a good day when a goddess gets on the school bus with you. In my two years suffering as this particular school bus stutters over potholes and gravel, winding its way through the back roads of Brookdale, Dina has only ridden a handful of times.

She's a senior, two years older than me, but she looks like she could have stepped off of a runway somewhere: blond hair, bright green eyes, soft and puffy lips, and a body that's pure torture. There are plenty of hotties at South Brook High, but Dina's a cut above and beyond. Of all

the things I hate about South Brook, the fact that she's graduating in a few months is at the top of the list. How am I supposed to go through junior and senior years without catching glimpses of her in the hall?

Dina checks out the seating situation, scanning the back seats, which are packed. The bus driver—a wheezing, leather-faced troll appropriately named Mr. Dull—closes the door and hits the gas, jerking Dina forward a little. She flips her hair out of her eyes, then rolls them at Mr. Dull's temerity. She heads for the first empty seat, which happens to be, well, next to me.

I try to play it cool, but let's be honest—that's tough to do in the presence of a goddess. I go with my first instinct, which is to try to dip my hand into my pocket for the safety totem I keep there. I always feel more calm when I touch it.

But it's awkward getting a hand into your pocket when you're sitting down, doubly so when there's someone right next to you. My elbow brushes her side, and she looks at me like I planned it. "Hey!"

"Sorry," I mumble. I feel like I should explain that I wasn't *trying* to touch her, but she's already looking away.

"What happened, Dina?" Sounds like Kayla Meyer. A junior, one who hasn't gotten a car yet. One who apparently ranks as Worthy on the Dina Jurgens Scale because her older brother is Steve Meyer, who I *think* dated Dina's older sister or something like that. I don't know. I don't really pay attention to stuff like that.

"My car wouldn't start this morning."

"Bummer."

"Yeah, I told my dad that it *has* to be ready by the weekend because—"

I tune it out and keep my head down so that no one will bother me. But being so close to Dina rattles me. I keep wanting to turn and stare, but even *I* know that that's not cool. So I settle for cutting my eyes left as often as I can. I get flashes of skirt and leg and the shadow of what could be a breast, but I'm not sure and I don't want to risk looking for longer than, like, a tenth of a second. So it's sort of like dumping the pieces of a puzzle out on the floor, looking at them, and then trying to put it all together in your head. With your eyes closed. So close! So far!

It goes like that for a little while, the bus jerking and bouncing along, making Dina's anatomy do very interesting things that she's ap-

parently unaware of (and of which I'm woefully under-aware, given those quick glances). Dina talks with Kayla, the Usual Idiots yell and chatter, and Mr. Dull's beloved country station blares out on the radio.

At some point, I realize that I probably look like an idiot, my head bent down, doing nothing, (apparently) staring down at my feet. I pretend to look for something in my backpack, but there's just school stuff and comic books in there. And God knows I don't want to pull out a comic book while Dina's sitting next to me! I wish I had something—*anything*—else to read, something that didn't scream "Geek!" at the top of its lungs and jump around in nerdly war paint. Like... I don't know... *Hot Rod?*

When we screech to a tooth-grinding halt at the school, a sudden brilliant stroke occurs to me. Dina is sitting next to me. On the aisle. She'll get up to leave and I'll get up behind her. Behind her. From here to the exit, I'll be right behind her, with an unobstructed view of The Back of Dina Jurgens. Not as splendid a sight as The Front, but not bad in its own right. Sweet.

So, Dina gets up, and I grab my backpack (watching her legs as I do so—wow), then get up and move to get behind her—

And Mark Broderick pushes me back. "Move it."

He doesn't even look at me as he does it. He's a big senior with short, bleached hair and a face like old hamburger. He dresses like Eminem, if Eminem weighed twenty pounds too much and couldn't keep the sweat stains from spreading out under his armpits. This is the weirdest part—he smells like boiling leather. I've never been able to figure that part out.

Up until now, the only contact I've ever had with him was smelling that unique aroma as he walked past me on the bus. But right now, I watch him as he struts up to the door behind Dina. A flood of bigger, meaner, and/or tougher kids fills the aisle, and I'm not about to step into that flood, so I just stand here and wait and watch Mark's back and the buzzcut that clutches at his scalp.

Now that I'm standing, it's easy to slip my hand into my pocket. As usual, I feel immediate calm when I touch the bullet that I keep there. I started carrying it about a year ago.

Everything's OK; I've added Mark to The List.