

*Whispers*

*Whispers*

*Extraordinary Book 1*

Feather Chelle



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This book is dedicated to my amazing family, who allowed me to be who I am and supported me every step of my journey. I love you all so much and have no idea where I might be without you.

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### A Note from the Author

I had this idea of creating a series of books to spotlight a number of extraordinary children in the middle grades. I would interview actual people and spread awareness of a

multitude of challenges that students face. I would celebrate their differences and bring to light the very real struggles that they encounter every day.

When I began to brainstorm the kinds of people that I might like to interview, I realized that I had my own story to share.

Having grown up totally blind in West Texas, I definitely know how it feels to stand out in a crowd. So, I decided to write the first book in this series about my own experiences. This proved to be much more difficult than I had imagined it would be, but my fondest hope is that my story can help others who have felt the sting of whispers or the scars from being teased at school as I was.

Although this story is based on the struggles I faced during middle school, I have changed the names of all the characters to protect the privacy of the real people in my life. Some of the scenes have been adapted for creative purposes, but the bulk of this book is true. Even though I am loath to reveal my age, I feel that it's necessary to inform you that this part of my story occurred during the 1990s. Technology was far from what it is today. For the most part, the machines I used were bulky and quite different from those used by my classmates. This made me stick out like a sore thumb, and it took me a long time to come to terms with myself and the myriad ways I am unique.

# Chapter 1

## Butterflies

Sunday evening means enjoying hot apple cider, sitting at the kitchen table with my grandma while she reads a book out loud. Tonight, we're reading *The Further Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, just the humor I need to distract me from worrying about tomorrow. The slow, soothing cadence of my grandma's Northern Louisiana drawl and the warm, spicy sweetness melt away my fears. Before long, we are swept away by the antics of Huck and Jim to a time long, long ago.

Just as the guys cause a glorious uproar at a Baptist revival, the phone rings, and we're brought back to reality.

Grandma answers the phone and sighs. "Well, it's for you, of course. Don't talk too long. You have to get up very early tomorrow."

I grab the cordless phone and scamper off to *11*

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my bedroom, which was once the dining room. Last year, my mom started truck driving around the country to make more money, and I've been living with my Grandma Rachel. My older sister, Justice, has been living with my Aunt Jenny, and my baby brother, Dusty, went to live with his dad. We don't get to see him much anymore.

"Hello," I say, flopping down on my bed.

"Hey, Amber," says Marie. "Let's call Kat on three-way."

“Yes!” I exclaim. A chat with my two best friends is just what I need to calm the butterflies that are already fluttering in my stomach again.

I met Kat and Marie last year in fifth grade, and we’ve been inseparable ever since. We’re all so different, but we have so much fun together. Marie is fragile, petite, and timid. Kat is wild and quirky.

And I... well... I don’t know what I am.

My name is Amber Cheyenne Douglass. I know!

I have three first names.

I’ve been totally blind since I was about three years old because I had a type of cancer called retinoblastoma. The doctors had to remove both of my eyes, so now I have glass eyes, or prosthetics.

They’re modeled after my mama’s eyes, which are a *12*

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beautiful blue, or so I’m told. I keep asking for purple eyes, but they just laugh and make the blue ones instead.

Boy, have I played some tricks on people with these prosthetics! Because they look so real, I can really freak people out sometimes. I figured this out a few summers ago, when I jumped off the diving board for the first time. The rush of the water dislodged one of my eyes. A merry search ensued that was made very difficult by the fact that my eye was blue and lost in the deep end of the pool. Of course the whole thing was hilarious to me.

Since then, I've even gotten my family in on the fun. Just last year, my mom put an old pair of my eyes in the punch bowl at Halloween. (Don't worry.

They were sanitized.) You should have heard the ruckus that caused.

When Kat joins our call, we talk about how much we're going to miss each other this year.

We're starting sixth grade tomorrow, but we'll all be going to different schools. I can't imagine school without my two best friends.

By the end of our fifteen-minute conversation, it feels like the butterflies in my stomach have morphed into bumblebees. Grandma comes in and *13*

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gives me one of her amazing hugs.

"Which new outfit do you want to wear tomorrow?" she asks brightly.

Just a few days ago, she and I went on a special shopping trip to buy new clothes for this occasion.

In elementary school, I wanted to wear a dress to school every day. My mom would fix my hair with pretty bows, and everyone would say I was such a pretty little blind girl. They would say I was amazing for being able to walk and talk and wipe my own butt. I guess people think they would just be stuck in bed all the time if their eyes didn't work.

I don't remember seeing, so being blind is just normal to me. I really don't see what all the fuss is about.

