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—Joan Bauer, New York Times Bestselling author
THE SECRET WINNERS CLUB
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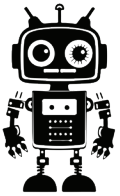


PRAISE FOR *THE SECRET WINNERS CLUB*

"I can't imagine any young person who "looks different" or wonders about those who do, not relating to this honest, carefully crafted story. It is a fine weaving of heartache, grit, humor, and the ethics of what it means to get even. The Secret Winners Club amplifies the voices of kids who struggle to be seen beyond their medical conditions with those who judge by appearance alone. It is an important reminder to young and old to look beyond the surface, to the truth of a person's heart and abilities."

—JOAN BAUER,
New York Times Bestselling author and winner of the Newbery Honor Medal and *LA Times* Book Prize

"The characters in The Secret Winners Club jump off the page. You root for this group of friends as they try to figure out what it means to go after their dreams, to seek help from others, and if winning at any cost is really winning at all. Filled with wisdom and heart, it perfectly fills that gap between middle grade and young adult and will inspire readers to pursue their own goals."

—WENDY MASS,
New York Times Bestselling author of 30+ books for young people

"A heartwarming must-read about friendship, second chances, and overcoming adversity."

—JAIME BERRY,
author of *Heart Finds*

"Middle schoolers of all types, whether athlete, STEM, or theater kid, those with autoimmune disorders or not, will see themselves reflected in this heartfelt tale of teamwork and the cost of striving to be the best. As a competitive swimmer with asthma and a junior high nemesis, I would have gobbled up The Secret Winners Club."

—SHANNON DOLESKI,
author of *Gabe in the After*

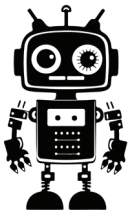
"This is a heart-warming and page-turning read for anyone who has ever felt different. A gift for the misfits and adventurers in our soul. I wish I'd had this book as a kid."

—SARAH ALLEN,
author of *Breathing Underwater*

"The Secret Winners Club is a moving and insightful middle grade novel that explores identity, perseverance, and the actual cost of success. Galanti skillfully captures how the hunger for recognition can sometimes overshadow what truly matters—integrity, empathy, and friendship. The story flows with energy and emotion, blending humor, tension, and heartfelt moments in perfect rhythm. The Secret Winners Club is an inspiring and heartfelt story about courage, friendship, and the power of self-acceptance."

—SUZIE HOUSLEY,
Midwest Book Review

For all the kids that look "different"
my wish for you is this:
embrace your own unique self because
you're special just the way you are.



CHAPTER 1
SUNNY

Sunny pulled the knot tighter on her newly designed headscarf and pushed open the door to Room 203, carrying a shoebox from home. Five minutes late. They'd switched the room on her for after-school STEM Junkbot Club, and she'd gone to the wrong spot first.

Everyone sat hunched over their projects, sprawled in pieces across tables. A few waved at her.

Not Jolie, who scrolled through her phone waiting for her partner. Sunny plopped down beside her. "Hey."

"Hey," Jolie said back, still scrolling.

Somedays it was a "Hi." Somedays a "Hey." Not much different than their one-word conversations since the club started the first week of school at the end of August. Their advisor, Mr. Lawson, had paired the thirty-two club members up to work on their junkbots.

One-word Jolie Kondo was not an ideal partner choice to *finally* win first place in the school's annual junkbot competition and go on to the state contest. They had the most middle school and high school junkbot clubs out of any state in the nation,

and it was the fastest growing STEM club in New York, but this also meant more competition. It was Sunny's last year before high school. She just *had* to win.

The competition loomed over two months away in November, the day before Thanksgiving break, but already after only a few club meetings, Jolie and Sunny were further behind than most teams. Their jumbled box of copper wires, old radios, appliances, broken golf club pieces, and other metal parts sat sadly on the table. They'd reworked their junkbot many times over the past few weeks with little success. Their new idea was a kitchen junkbot using a coffee can, metal spatulas, flattened forks, and mixer parts, but it kept falling over.

Mr. Lawson said experimenting was all part of the process to create robots out of recycled materials. Start with a general idea, then build as you go. A work in progress. Great. Except she and Jolie had no progress.

Maybe if we increased our chats to three-word phrases, we'd get somewhere.

Sunny decided to try.

She set her shoebox down with a loud clunk. "My dad gave me more things we could use."

