

Chapter 1 – The Secret

I had a secret and I couldn't wait to use it. I darted around the corner, my heart racing with mischievous glee. My saddle shoes skidded out from under me across the waxed-wood floor, but I grabbed hold of the door jamb before flinging myself through the doorway of my cousin Clarissa's bedroom. I almost landed on my rump, but luckily my feet stayed under me.

"Hi Adie! Hi Clarissa!" I pirouetted across the room, then did a leap onto the bed.

"Jeepers, Emma." Adie gave Clarissa her favorite Emma-is-the-biggest-botheration-of-a-sister look while her hand pressed to her chest, covering the low neckline of the silver fringed, silk-chiffon dress she wore. Shiny beads shimmied when she shifted on the stool. "What are you tryin' to do—cause the eradication of our lives?" She loved tossing big words in my face, but I knew her game. I had no idea what eradication meant, but she wouldn't get rid of me quite so easily.

I propped my hand under the side of my head, careful to not fold my ear over itself—it always hurt if I did that. I squinted my eyes at Adie's reflection in the gold-gilded mirror of Clarissa's dressing table. I knew I had to time this discussion just right or Adie would see right through me. I'd first throw her off by letting her think I was gonna get her in trouble.

"Well, Adeline Jane Perkins," I said while still squinting at her, "where'd you get that dress?"

"Never you mind. A friend let me borrow it." Adie pulled a long string of pearls over her partly pinned-up hair. Many of her friends had bobbed their hair lately, and Adie had begged Daddy to do the same, but Daddy had said over his dead body would any daughter of his have a haircut like that.

Commented [CS1]: Only highlighting "I"-starting sentences on the first page, but check for sentence structure variation throughout 😊

Commented [CS2]: Nice—we get a lot of character detail and immediately are moving forward in a story.

Commented [CS3]: I get the feeling that...Adie doesn't know either? Because this is pretty awkward usage.

Commented [CS4]: I hope this detail comes back as something important (bc otherwise it's pretty random?)

Commented [CS5]: Love the sisterly tattle-tale-ness

Commented [CS6]: Are we...in the 20's? Or 40's maybe (saddle shoes from earlier. I don't pretend to know enough about either decade to pick up on where we are exactly)

“If Daddy sees you wearin’ that,” I said, “his eyeballs are going to pop out and fall flat into circles of glop on the ground. *And* you’ll break our poor mama’s heart.” I figured I had to add the part about breaking Mama’s heart, because nobody could cause a guilty conscience like our Mama. Tommy Jeppeson said that if your eyeballs ever come out of your head, you’d have to be careful where you stepped so you didn’t squish them, ‘cause it would be like you stepped on a giant bug, all gushy and gooey. And since Tommy had an older brother studying to be a doctor, we all knew it must be true.

Commented [CS7]: Nice voice

“I got permission from Mama to wear this dress.” Adie sniffed with her nose in the air.

“There’s no way Mama gave you permission to wear *that*.” I might have been six years younger than Adie, but I was not stupid. She looked way more grown up than Mama would approve of.

“I just told you she did,” Adie said. “Now, why don’t you go find something to do and stop botherin’ us?”

Commented [CS8]: TOTALLY my own personal preference, but if the affected speech doesn’t have a direct purpose and say something about the characters, then it’s kind of distracting. And quite polarizing. If you’ve got reasons, awesome, it’s still a risk. If it’s just there, it might be something to look at.

Here was my chance. Adie knew I already had my suspicions about the dress, now I just had to start my negotiating before I dropped the big bomb. I took a deep breath.

“I’m *botherin’* you ‘cuz I need to work on my big school project. So, could I borrow your bicycle to go to the Charleston Coburg Dairy tomorrow? It’s the biggest project of the year, and I *have* to get a perfect score. It’s my chance to move to head of the class, and beat Bessie Miller.”

Commented [CS9]: I’m surprised it isn’t about the secret—YOU PROMISED US A SECRET!!! 😊

“No Emma, you can’t. For one reason, you can barely stay up on it. And for another, I already made plans to ride it over to the river after school with some friends.” Adie pinched her cheeks and put on her long dangly earrings.

“Oh come on, Adie.” I clasped my hands together to show I was ready to beg. “You know how much I want to get to be head of class this year. I’ve been practicin’ on your bicycle, and once I get going, I can stay up on it all the way down the street. Pretty please? I’ll do your chores as payment. I won’t make it all the way over there and back in time for dinner if I don’t have the bicycle.”

“Maybe your mama can take you next week after she’s done volunteering at the hospital,” Clarissa suggested.