All the attention makes me uncomfortable sometimes, but I guess it went to my head as a little kid. One day, in fourth grade, I started crying when I got home from school. When my mom asked me what was wrong, I said, “No one told me I was pretty all day today. I’m never wearing this dress again!”

Anyhow, this year, I’ve decided that I’m not a little kid anymore. There will be no more dresses and bows. I select a new pants outfit. The top has a *14*

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netted overlay sewn on the front with flowers stitched onto it that I can feel. I always love it when things are textured. It makes them come alive for me. Clothing with no texture is like a bleak, empty canvas, no matter how vibrant they may look.

After I lay out my clothes, I take a bath. I even wash my hair, which I really hate to do because I despise putting my ears underwater. I rely on my hearing so much that covering my ears with anything is like a sighted person putting on a blindfold. Every time I have to do a project in school, they make me do it about Helen Keller, a famous lady who was both deaf and blind. I can’t imagine a worse fate.

I brush my teeth, then sit in front of Grandma’s recliner. She combs my hair with detangler as we talk. I have very long, fine hair that is supposedly

“dirty blonde.” My mom and grandma always complain because it tangles so easily. Mom calls it

“Barbie doll hair,” and they’re always trying to convince me to cut it short.



My grandma has always been my favorite person in the whole wide world. I can tell her anything, and she always has a way of making everything right. I tell her about my worries, and *15*

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she reminds me of how much I love school. She says I'll make new friends, and I'll be able to visit Marie and Kat on weekends and holidays. I remember how excited I was when I learned we would get to choose elective classes this year, and I start to feel a little better.

As Grandma tucks me into bed, I can't help thinking that I'm getting a little too old for this, but it feels good anyhow. She kisses me on the top of my head, and feeling clean and cozy, I drift off to sleep.

## Chapter 2

### So Early!

“Amber! Time to get up!” calls Grandma.

“Okay,” I mumble as I roll over to get more comfortable.

“Come on. Get up. I made cinnamon rolls,” says Grandma as she comes back into my room.

“Okay, I’m getting up,” I mutter as I sit up groggily.

I stretch and let out a squeal. The heavenly smell of fresh cinnamon rolls pours from the kitchen into the dining room, where I sleep. I press a large button on a talking clock next to my bed.

With a loud *bing*, it proclaims, “It is 5:40 a.m.!”

“Wow! I could sleep like four more hours,” I say, clambering to my feet.

After visiting the bathroom, I stumble into the kitchen, where a pan of fresh, warm pastries sits in the middle of the table. I plop into a chair and slide *17*

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the entire pan in front of me. With great enthusiasm, I begin to devour them.

As I’m eating, my Uncle Dylan, who is a junior in high school, walks into the kitchen.

“Am I going to get any of those?” he asks.

With a devious smile, I wrap both of my arms around the pan.

“Just one?” he pleads.

“Okay,” I say, “but only one.”

With a laugh, he scoops up a cinnamon roll and strolls out of the kitchen.

“Good thing I stole mine before you got up,”

says Grandma as she sits down next to me.

We have a laugh together as I make short work of the pastries. Then I begin to get ready for school.

At exactly 6:30, I hear a loud honk outside. The bus has arrived. I grab my backpack, unfold my white cane, hug Grandma, and head out the door.

Since I have to go to a school across town with all the other students with visual impairments, they send a special bus to pick me up every morning.

Visual impairment is just a fancy way of saying someone has trouble seeing, and having no real eyes definitely qualifies me.

Since Aunt Jenny lives close to my school, my *18*

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sister will be going to the same school as me for the first time since second grade. She’s a year older than me, but we’ll be in the same grade this year because she’s having to repeat the sixth grade. She hasn’t been taking our family

stuff very well, so she's started acting out the last couple of years.

I'm the first kid on the bus, but I have the same driver and assistant as last year.

"Hello," I say as I climb aboard.

"Hey, Amber. Your usual seat is open," says the driver.

I thank her and walk past the front of the bus, which is designated for wheelchairs. I go halfway back and sit in the second seat on my left.

"How was your summer?" the assistant asks as I buckle my seat belt.

"Great," I say as I pull out my favorite contraption. "I went to the school for the blind for summer camp and made lots of friends."

"That is so cool," the assistant says, settling into the front seat across the aisle. "Are you going to stay in touch with them?"

"I've been writing them letters since I got home," I say. "The neat thing is that I get to mail braille letters for free."

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Braille is a system of dots, poked into paper, that make letters, numbers, and punctuation.

People who are blind can feel the dots and use this system to read.

“Wow! You can’t beat that,” she chuckles as the bus begins to roll.