Jolie peered into the box. She thumbed through small pipes, wiring, transistor radios, and cogs then slid over her own small box on the table. "I brought stuff."

Good job, Sunny. She's graduated to three words.

And Jolie now wanted to contribute to their junkbot. Finally, progress. Except Sunny was determined to only use items from Dad's scrapyard. She had her reasons.

Sunny inspected Jolie's contents with a frown, thinking of how best to reject them. "Wood pieces?"

"It's reclaimed wood." Jolie held up two shapes. "Recycled like your metal parts." She sounded hurt.

"Junkbots—*robots*—are made of metal." Sunny peered around. "No one's using wood here."

Jolie's nostrils flared, but she slid her box away, resuming silence.

Sunny tried to explain better. She held up a metal cross joint. "See this? It could be a—"

Before she could finish, Hannah Brown came over from two tables away. She inspected Sunny's items. "From your dad's junkyard, right?"

"Scrapyard." One-word Sunny was all she'd get. Sunny dumped her box on the table.

"Oh, wow." Hannah leaned in closer. "We should all have a field trip to Mr. Whitlock's *junkyard* to make our *junk*-bots." She glanced at the other teams. No one sat hunched now. They all stared at Sunny, then looked away. The middle overhead fluorescent light blinked its steady on-on-off. "You're so lucky your dad's a junkman to get all this amazing stuff." She drew out the word *amazing* like it was so *not amazing*.

Sunny ignored her as Jolie lined up metal pieces by size and item. Sunny could appreciate her partner's sizing fixation. Everything even. Like on herself. Twin invisible eyebrows. Smooth twin legs. Smoother head. The bonus to losing hair to alopecia. No shaving required.

Hannah picked up pieces of stiff copper wire and waved them about. "What's this for? To make a stick junkbot?" She walked the copper pieces like legs on the desk.

The room erupted in laughter. Sunny snatched the pieces back and placed them neatly where Jolie had set them.

"And my dad isn't a junkman," Sunny said. "He's the owner and operator of Sam's Scrapyard." She pulled out her worn notebook filled with junkbot sketches and spread it open to her newest page idea to share with Jolie.

But Hannah didn't give up. "So, does that make him a scrapman instead?" She chuckled, pointing at Jolie. "What do you think?"

Jolie shrugged, giving Hannah a small smile. "Maybe."

One-word Jolie returned.

Ignoring Hannah, Sunny flipped through her notebook until her nemesis finally headed back to her own table.

"Jealous," Jolie said softly.

"Hannah, jealous of me?"

"Yup."

Totally ridiculous. "Nope."

Jolie shrugged. "Your dad's cool."

He *was* cool, and more importantly, he was around. Hannah's dad, not so much. He divorced Hannah's mom and moved across country to start a new family. But still. Jolie had to be wrong about the jealous part.

Sunny released a deep breath and tugged on the ends of her headscarf for comfort. It showed off her favorite tie-dye combinations. She'd finally got the mix just right with a new dye she'd tried this week.

Jolie eyed her headscarf. "Pretty."

"Thanks." Sunny glanced at Hannah, who swung waves of long blond hair over her shoulder as she sat down next to her partner, Chloe.

I could grab that hair, Sunny thought. *Rip out a chunk. Or two. Or three. Make a wig out of it and wear Hannah's hair while she goes bald. Then she'll beg me to make her a tie-dye scarf!*

She giggled. Jolie gave her a puzzled look.

Sunny laughed harder, scrunching her shoulders, envisioning bald Hannah. She finally calmed down, but when she straightened, her headscarf slid sideways. *Oh, no!* The longest tied end hung in front over her shoulder and was now stuck in the top of her hoodie zipper. She tried to tug the headscarf back on, but it slid farther off her scalp.

Jolie whispered. "Your skin's dyed."

Sunny hunkered down in her chair and scrambled to cover her head, but the headscarf wouldn't sit right. The ends had loosened in her zipper. She blinked back tears. Other kids stared at her.

I will not cry. Especially not in front of Hannah the Horrible. I will not. Not. Not. Not.

"It's kinda cool," Jolie softly offered.

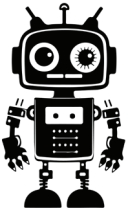
Was she being mean, too? Sunny couldn't tell. Although she didn't sound mean.

Where the heck was their advisor, Mr. Lawson? The high school assistant sat in a corner on the phone, ignoring them as usual.