Clarissa needed to just mind her own bee’s wax. “I can’t wait ’til next week. Plus, I don’t want Mama hanging ‘round.” I turned back to Adie. “You know she’ll start telling me what to do. Please Adie?” I gave her my most pleading look ever. Our mama was a good mama, but she *never* stopped giving me advice, and if she went with me to work on my project, it would turn into *her* project.

“Now I’ve said no, and I’m not gonna change my mind. Maybe you can take it on Saturday, but I’m promising nothin’.”

It was too many days away, and I knew what would happen. Saturday would come along, and Adie would find some kind of excuse why I couldn’t use it. But I still had the secret. She didn’t know it, but she’d be begging me to take it by the time we were done talking.

“Okay, I’ll ask on Saturday,” I said, pretending to give in. I rolled from my side onto my stomach and rested my chin on my hands, squishing my bottom lip against my top lip.

“Why don’t you go find something else to do?” Clarissa had been sorting through her jewelry box, but turned and gave me one of her grumpy frowns. She was always sticking her nose in where it didn’t belong. “Where’s Silas?” she asked. “I bet he’d love to go climb trees or somethin’.”

Commented [CS10]: I think this is just one word?
“beeswax”

Commented [CS11]: Nice
Lots of really great character work so far

“Stinky Silas? No, thank you. And I’m eleven now. Eleven-year-olds do *not* climb trees.”

“My brother is not stinky.” Clarissa placed her hands on her wide hips. “And eleven-year-olds should know better than to lie down on a bed during the day, especially with their shoes on, Emma.”

“Oh fine.” I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “You two just don’t appreciate me, and someday you’ll both wish you’d been nicer. And if I can’t borrow your bicycle tomorrow, Adie, you could at least call me by my full name and stop calling me just Emma.”

Adie rolled her eyes and pinned her last chestnut-colored curl into place. “Okay. Emma . . . leeeena-banana-beena, you better skedaddle so we can finish gettin’ ready for the party.”

Commented [CS12]: Not sure about the punctuation here?

She always did that. If I asked her to call me by my full name, she joked and teased then shooed me away. It made my blood boil hotter than Nana Andrews’s tea water.

I hopped onto the ground and slowly backed toward the door. “Well, like I said, you might wish you’d been nicer to me . . .” I stepped just outside the room and pulled the doorknob almost closed before quickly finishing. “. . . specially if you knew that Eli Chittenden asked me to give you a message.”

Commented [CS13]: nice

I slammed the door hard and took off down the long hallway toward the grand staircase that led down to the front of my aunt’s house. Mama called it a castle in the middle of the city, but it was just their home.

If only Mama hadn’t made me wear those pompous shoes, I could have gone a lot faster. A shriek that sounded a little like my name came from behind me, and I fled down the stairs as quickly as I could.

Chapter 2 - The Sneeze

If there was one thing I wished I could change about my sister more than anything else, it would be to slow her down. Daddy bragged to his friends that Frank, our older brother, was the smartest in the family. He was at university, getting even smarter every day. I was the most determined and hardest working, and Adie was the most beautiful . . . and the fastest runner.

Commented [CS14]: nice

Even though that wasn't an attribute most parents bragged about their daughters, Daddy always added it. He thought her gift of speed topped almost any talent a daughter could have. Once he talked her into racing his friend's son, who was training with his collegiate track and field team. He beat her, but only by half a second.

Right before the bottom of the stairs, I risked glancing over my shoulder. Adie raced down in her stocking feet, taking the steps two at a time.

I used my arm to sling myself like a boomerang around the banister. I was counting on her eventually catching me, but if I could just make it to the kitchen, Cook Maggie would protect me from Adie doing any *bodily harm*. I was Cook Maggie's favorite because I always offered to help set up the table. Lucky for me, that also meant I got my fill of apple tarts every time we visited on a Wednesday afternoon, which we did often. If there was a day Mama hadn't hauled us over to Aunt Delaney's house, then Aunt Delaney hauled Clarissa and Silas to our house.

Just as I got to the hallway leading to the kitchen, Adie grabbed hold of the back of my jumper. My feet flew out in front while the straps dug into my armpits, and this time, I *did* land on my rump—smack down on the carpet.

She jumped in front of me and held her arms out, blocking my way to the kitchen door. I slowly stood with my face downcast and repentant. I rubbed the sore spot on my behind and looked up with my eyes as wide as I could make them.

“I’m sorry, Adie. You shouldn’t have to run after me like that.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t. You should behave more appropriately.”

“I only meant . . .” I slowly stepped closer to her, “. . . that you should run after me more like *this*!” I ducked my head under her left arm and pushed her midsection at the same time.

Commented [CS15]: nice

Luckily, she lost her balance and couldn’t grab hold of me. She wouldn’t want to wrestle, not when she was all dolled up, so I knew she wouldn’t dive for me. I dashed five steps into the first open door in the hallway and slammed it behind me before turning the lock.