With a grin, I put in my earbuds and plug them into my little device. It’s a talking dictionary, called a Language Master. I can type in any word in the English language, and it will read me the definition.

It also has a thesaurus and ten word games. I play my favorite games of Hangman, Anagrams, and Word Train as we travel around the city, gathering students with disabilities.

I know we’ve arrived to pick up Joshua when I hear the screech of the wheelchair lift being deployed. I remove my earbuds and talk with him about his summer for a short while. He has cerebral palsy, or CP for short. I’ve known him since third grade, when we started riding the bus together.

This will be the first year we attend the same school, though.

Joshua is in a motorized wheelchair and has trouble using his hands because he says they don’t listen to his brain very well. Even though his speech

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was hard for me to understand at first, I really enjoy talking to him. He’s very nice and has a great sense of humor about his disability. He really loves to make people smile.

After about an hour, we finally make it to our middle school. I run off the bus while the assistant and driver unload Joshua.

“Straight ahead to the double doors,” says the driver as I skip off, wildly unfolding my cane.

The campus is empty and quiet this early in the morning, and I wonder if the doors will even be unlocked. As I approach, they open, and a lady rushes by me to collect Joshua.

“I believe there’s someone waiting for you just inside the cafeteria,” she calls as she hurries past.

I open the door and step into a large, echoing room. This must be the cafeteria.

“Hello, Amber. My name is Lori Lovet,” calls a voice. “I’ll be your new VI teacher.”

A VI teacher is a teacher who helps students with visual impairments, those who are either blind or don’t see very well. They convert our assignments into braille, orient us, and help us to function as normally as possible in school.

“Hello,” I say. “Nice to meet you.”

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“Would you like to grab breakfast before I show you around?” she asks.

“No thanks,” I say. “I ate about six cinnamon rolls before I got here this morning.”

With a laugh, she says, “Well, sounds like you should be set until lunch. If you’ll take my arm, I’ll show you to all your classes before everyone else gets here.”

I thank her and reach out to hold her arm just above the elbow. This is the approved “sighted guide method” that I use with people in school. It’s handy because the guide is able to move their arm behind their back to indicate that there’s a tight space up ahead. You can also feel if the guide is stepping up or down in time to adjust your steps accordingly.

Even though I know this sighted guide method works best, I rarely use it with my friends and family. In fact, everyone has a different way of guiding me when we go places. I hold hands with my mom, grandma, and aunts. I link arms with most of my friends, and my sister usually leads me around by the back of my neck. I grumble about it when she uses my neck like a gaming joystick, but I actually think it’s funny, kind of our special thing.

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Mrs. Lovet shows me how to find the office, the restrooms, and all my classes. Then we enter a small room inside the library. This is going to be her headquarters. All my braille textbooks are stored here, as well as a computer with screen reading software that I can use. The computer is connected to a braille embosser, or printer, that she will use to convert worksheets and handouts for me.

Braille takes up so much room that one textbook is usually about twenty to thirty volumes.

Regular chapter books are generally between two and four volumes in braille, which means that my backpack is almost bigger than I am because I absolutely love to read.

Excitedly, Mrs. Lovet tells me that I'll be spending first period with her. We settle in and talk about some new technology she would like me to try out this year. When I was in elementary school, I had a big table to myself in my classroom to accommodate my large textbooks and braille machine. I would write all my answers in braille, and my VI teacher would transcribe them, or write them in print, for my teacher. This worked out well when I stayed in one classroom most of the time. In 23

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middle school, I'll be moving between several classes every day, so we'll definitely have to do some adapting.

Time flies by, and I'm lulled into a sense of contentment. When the bell rings, crowds of noisy students burst into the halls. Suddenly, the butterflies are back with a vengeance.



# Chapter 3

## The First Day Blues

Mrs. Lovet walks with me to my second period class to meet my homeroom teacher. Mrs. Thomas will be teaching language arts and is very warm and welcoming. She shows me to a seat in the front row, where I sit down and fold my cane nervously.

None of my classmates speak to me as they take their seats. This feels odd. Every time I started a new school year in the past, kids asked me a thousand questions about what I can see and the equipment I use. I didn't mind their curiosity. I would even let them play with my cane or braille typewriter if they were interested. Last year, I actually taught the braille alphabet to my best friends, Marie and Kat. I would type them notes in braille, and they would make notes for me with dots of glue on paper.

My next classes are math, social studies, and 25

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reading. The teachers seem great, although I get the impression that most of them are uncomfortable with my blindness. When I'm expected to fill out first-day questionnaires, the teachers sit next to me and write my answers. They're so busy, and I can't help but think that I'm a burden.