Tears filled Sunny's eyes. She couldn't hold it much longer.

Jolie nudged Sunny's leg with hers. "Bathroom."

One-word Jolie saved her.



CHAPTER 2
SUNNY

Sunny shoved back her chair and headed for the door, avoiding everyone's stare. She caught sight of herself in the mirror by the door and groaned. Her new tie-dye product *had* bled all over her scalp. *I knew I should have washed this headscarf after making it!* But she'd been so eager to wear it.

She made a dash for the bathroom, the sounds of other club meetings echoing down the empty hallway. By the sink, she yanked off her headscarf. Her entire scalp was totally Planet Earth, blotched with blue and green. She grabbed a wad of paper towels, wet them with soap, and scrubbed her head over the sink with one eye on the door. *Please don't let anyone have to pee right now.*

She scrubbed and scrubbed. The colored hues dulled but not much.

Hair or no hair, you're still the same person inside. Dad's words. He was an expert at being bald ever since he'd shaved his own head to match hers. *Always remember why being bald is super-duper awesome.*

She dried her head as she recited to herself "the seven reasons why" they'd come up with together.

1. Never have a bad hair day.
2. No money on hair products.
3. Ready to go anywhere in no time.
4. Less time in the shower!
5. People notice your eyes more.
6. Change up your look with scarves, hats, or wigs.
7. Beautiful in your own special way.

She was still waiting on the last part of number six; however, wigs cost thousands of dollars. She had applied to the Wigs for Teens organization. They made beautiful free wigs for all kinds of kids. In any hair color. Short or long. From real hair hanks donated. Her application was still in progress since the day she turned thirteen last May, and it could be months until she got her very own designed wig. Then she'd never have a tie-dyed head again. She'd have blond hair, in total rebellion of her mother's black hair.

If my mom was here, I'd tell her why I don't want to look like her—even if she donated hair for my wig, I wouldn't use it.. I may have started out with her black hair, but I'd go bald forever before using anything from her.

But she couldn't tell her all this. Mom was nowhere to be found. The first strike against her? She obviously hadn't wanted to be a mom. She'd left to be a *real artist* when Sunny was born (Sunny had gathered this from bits and pieces Dad told her). Mom hadn't believed junk could be art. Sunny guessed Mom had also been embarrassed by Dad's profession as a scrapman. That was the second strike against her. But Sunny's father, Sam Whitlock, was Dad *and* Mom enough. So, here they were. Just the two of them. Both bald and beautiful in their own special way. One by choice, one not.

She heard footsteps and quickly put her headscarf on, scrambling to tie the ends secure at the base of her neck, but her hands shook, and she missed the knot.

"I can help." Jolie stood in the doorway.

Sunny stiffened, then nodded, pulling the headscarf tight across her scalp. Her pale face glowed sickly yellow under the fluorescent light except for the blue eyebrows she'd penciled in to match today's headscarf. Usually, she loved matching. Her signature style. Not today. She wet a paper towel and scrubbed off the eyebrows until her skin was red.

Jolie came up behind her and knotted the ends. "Good?"

Sunny tested it. "Yeah."

Jolie stepped back. "Maybe get a wig?"

"They're too expensive."

Jolie shrugged. "Okay."

Jolie didn't get it. How could she? Jolie had gorgeous auburn hair (eyebrows complete) and lived in the rich part of Brownsville like Hannah over at Eden Gardens development. They probably had enough money to go anywhere on vacation or buy any clothes they wanted—or a whole set of wigs. Something Sunny could only dream about.

"You don't understand." Sunny stiffened again and headed for a stall to be alone. "You'll *never* understand."

Jolie stepped toward her. "Just helping."

Sunny yanked a stall door open. "Like telling me you think my colored scalp is cool?"

"To help you look at it in a different way."

It was the longest sentence Sunny had ever heard her say. Sunny took a deep breath and turned to Jolie. Maybe she wasn't so bad. A bit shy and awkward. Maybe because she was a new kid in school. But she'd also been nice to Hannah, or at least neutral.

Sunny crossed her arms, leaning on the stall. "Well, you can leave now. I don't need any more help."

Jolie opened her mouth to say something but closed it, crinkling her forehead. She turned with a pause, then left.

Sunny hid in the stall for a couple of minutes, then adjusted her headscarf one last time before heading back to the classroom.