Oh no. It was the one room in the house I wasn’t supposed to be in—Uncle Roy’s study. Most people would think that a similar room would have become super dusty since Uncle Roy had been dead for almost ten years. He had passed to the grand beyond. Danced in the shadows of angels. Walked over the great rainbow bridge. These were all the ways Aunt Delaney described Uncle Roy. Why didn’t she just say dead? Either way, the room was spotless and had been ever since I could remember. Aunt Delaney had the housekeepers clean it. Every single day.

Commented [CS16]: nice

Thud! Thud! Thud!

“Emmelena Bennette Perkins, you open up right now!”

Sure, now she decides to use my full name. Adie banged on the door over and over again, but I just glared back at the dark wood with my feet firmly planted. I couldn’t see her, but I could imagine her face just fine, and that made me determined to not move. In a stand off like this, the likelihood of me winning against Adie wasn’t very high, but perhaps just this once, I could do it.

Commented [CS17]: Well...what is her purpose here? Like...she’s running away, she’s afraid Adie will hurt her...but she’s not even asking what the message is and isn’t bargaining for anything in return. What does she want and how is she going to use it?

“Fine,” I heard her huff from the other side of the door. “You’re gonna have to come out sometime. You might as well do it now and save us both a lot of frustration. Just tell me what Eli said, and I’ll give you the last of my Chanel No. 5.”

I could hardly believe it. She must have really wanted to know what he said, or she wouldn't have offered that. I'd been begging for weeks to just get a dash of the stuff, but she would never share any. It wasn't the bicycle, but maybe I could figure out a way to get both.

"You promise?" I asked through the door.

"Yes, I promise. It's almost gone anyway, so I suppose I don't mind giving you the last little bit." She was trying the honesty route. Sometimes, I caved to that one.

"And you'll call me by my full name?"

"I don't know why you don't like Emma. It's a cute name." She sighed so loud I could hear her through the door. "Alright. I'll try to remember to call you Emmalena."

I folded my arms. "What about the bicycle?"

"Emma . . . lena, I can't give it to you tomorrow. Are you sure you can't figure out another way to get there? Or does it have to be tomorrow? Why not Saturday?"

"I have to do a good job on this report, and on Saturday, Mama'll probably be having us clean out the attic or going to visit Nana Andrews. Or if she agrees to take me, she'll take over the report at the same time. Or she'll tell me to just wait until Monday. It'll never work."

"Well, you're not going to get it tomorrow, so you'd better take the perfume or you can just forget it."

I sighed. Once again, she was going to win. I'd have to figure out another way to get to the Dairy. I walked to the door and turned the lock.

Adie pushed her way in and grabbed my braid, pulling hard. "Tell me now."

"Oww! Okay. . . okay. . . he said that he wants you to meet him by the big weepin' willow at eight o'clock tonight."

Commented [CS18]: Is this a small town or a city (earlier the house was a castle in the middle of the city, but a dairy doesn't seem like a place you could bike to? Unless "city" is relative to the characters upbringing, but we don't have enough clues yet to know one way or the other)

Adie let go of me and smirked. “Oh, he did, did he? And he just expects me to do whatever he tells me to?”

“Don’t ask me.” Did she really expect me to know what a boy might be thinking? I mean, he was a *boy*.

“Well, you can tell him—,” she started.

“Hold it.” I held my hands up, palms in her face. “I’m not turning into a message carrier between you and one of your boys. If you want to tell him something, you’d better do it yourself.” Adie had a string of young men vying for her attention, and somehow, those boys always seemed to think they could use me as a way to get it. They had no idea that I had about as much influence on Adie as grain of salt would have on a bowl of peaches.

The front door creaked, and voices drifted through the hallway.

“What was that?” Adie grabbed a hold of my jumper straps, one in each hand. Her eyes widened, and she looked scared half to death.

“It’s probably Mama and Aunt Delaney back from their meeting.”

“But they only left half an hour ago. They don’t get home ’til late from those things,” she half-whispered—mostly to herself.

But, sure enough. We heard Mama’s voice floating through the hallway. “Sorry Delaney. I don’t know what else more to do now that the vote is legal. Some of these women are too afraid to get out and even try.” Her voice was getting louder. They must have been heading in our direction. If they caught us in Uncle Roy’s study, we were goners.

Adie crouched down and looked hard into my eyes. She whispered, “Emmalena, promise to be quiet.”

I glanced down at the shimmery dress she wore and realized that Adie would be in a bigger pickle than me if Mama caught her wearing it. There was no way Mama had given Adie permission to wear that dress. This was my opportunity. I grinned at her.