I don't speak to another student until a girl is asked to help me in the cafeteria at lunch. Selina is very nice, although a bit quiet and shy. I feel a little awkward because she was

asked to spend lunch with me, but we have a decent conversation nonetheless.

After lunch, science class is more of the same.

When I get to physical education, or PE, the coach clearly doesn't know what to do with me. I warm up with the class. However, when it's time to walk and run around the gym, he just asks me to sit on the bleachers. Although I'm thinking that my legs work just fine, I'm too timid to say it out loud. I just play with my Language Master for the rest of the period.

Choir is next. I love to sing, so I'm convinced that my schedule saved the best for last. When I arrive, I discover that my sister is actually in this class with me. She's surrounded by chattering friends and quickly says hello. When we're 26

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separated into groups, I move to the soprano section, and she stands with the altos. To my disappointment, choir is spent studying the clef on the blackboard, while we stand on the risers. It's hot and uncomfortable, and we hardly get to sing at all.

On the way to the bus, I'm shocked when a guy asks to walk with me. He introduces himself and asks me if I'm Destiny's sister. When I say yes, he asks if he can have her phone number. Mortified, I tell him to ask her for it, and he walks away with his friend, laughing.

As they move off down the hall, I hear his friend ask, "Why were you talking to that blind girl? She's dressed like my grandma."

I'm so upset that it's hard to concentrate on where I'm going. It's difficult for me to navigate big crowds during the best of times. When my concentration is broken, you can forget it.

I hurry outside, bumping into many students along the way. This causes more people to stare, and I pretend that I don't hear the kids whispering about the "blind girl" who has to ride "the special bus." The whispers turn into a chorus of raucous shouts as I barrel past.

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"Why are you in such a hurry, blind girl? The special bus won't leave without you."

"Watch it with that stick!"

"She can't watch!"

"Ha, ha! You're wrong for that."

High fives...

Laughs...

Jeers...

I keep my head high while I greet the driver and assistant. Once we're on the road, however, I put my head down and let the tears flow.

I beat everyone home and let myself in with my key. Grabbing handfuls of snacks, I settle down in front of the television to watch my favorite programs. Although I would

never admit it to any of my friends, I absolutely have to watch the *Power Rangers* every day at 4:30.

One of the questions I hear a lot is, "How do you watch TV if you're blind?" My answer is always the same. I listen. You would be surprised how much you can pick up by really listening.

I get comfortable on the floor in front of the TV

and do my best to munch away my sorrows.

Although I begin to relax, I can't stop feeling guilty for causing my teachers extra work. Even worse, I 28

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feel like nothing more than a circus freak, someone at whom students point and laugh.

Why do I have to be so different? Last year, it felt good to be unique and "special." Now I would give anything to just fit in with everyone else.

# Chapter 4

## Bad to Worse

I can't believe that school was once my favorite place to be. Now it's all I can do to drag myself out of bed every morning to get on the bus. I live for the weekends that I spend with Marie and Kat.

Mrs. Lovet loves to try out new technology, and I'm her favorite guinea pig. She found a machine that translates braille into print, but it's a monstrosity. Mrs. Thomas, my homeroom teacher, had her husband design a giant cart for me to transport it. Now I have to leave each period five minutes before the bell rings. This allows me to drag the machine to the next classroom without fighting against the crowds. What's worse, I have to sit in the front of the classroom by the teacher's desk so I can access an electrical outlet.

Many of the students are jealous that I get to leave classes early and make venomous comments *31*

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when the teachers aren't listening. As far as I'm concerned, they could have the stupid cart. I wonder how they would like to stand up in front of the class to pack away their things, feeling all those hot, vengeful eyes trying to burn holes in their skin.

The principal hired a special PE teacher, named Ms. Hanson, to come and instruct the students with disabilities. There are four of us, and we meet in the weight room. I already know

Joshua and a kid named Luis. He's blind, with a bit of a learning disability, and I've known him since first grade.

The best part about this class is that I make a new friend. Her name is Carla, and she's unable to use one of her arms. She's my only friend at school other than Selina, who is still sitting with me at lunch. I don't really talk to Selina outside of lunch, so I'm pretty sure I'm just her daily good deed.

The rest of school is nothing but embarrassment after embarrassment, and I always stand out like a sore thumb. They say that blind people hear better than other people. That's not necessarily true, but we do learn to depend more on our hearing. Sometimes I wish I hadn't honed my hearing to be so sharp because I can hear all the little comments they whisper to each other as I

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pass.

"Do you see what she's wearing today?"

"Why does her eye look off to the side sometimes?"

"Why is one eye bigger than the other?"

"Move before she hits you with that stick."