She bumped right into Mr. Lawson, who rushed in late. "Oh, sorry, Sunny." He steadied himself against the doorframe. "Been running behind all day." He grinned and dropped a pile of folders and papers on his desk.

She gave Mr. Lawson the best smile she could manage, then slid into her chair, avoiding Jolie's gaze, but she was good at avoiding, too, rearranging Sunny's scrap heap.

"All right, everyone, I hope you've been working with your partners in my absence." Mr. Lawson snapped his fingers, getting everyone's attention. Even the high school assistant put down his phone. "I'm coming around to check on your progress and answer any questions, then we'll have a technique lesson."

For the next hour, Sunny focused with Jolie on re-creating a new body, or chassis, as Mr. Lawson called it, using scrap parts for their junkbot. But it was still top heavy. One-word Jolie didn't express her thoughts about any of it. She followed along, quieter than usual. But even after the bathroom incident, they still worked well together. Jolie handed Sunny parts until they had the semblance of a new form.

Sunny forgot about Hannah for the most part except when she raised her voice to let everyone know all the wonderful techniques that she and her partner, Chloe, used on their junkbot.

"Check this out, everyone." Mr. Lawson gathered the club around Hannah and Chloe's table. Sunny reluctantly went

over, standing far back as Jolie squeezed into a spot right beside Hannah to see their project.

Mr. Lawson held up the junkbot. "Hannah and Chloe here have created a junkbot with eyes that light up, and it rolls on wheels."

Sunny clenched her fists in her jogger pockets. She hadn't even thought of light-up eyes. Most junkbots were decorative. They didn't move like real robots. Movement involved circuit boards and batteries.

We must build something better. Something to win. So I can be interviewed for the news like each year's winner. This competition is my last chance to be on TV where Mom could see me be a winner … and see what she gave up.

Mr. Lawson explained the mechanics of creating light-up eyes to the club as Sunny seethed inside, sweating under her headscarf. It itched. She dared a small scratch.

Hannah smiled and nudged Jolie next to her, who smiled back.

I should never have trusted Jolie. She'll never be loyal. Not like Vee and Trev.

The thought of her best friends gave her an idea.

They'd help.

Sunny pulled out her phone and sent a group text to them.

emergency mtg you guys! my shed. 5:30

No way could Hannah win.

Sunny would do whatever it took to win the junkbot competition.

No matter what.

Then she'd prove to Hannah, and everyone in Brownsville, that junk is cool and she wasn't trash just because she lived in a mobile home. And she'd prove to Missing Mom that junk *is* art—and make her regret ever leaving her family.

CHAPTER 3
TREV

Trev stepped into the auditorium, already filled with other eighth graders eager to hear the announcement of this year's school play. A warm wave of stale air blew over him along with the scent of musty theater curtains as the room heated up with the crowd. The usual candidates hung out in groups, hoping for their pick. Chorus. Costume design (his fave). Set design. Tech operators (his least fave). Extras. Actors. Lead.

He scrunched up his hands in his jean pockets. *My last year to make lead. Goals.*

Once high school arrived, the competition would explode with kids coming in from all the other middle schools. And he'd still have to contend with people like Will Blakely. Trev tensed. And there stood Will, laughing with his jerk friends as always. He'd been the lead last year. Now his jock friends showed up to try and prevent him from auditioning because "theater was for losers."

Trev wished Will's friends would succeed in keeping him away.

It's not fair if he gets the lead again. It's my turn.

Trev leaned up against the wall, faking a stretch while subtly scratching the back of his hairline so no one would notice. He *could* pretend it was the handsewn embroidered name tag that made him itch on the inside collar of his lucky shirt he wore to every first play meeting. He'd designed it himself with Frank Sinatra's face outlined in black and periwinkle, complete with Frank's classic signature fedora tilting to one side. A cool move for the twentieth century's most popular entertainer. None of the kids here had heard about Frank but Trev, of course, but famous Ol' Blue Eyes gave Trev confidence. He tipped his own fedora down over his face, getting in a good scratch behind his ear as he did, then rubbed the back of his scalp hard into the wall.

Trev wished his shirt was to blame for the itchies, but he'd woken up with two new red psoriasis patches on the back of his hairline. Stress made them spread. And, of course, he had the cold weather now coming up that made it even worse.

