

What Mr. Mattero Did

Chapter One: *Claire*

This was the plan: second period when we had earth science together, we would meet by the girls' bathroom and go straight to the office instead of class. We would say we needed to see the principal, Mrs. Fernandez, right away. And if the secretary said the principal was "busy" or "in a meeting" we would tell her it was an emergency. We would go together, the three of us -- Jenna, Suzanne, and me. And if we got scared, like if one of us started to panic, we would reach out and hold hands, but we would not *break* down or *back* down.

Jenna would do the talking. There was never even a discussion about that. Only Jenna could lay out the facts without getting embarrassed the way Suzanne or I might. It's true. Jenna is like totally fearless. The third set of holes in her ears? She did them herself with a safety pin and an ice cube in her bathroom during winter break. Suzanne and I couldn't even watch we were so freaked out. We jumped in the shower and pulled the door shut and sang *The Star Spangled Banner* really, really loud.

But even Jenna needed to practice once -- not piercing her ears, but, you know, to be sure she could say certain things out loud. So we huddled that morning before school by the water fountain. I practically chewed off the thumbnail on my left hand, the only decent fingernail I had left, while Jenna, in a low voice, rehearsed what she would say. When she finished, when she pressed her lips together and looked at us with raised eyebrows, we nodded enthusiastically. We gave her a thumbs up. We had a hundred percent confidence that Jenna could do it. That she could tell the principal what Mr. Mattero did to us in the music room.

I'm telling you, for two days we agonized over it. Should we say something? Should we just drop hints? And for two days, we had argued only once -- when Suzanne said she worried what the other kids would think. "I mean what if they look at us like we're whatchamacallit, weird or something."

I had frowned at her -- I remember that -- because I didn't know what she was getting at. Like did she mean victims? Was she afraid kids would think we were victims? And so what if they did? What was wrong with that? Or did she mean something else, like did we do something to egg him on? I didn't know the word I was looking for then, but I know it now: provoke. Was she worried that kids would think we did something to *provoke* Mr. Mattero?

Jenna was just as confused as me. She had screwed up her face and leaned toward Suzanne. "What did you say?" She was already turned around on the bus seat in front of us and was sitting on her knees. She did that so we three could talk together but it was incredibly noisy on the ride home after school and sometimes, honestly, you have to get right in someone's face or practically shout to be heard.

"Weird! They'll think we're weird!" Suzanne repeated very distinct and very loud, because you could tell she was a little bit angry, too.

Jenna laughed. She popped her gum. "Halfa them think we're weird anyway! So who cares?" Ouch. I think that hurt Suzanne. I know it hurt me. I mean, I never wanted kids to think I was weird or anything. Anyway, we're sort of getting off the subject here because what was far more important at the moment was that I, for one, did not think we should be *laughing* or *hollering* about any of this. "You guys! Shhhhhhh!" I warned, holding a finger to my lips.

Suzanne scooted forward and continued anyway, talking in that tiny little pleading voice of hers. Whiny, that's what Jenna calls it. Her whiny voice: "I was just thinking that maybe we shouldn't say anything."

Jenna's intense eyes locked onto Suzanne's. "Look at me and tell me that you want to be in Mattero's music class the rest of the year."

Suzanne looked down at her hands.

"Do you want to have to look at his ugly face every single day for the rest of the semester?" Jenna persisted.

Suzanne trembled, a little like my mother's cell phone on the vibrate mode. I mean, you could actually see her shake.

"Do you?" Jenna demanded.

Timidly, Suzanne shook her head in tiny, back and forth motions.

"No. No! Of course you don't! Then we have to speak up, Suzanne. We don't have a choice. Claire and me, we'll go in there without you if we have to." She glared at me. "Won't we Claire?"

That's when I first started biting the rest of that good thumb nail off. And after all those weeks of leaving my nails alone! Reluctantly, I nodded, agreeing with Jenna.

Suzanne was sucking on her bottom lip, the way she does. I told her she ought to stop it. Not that *I* care -- we go back a long ways, Suzanne and me, all the way back to kindergarten -- so I'm not the one's gonna give her grief. But she really ought to give up the lip thing 'cause the kids in this middle school are gonna call her a frickin' baby if she keeps it up.

"Hey," I said, poking Suzanne's shoulder. When she looked up, I encouraged her with a teensey smile because I knew Jenna was watching.

"Okay, *okay*," Suzanne gave up. She widened her eyes. "Whatever."

"Good!" Jenna pronounced like that was that, and with a sniff, too, because she was on the brink of a cold. "We're best friends, remember?"

True. Now *that* was true. We were best friends. We had been best friends since the beginning of seventh grade -- so, for what? Seven months? We were in almost all the same classes. We were online or on the phone with each other after school. And practically every Friday we had a sleepover, rotating to our different houses, but mostly to mine and Suzanne's because Jenna's mother was away so much.