"Who picks out her clothes?"

"I hope she bumps into that pole."

I do my best not to let my hurt show on the outside. I still enjoy reading and doing my schoolwork, but I wish I could hide in a hole to learn. My teachers are nice, but most of them are still a bit awkward with me.

I've developed a love-hate relationship with my white cane. Every time I have to unfold it five minutes before the bell rings, I feel all the eyes in the room shift to me. It has become my badge of shame.

Since kindergarten, I've had a special teacher take me out of class once a week for a lesson in orientation and mobility. That's just a fancy way of saying getting around. I have a new teacher this year, named Mr. Clinton. He teaches me to travel independently with my cane. This includes crossing streets, locating new places, using public

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transportation, and more.

I don't know if it's because we have opposite personalities or because I now detest my cane.

Whatever it is, Mr. Clinton and I rarely see eye to eye. This is a new experience for me because I've always gotten along well with all my teachers.

Every day is as horrible as the last, and I prefer to sleep or be lost in a book as much as possible.

Thank goodness I have books. They're the best escape from reality I've ever found. When I'm reading a book or writing a story, I can drift off into imagining I'm someone else. I would almost rather be anybody in the world other than me.

Last year, I was a "pretty little blind girl" with neat gadgets. This year, I'm a freak. Sometimes, it even feels like the other kids are afraid that my blindness is catching, like measles.

Why don't they ask me their silly questions instead of whispering them behind my back? Don't they know I can hear them? Don't they know I'm just another kid trying to figure out who I am? Do they suspect that my opinion of myself is changing because of the things they say? I'm beginning to hate everything that I am. I'm deeply ashamed of being me.



# Chapter 5

## Just Let Me Dream!

“Amber! Get up! You’ve already missed the bus, and I have to be to work by nine o’clock,” cries Grandma, ripping my blanket away.

I do my best to ignore the desperation in her voice. If I can just stay in bed a little longer, I won’t have to endure the whispers today. I curl up in a ball and bury my face in the pillow.

“I have to get you to school. If you keep missing, they could come and put me in jail,” says Grandma.

“Surely that can’t be true,” I think. “Who would try to put my grandma, the sweetest lady in the world, in jail, especially for something that’s my fault? It has to be a sneaky tactic to trick me into getting out of bed.”

Sadly, this has become our morning routine.

More often than I like, I lose this battle. Grandma has tried everything she can think of to get me up

*Whispers* and going in the mornings. One day, she even dumped cold water all over me. Who would have thought that such a mild-tempered lady would resort to such drastic measures? Although I tried to be angry, I really admire her grit. Besides, I’ve never managed to be upset with Grandma for long.

Sometimes, like today, I win, but there’s no real sense of victory, only an all-consuming sense of relief as Grandma

finally drives away for work. Yes, I spend my day away from prying eyes and constant whispers. Yes, I get to stay home alone with snacks and books and television.

However, my grandma's disappointment weighs heavily on my soul. It smothers the embers of my enjoyment like a heavy fire blanket on a pitifully dying fire. There's no opinion on the planet that matters more to me than Grandma's. Causing her grief is yet another strike that I hold against myself every day.

I'm beginning to discover that the "three strikes and you're out" rule doesn't count much when it comes to self-esteem. I'm now my own worst critic, and that's saying something because there are plenty of haters judging me from all sides.

I vow to myself that I'll do better going forward 36

*Feather Chel e* and finally relax enough to enjoy my solitude. I eat a bowl of my favorite cereal in front of some morning cartoons. Then I put on an audiobook while I catch up on some homework, then play Solitaire with some braille playing cards. With a wry chuckle, I think, "Who actually does schoolwork on days when they skip school? It isn't the learning I'm trying to escape, just the people."

I fix myself a baked potato in the microwave for lunch. Then I sit down and compose a poem.

The Circus Freak

Everywhere she goes,

People stop and stare.

They point and they whisper,

“Look! What is that over there?”

Does she have two heads?

Is she wearing a disguise?

Does she have an extra limb?

No! It’s worse!

She has fake eyes!

Haven’t you heard?

She could hear a feather drop

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*Whispers* From a hundred miles away.

But she’s too dumb to hear

All the stupid things we say.

Disgusted with my irregular verses, I turn on some music. I sing Mariah Carey songs at the top of my lungs for an hour or so. This has become another escape for me, and I’ve discovered that, surprisingly, I can hit all the notes that she can hit.

I’ve been pretty hard on myself lately, but my voice does sound good. At least I’m still good at something.

By the time Dylan arrives, I’m parked in my customary place on the floor in front of the TV with a pile of snacks.