He'd meditated every day this week to keep calm in anticipation of today. He'd used his medicated steroid foam and tar gel shampoo. And still, his condition worsened. He should be lucky it was just his head, not whole-body plaque psoriasis like Dad's condition.

The body doesn't lie, Trev Fitch, Mom often said to him. *It's telling you something. So, listen to it.*

Well, right now it's telling me to go home and forget about auditioning for the lead role.

Izzy costume-designer-wanna-be-leading-lady waved at him, and he reluctantly left his scratching post, heading for her group that mingled by the stage.

He didn't get far before one of Will's squad members eyed him and yelled out with a grin. "Hey, Trev, got your lucky shirt on again?"

Trev groaned and wished he'd never mentioned his good luck shirt last year at auditions. The year Will won the lead in *The Outsiders*.

I'm Ponyboy. The ultimate outsider—not perfect-at-everything Will.

The rest of Will's squad twisted around to check out Trev, except Will, who stared down at his feet, shifting them from side to side.

One member pointed at the front of Trev's embroidered shirt, reading the quote. "Leader of the Rat Pack." His voice rose. "Maybe it'll help you get the lead this year."

"Yeah," another said with a chuckle.

Remember what Frank said. "Cock your hats, angles are attitudes."

Trev channeled his hero, angled his hat farther down, and shot Will's jerk friends a cool Frank quote. "The best revenge is massive success."

They looked confused. Will ignored all of this and motioned his friends to the stage, shaking his head.

"Come on, Will, why you wanna do plays anyways?" His friends joked with him. "Let's go play basketball." They tried to herd him to the back of the theater, but he resisted.

"Idiots!" Izzy stuck her tongue out at Will and his friends, then tugged Trev over to her group. "Who cares about Will. They'll never give him the lead two years in a row."

She peered up at Trev, her freckled face flushed, still clutching his arm.

The other kids in Izzy's group nodded.

But Trev wasn't so sure. Burning daggers bit into his scalp. He balled up his fists, pushing them against his thighs. No way would he dig his fingers into his head here in front of Will. From Trev's peripheral vision, he searched for white scalp flakes lining his shoulders. *No one can see them. You're wearing light gray. It doesn't show.*

Mr. Wilks distracted Trev's deep-seated itch as the play director rushed onto the stage in a flurry, dropping papers and a clipboard. "Hello, everyone!" He gathered his things and stood, sweating under the bright lights. "Take a seat, please."

Three other teachers working the play filed in together and stood on either side of him, holding their own clipboards. The room quieted down as everyone shuffled to sit.

Izzy pulled Trev next to her toward an empty front row of seats near the end. "Always be in front to be noticed," she whispered.

"Okay," he whispered back, loosening his hand from hers, then inhaled a sharp breath.

Elliott Andino stepped into the auditorium. He shifted his eyes about, casually holding his backpack strap on one shoulder. Izzy waved him over.

Trev slowly exhaled and stiffened as Elliott pulled down the wooden seat next to him. It slapped back up with an echoing whack. All heads turned their way. Trev yanked the vintage seat open and held it down. Elliott cast him a grateful smile and sat, stretching his long legs out after plopping his backpack on the floor.

"Had to leave practice early to get here," Elliott said, glancing at him as Mr. Wilks consulted with the other theater advisors. "I've never been in a play before."

I know, Trev wanted to say. Instead, he went with a vague, "Sure."

"You're Trevor Fitch, right?"

Elliott Andino knows my name! My whole name!

Trev could barely squeak out, "Yeah."

"I'm Elliott Andino."

"I know," he said, trying to sound cool.

Elliott looked surprised at that, then slid down farther in his seat. He appeared as uncomfortable in a theater as Trev felt being called to pitch baseball in gym class. But the field is where Elliott ruled. Trev had dragged his best friends Vee and Sunny to see Elliott play every home game since last season just so they could follow number eleven on the field, *Andino* blazing in white across his blue Brownsville Bears jersey.

And now Elliott sat here, radiating heat from practice and smelling like Epic Sky. The same Axe deodorant Trev wore. Except he was pretty sure he didn't smell epic like Elliott.

My new name for him. Epic Elliott.

He *was* epic with his clear, fair skin, classic Roman nose (Sunny's description, not his), and black curls that were currently stuck to his forehead. He swiped a hand across it, and Trev squished himself tighter in his seat.

Don't scratch. Don't scratch. Don't scratch. Not next to Elliott.

That would NOT be epic.