“If I get the bicycle . . .”

Adie clamped her hand down onto my mouth.

We heard Mama and Aunt Delaney stop at the coat stand just before the mostly closed door to the study, probably taking off their hats and gloves. Adie squeezed her lips tight together and her eyes stared straight into mine, begging me to be quiet, but I raised my eyebrows at her. She knew I was askin’ for her bicycle. She closed her eyes tightly for a couple of seconds then nodded.

I did it! I knew I could do it if I just applied my determined spirit.

“I guess if the amendment isn’t enough, then we’ll just have to take matters into our own hands,” Aunt Delaney said. She must have been having problems with her nasal passages again. She sounded like she had cotton stuffed up her nose.

“You realize that Mildred Brooks hasn’t left her house in almost two weeks now?” Mama asked. “Her husband must be stopping her. I called her up on the ringer, and she didn’t say more than a dozen words before she said she had to go. Why can’t we just call it a victory? We got the vote. Why push for more?”

Commented [CS19]: 1920 then?

“Josephine Perkins, you’re using Mildred as a reason to *not* push for more? It’s not right, Josie. Men control this world and us women-folk have to roll over for whatever they say. I would know.” Aunt Delaney sneezed, and I heard her clutch pop open, probably so she could get a hankie.

They always talked about this stuff. Mama and Aunt Delaney were co-chairs of the Charleston Chapter of the South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. They always told me that it was my responsibility to make sure I stood up for my rights as a woman . . . well, a some-day woman.

"Now you're just exaggerating." I could tell by her tone that Mama was getting frustrated. "My brother was a good husband to you, you know he was. And you're just fueling the fire by going after the mayor like that—demanding that he see you when you haven't even made an appointment."

Aunt Delaney sighed. "I'm afraid it doesn't matter. Somehow I'm becoming obsolete. No one wants to listen to me these days."

"Oh, just stop that nonsense talk."

"Well, no matter what I say to your husband, he refuses to take me to meet your new neighbors, and I'll just have to go on my own, which doesn't usually end up well with these new-money types."

Commented [CS20]: Her husband...they mayor?

"For goodness' sake—the family only moved in three days ago. He's made plans to take us over . . ."

My nose started to **itch**.

How long do we have to stand so still? It's agonizing.

Commented [CS21]: I like this as setting for the story btw—this is very "kid's overhear important things but it doesn't apply to them so they don't care" and I like it.

Adie still had her hand over my mouth, so I tried to pull away from her to get at that itch, but she refused to let me go. Normally, I would just stick my tongue out onto her hand or pinch her, but she might yelp at me. Instead, I gave her a fierce look and pushed at her arm. Her eyes got even wider, and she shook her head no. I tried one last time, but it was too late.

The sneeze of all sneezes had started, and there would be no stopping me. My nostrils flared, and my eyes started to water. Adie stopped pushing so hard and gave me the most confused look ever.

“ACHOO!!!!” I slobbered and sprayed all over her hand.

She shrieked. “You horrible, little . . . *disgusting* . . .”

I used my sleeve to wipe my face, and Adie stared at her snot-sprayed hand as the door slowly opened.

Things we like:

- We get a good sense of the main character’s personality from the first paragraph.
- If her mama went with her to help with a project it would turn into *her* project
- The voice!!!! I am so here for the voice! Some wonderful samples: “They had no idea that I had about as much influence on Adie as grain of salt would have on a bowl of peaches.”
- “Tommy Jeppeson said that if your eyeballs ever come out of your head, you’d have to be careful where you stepped so you didn’t squish them, ‘cause it would be like you stepped on a giant bug, all gushy and gooey. And since Tommy had an older brother studying to be a doctor, we all knew it must be true.”
- I loved the part where Emmalena is confused why her aunt always talks around death rather than just saying “dead.” Seems like a really realistic reaction from a little kid.
- I think this author does a great job telling us the time period without telling us the year. In the first page or so I automatically knew we were around the 1920s because of certain markers--an extremely beaded dress, bobbed hair, etc. By the end we’re talking about suffrage and it’s extra clear.
- Loved the bit after Emma succeeds at blackmailing her sister where she’s so proud of herself, like, “I did it! I knew I could do it if I just applied my determined spirit.”

Things that might need a second look:

- Though Emma’s voice does sound like that of an eleven year old, the plot content of the first few pages struck me as something more tailored to older readers than younger readers. Eleven-year-old readers may have trouble being interested in Adie’s dress and the message from Eli, just like Emma herself isn’t terribly interested in those things.
- “Pompous” seemed like a big word for her to use considering she didn’t know the meaning of eradicate? Maybe this isn’t that much of an issue since I’m not sure she really uses pompous the normal way.