“Did you enjoy your day, brat?” he says with disgust. “I can’t believe you’re willing to get my mom in trouble just so

you can sit on your butt and eat snacks all day.”

I try to speak, but no words make it past my trembling lips. Dylan stomps away, and I retreat to my bedroom. I put on an audiobook, but I don't even hear it. My mind is a maelstrom of guilt and shame and despair.

When Grandma gets home, her voice is bone 38

*Feather Chel e* weary as she tells me I can't continue to skip school.

I hug her tight and tell her I'm sorry. I say that I'll do better, and I dig down deep to mean the words I'm saying. I go to bed with the best of intentions.

Far too soon, I awake to Grandma's sweet voice and the fragrance of freshly baked blueberry muffins. Even with my newfound resolve and such a heavenly aroma, it's all I can do to drag myself out of bed and prepare for yet another day.

# Chapter 6

## A Glimmer of Hope

When I arrive at school, there's a surprise waiting for me. Mrs. Lovet has hired an assistant to braille my handouts for me. Her name is Evelyn, and we hit it off immediately. It's almost as though we've been family for all of our lives.

With Evelyn doing the braille, Mrs. Lovet is free to show me a neat article she's found. It's about a blind man who became a marine biologist. His story begins by exploring a beach and discovering the joys of collecting sea shells. Mrs. Lovet has even brought an assortment of shells for me to start my very own collection.

As my fingers caress the delicate contours of each piece, my mind drifts away to a summer vacation when I was five years old. The first time I heard the roar of the surf, I squealed in terror. In my mind, it was an enormous living creature, just *41*

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waiting to swallow me whole. The instant the first wave crashed against my feet, however, I felt the pull of the ocean take hold of my heart. It sparked a deep longing and a connection I didn't understand.

I've never been back, but the wonder and allure of the ocean still beckon to me from my memories.

The simple thought of making a career out of something I love so much brings me back to life inside. I can't stop imagining the adventures I'll have exploring the sea and the

amazing creatures that dwell within its depths. The fact that a blind person is already paving the way for others to follow in this field is a great inspiration to me.

My heart soars as I trace the countless bumps, ridges, spirals, lines, and glassy smooth insides of my new sea shells. Each one is so different, and the tiny imperfections only make them more beautiful and more interesting. It's magical to think of the tiny, fragile creatures that once called them home.

What caused each little dent and fracture?

My imagination breathes life into a stunning variety of little shellfish, each one more uniquely lovely than the last. I wonder what they must think as they rest at the bottom of the sparkling sea or on bright, sunny beaches. I wonder if they ever think 42

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twice about being different from those around them.

"Of course not, silly," I think. "They have much more important worries, like hungry fish and birds."

Running my finger along a jagged hole in one shell, I realize that I might not have it quite so bad after all.

With my newly rekindled love of learning, I set out to read everything I can find about the ocean. I read articles online and order books from the Talking Book Library. They're funded by the government and provide braille and audiobooks for people with disabilities. Thankfully, they have a wide selection of books from which to choose. I'm always anxious to check the mail when I get home to see if I

have new books or letters from my blind pen pals that I met at summer camp.

I grow very close to Evelyn, and I even visit her home on weekends sometimes. I go to church with my piano teacher, Ms. Baker, every Sunday. I'm often the only kid at this church, and we spend a quiet afternoon sampling new cuisine together afterward. I see the few friends I have less and less.

I don't know why I feel more comfortable around 43

### *Whispers*

grownups these days.

School drags on and on with more of the same until one glorious day in my language arts class.

Mrs. Thomas is one of the best teachers I've ever had, and I always enjoy her teaching. Today we begin the book *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O'Dell. Mrs. Thomas reads the first chapter aloud, and I am absolutely enthralled.

At the end of class, she passes out a flyer about our very first school dance. I've often dreamed of attending a dance, but I never really thought that day would come.

I begin to fantasize about dancing with Jacob, the cutest guy in school. He's the one that all the girls talk about, but that isn't why he makes my heart beat quickly. Jacob is quiet, polite, and extremely self-assured. He's kind and humble, almost as if he has no idea that he's the handsomest guy in the sixth grade. The best part about him, though, is that he never participates when the other kids are talking about me. In fact, I've even heard him defending me and telling people to lay off if he overhears them being cruel.

Deep down, I know that Jacob could never be interested in someone like me, especially when he 44

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could be with any girl in the school. Even so, I can't stop dancing the night away with him in my daydreams.

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# Chapter 7

## The Dance

The Friday of the dance finally arrives, and I'm floating on air all day. If there are whispers at school, I don't hear them. I'm determined not to let anything spoil my mood today.