There is no question that Jenna and Suzanne were the two best friends I ever had although anybody who didn't know us might wonder what in the world we three had in common. I mean Jenna's so blonde and has perfect skin and everything while Suzanne and I are so -- I don't know, ordinary. Okay, maybe that's cruel to say because once Suzanne gets her braces off -- and when her skin clears up, she'll be incredibly cute. She looks good in clothes even if she thinks she's too fat. She is *not* fat! And her hair -- wow -- too much, too curly, too red, she says -- but everyone else, including me, thinks it's really pretty.

For sure, I'm the one who's no raging beauty. Jenna says I just need to let my bangs and layers grow out. She says I'm really smart and that I have a classic Roman nose and awesome brown eyes and not everyone tans just look at Suzanne and wait 'til I'm older I can use that dermabrasion stuff to get the freckles off. Oh yeah, and she says that lots of girls wish they were as skinny as me. She swears she's not kidding, but sometimes she just says stuff, you know?

Jenna was reaching out her hand to me on the bus while all that stuff went through my mind. "Claire, peachy, can I borrow your lip gloss? That sparkly one?"

"Oh yeah, sure." I hauled up my backpack from the floor and unzipped the little pocket on the side where I kept the gum and Tic Tacs that warded off my constant hunger, a fist full of makeup, and change for the soda machine. When I found what she wanted, Snow Kiss, I placed it in her waiting palm.

"Thanks," she said. She popped her gum again. "You're sweet."

While Jenna dipped her pinkie in the lip gloss pot, I brushed the wispy hair ends out of my eyes and glanced at Suzanne again. The way she sat, slouched back into the seat, it didn't look like she was convinced. And I have to admit, I was a little worried myself -- but more about my mom than about what the other kids would say. I never said so to Jenna though because I didn't want her to think I was weak.

Later, after we got home that day, Suzanne and Jenna I-M.'d each other back and forth like crazy on their computers so that by the next morning Suzanne was gungho in total agreement that we would tell the principal. I wasn't part of their online conversation because our family computer is in the kitchen facing the island where my mother puts the salad and everything together so I didn't think I could take the chance of anyone looking over my shoulder.

I don't know. Maybe I should have tapped away on that keyboard anyway and let my mother find out. See, I've always thought we should have told our mothers first. "Let *them* march into Mrs. Fernandez's office," I had suggested to Jenna the very first time we ever talked about it. "Our moms are going to find out anyhow."

"Claire, this is something we have to do ourselves," Jenna had argued. "Besides, my mom's not home this week."

Nothing new. Jenna's mom is a stewardess and she's away a lot. Paris one week. Honolulu the next. No wonder it was so easy to lose track of her. I used to think she was such a good mother, too. She was always bringing Jenna stuff: cute little fish earrings, flashy pareos, cool bathing suits -- and those fancy Macademia nuts. She used to give us each a jar every time she flew in from Hawaii. Ha! I ought to tell her sometime how I used to eat maybe one nut and chuck the rest in the backyard for the squirrels because they're like two hundred calories for about five.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So there's a part of me that's a little bit mean, too. But you know what? If you took a good look at my life sometime, you'd see why. Still, it just kills me to think about how I envied Jenna because of her Mom. I mean, my mother seemed soooooo incredibly boring next to hers. All my Mom did everyday was stay home working on her food list, doing stacks of laundry, fawning and fretting over my little brother and sister -- mostly my brother -- and asking me annoying questions like: "Claire, have you done your homework yet? Claire, did you pick up your room? Claire, is that all you're going to eat?"

Sheesh.

But now that I think of it, Jenna's mom should have been a little bit more like *mine*. Hey! And maybe none of this would have happened. Who knows?

"Look Jenna, we can wait until your Mom gets back," I had suggested, in my most kindest, most sane voice.

Jenna grew quiet when I said that. I know Jenna missed her mom. You could always tell when her mother was flying. (I guess I should put that in quotes or something, the word, "flying.")

Suddenly Jenna pulled the elastic out of her ponytail and shook back her long hair. "I'm thinking of getting more highlights this week. You wanna come with me?"

I stared at her. If arrows could have come out of my eyeballs they would have.

"Claire, come on, you should come with me -- "

"Jenna!" I hated it when she didn't finish a conversation. "I said maybe we should wait 'til your Mom gets back."

"No!" Jenna had shot back.

It sort of shocked me, her tone. It had a nasty edge to it. I pulled back.

Jenna softened her voice. "Look, we already talked about that." And instantly, like she pressed a button or something, her eyes got all red and watery, too, like she was going to cry.

"Remember?" Jenna asked. "We all agreed -- we have to tell someone *now*."

What is it about her? You look at Jenna and you think, here is a girl who has everything going for her but somehow she can make you feel sorry for her like nobody I have ever known in my entire life. So I may have hesitated and rolled my eyes. Maybe I even cussed at her under my breath. But I went along with it. At that point I committed.

I could kick myself though -- *real hard*. And I still say that if our mothers had all known first, it might have played out different. With a little more warning, Suzanne's mother might not have gotten so off-the-wall hysterical and for sure, Jenna's father wouldn't have come barreling into school the way he did, swinging his fists. God, that was awful. I just can't believe it. It got everything -- *everything* started off on the absolute wrong foot!