When I get home earlier than everyone else, I'm so anxious that I can't stop pacing. In about an hour, Dylan arrives with his girlfriend, Lydia. She volunteered to help me get ready and has brought along an impressive arsenal of makeup and hair products.

Excitedly, I slip into my new dress. It's pastel pink with silky frills and white lace. As I sit down nervously, Lydia gets to work curling my hair into ringlets. It requires quite a bit of hair spray to keep it in place because my hair is long and straight as a board. It takes Lydia over an hour to curl and tease my hair.

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### *Whispers*

Then she begins on my makeup. I can hardly believe that I'm wearing makeup for the first time and going to my very first school dance.

The dance starts at 7:00, and we rush out the door just in time. As soon as I step out of the car, I can hear the music blasting from the school gym.

With a huge smile, I wave goodbye and skip toward the party.

As I approach the building, I reluctantly unfold my cane. I begin to walk very carefully. The last thing I want to do is bump into someone now.

The principal greets me at the door and asks a chaperone to guide me to a seat. I sit nervously, folding my cane and hiding it under the seat. I sit up straight, gazing around the gym in different directions, trying to make out the conversations going on around me. It's no use. I catch snippets of conversations, the occasional whistle or cat call, but nothing of any real substance. To my astonishment, I begin to feel like Helen Keller, blind and deaf to the world around me. I try to relax and enjoy the music, but I'm a quivering ball of nerves.

I smell refreshments nearby, and my stomach begins to grumble. With a start, I realize that I haven't eaten anything since lunch. It's very unlike *48*

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me to miss a snack, but I was so anxious to get here that eating never crossed my mind. There's no way I'm going to unfold my cane again and draw attention to myself. It's so loud and crowded that I can't even remember where the door is. I'll just have to eat when I get home.

I sit awkwardly for over an hour before Carla finally finds me. I'm so relieved as she sits next to me. Even though it's really too loud to talk to each other, it feels so much better just to have a friend with me.

After a few moments, our favorite song starts playing. With a whoop, Carla grabs my hand and pulls me out onto the dance floor. She tries to show me the moves, but my body feels frozen. I make a jerky, half-hearted attempt, then just wrap my arms around myself in embarrassment.

Harsh laughter filters to me through the music, and I wait in shame for Carla to finish her dancing.

As we go back to our seats, Carla asks if I would like some food, but my appetite has fled. I keep my head held high, my lips tight in a grimace of a smile. Why did I want to come here in the first place? I should have known it would be more of the same.

The evening passes in agonizing slowness, with 49

### *Whispers*

not a single person asking me to dance. On the next-to-last song, Carla excuses herself for a moment. By this point, I'm simply numb and can't wait to go home and hide in my room for the weekend.

As the DJ announces the last dance, I feel a warm hand on my shoulder.

"Excuse me," says a low, soft voice. "Would you like to dance?"

Dumbstruck, I realize that it's Jacob. My heart flutters wildly as I stumble to my feet. Threading his arm through mine, Jacob leads me onto the dance floor. He wraps his arms around my waist, and we begin to sway gently.

"You look beautiful," he says shyly.

"Th-thank you," I stammer, and we spend the rest of the dance in timid silence.

As the song ends, Jacob walks me back to Carla and says, "Goodnight," patting my arm sweetly. Still in a daze, I don't

manage to speak before he's swept away with the tide of people exiting the gym.

"So, how was it?" bubbles Carla, linking her arm with mine.

With a squeal, I hide my face with my free hand as she giggles.

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With the absence of the music, it isn't long before a derisive laugh breaks through my euphoria.

"Ha! Look! She actually thinks that Jacob likes her like that."

"Girl, be nice. She looks so happy."

Then, in a stage whisper, the first girl says, "The only reason he danced with her is because that one-armed girl asked him to."

Mortified, I stop and turn to stare at Carla.

"How could you do that to me?" I whisper in shock.

"I just wanted you to have a good time. I know how much you like him, and I just thought..."

Unable to listen, I let go of her and begin to bolt frantically toward the street where Grandma will be picking me up.

"Wait!" cries Carla as she moves quickly in my wake. "I have your cane. I'm so sorry. I just wanted to help."

"Wow! What's wrong with *her*?" someone says.

“She’s so ungrateful.”

“See, that’s what people get for trying to help handicapped people.”

“Who dressed her up like some little porcelain 51

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doll, anyway?”

Making it to the street, I try desperately to catch my breath. Wrapping my arms across my stomach, I wish I could fly far away.

Puffing, Carla catches up and tries to put her arm around me. I cringe and hug myself tighter, so she taps me gently with my cane.

When I finally take it, she says, “I really am sorry.”

I nod, unable to speak. All I can think is that I am never wearing pink or frilly dresses again for as long as I live.

# Chapter 8

## The Clown

I spend the weekend in my bedroom, reading and avoiding people. I don't go to church on Sunday, and I don't even talk to my friends on the phone.

Monday morning arrives way too soon, and despite my promise not to fight it, another battle ensues. This time, Grandma wins, and I'm off to school, hating myself for causing her more trouble.

In my first class, Evelyn has a gift waiting for me and wants to hear all about the dance. I try to be enthusiastic about it, but I'm sure she sees right through me. Evelyn sells cosmetics and makes jewelry to sell. She's made a beautiful butterfly brooch just for me. It's silver with a heart-shaped body, and the wings even move a bit. Thank goodness I have Evelyn during first period. Without her, I don't know how I would gather the strength to get through each day.

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### *Whispers*

The rest of the morning goes by in a blur. To my surprise, during lunch, two girls ask if they can sit with Selina and me. Their names are Megan and Brandy, and the four of us chat quite a bit. I'm floating on air the rest of the day because I finally made some new friends. In PE class, I even forget that I'm angry at Carla, and I give her a big hug, telling her all about my new friends.

Megan and Brandy sit with us all week, and they ask if I want to spend the weekend with them at Megan's house. I get permission from Grandma, and I ride home from school to Megan's house on Friday afternoon.

I feel bad for Megan because her house is so dirty that it's literally hard to breathe. They have so many animals! Every time one of them has an accident in the house, they just throw a newspaper over it. When they offer me food or something to drink, I politely decline. How in the world am I going to stay here an entire weekend? Megan and I share a twin bed to sleep, and I stay awake all night, thinking about how I'm going to call Grandma to pick me up in the morning.

When morning finally comes, however, we become caught up with plans to go to the mall. I've 54

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been to the mall with Marie and Kat, of course, but this will be the first time I go with kids from my new school. We spend a great deal of time getting ready. The girls ask if they can help me choose an outfit and do my makeup. Of course I'm honored.

As we're walking out the door, I say, "Do you mind if I walk with you and leave my cane behind?"

People always stare at me when I use it."

"Of course not," says Brandy. "You can walk with me."

"Or me," says Megan.

Relieved, I leave my cane folded in my backpack.

When we get to the mall, I'm so hungry and thirsty! We stop at the pretzel place, and I order a big, soft Parmesan pretzel and a Coke. This is the first thing I've eaten since lunch yesterday, and it's all I can do not to order more.

We eat quickly at a small table in the food court before beginning our cruise around the mall. As we start to walk, I hear lots of snickering and whispering. The mall is very crowded and echoey, so I can't really make out what people are saying.

What's even stranger is that I can't help but notice that Megan and Brandy keep nudging each other 55

### *Whispers*

and shaking with silent laughter. I begin to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"What's so funny?" I ask quietly.

"Oh, nothing," Megan says.

"Just this guy making really weird faces," says Brandy, and they both dissolve into giggles.

This continues for an hour, and I know that everyone has to be laughing at me. Do they really expect me to believe that some random guy is following us around for this long making funny faces? When I tell them I'm ready to go home, however, they say that Megan's mom can't come for another hour. I'm trapped. Time passes more slowly than it ever has before for me.

Finally, we get picked up, and I rush to Megan's phone and call Grandma. I gather my things, and Megan tells me I can keep the clothes I'm wearing.



When my Aunt Sherrell arrives to pick me up, she's appalled.

"What are you wearing?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "Let's just go."

As we drive away, my aunt tells me that I'm wearing some neon pink shorts with a baby-poop green shirt. She says my face is made up like a clown, and I just want to die. Now I know exactly 56

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why everyone has been laughing so hard. How am I ever going to show my face in public again?

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## Chapter 9

### Home for Christmas

The rest of the fall semester drags on, and I've mostly accepted my role as freak at school. I've switched to wearing jeans and T-shirts so they can't say I dress like a grandma anymore. Even so, I've learned that they'll always find something to talk about.

In October, Mrs. Thomas informs us that we'll be taking a class field trip to a nearby Renaissance Festival. Despite myself, I spend that outing with Selina, and it's the best day I can remember having had in a long time. We sample interesting food, watch jousting contests, buy interesting little trinkets, and even get our fortunes told. I'm told that I "must traverse a period of intense darkness, but there is a bright light far away on the horizon."

It's a little vague, but I'll take any sign of happier times ahead.

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When I get home from the festival, I get a call from Mom. She's actually coming home for Christmas! I'm so excited that I don't even notice the whispers at school for the next several weeks.

When the holidays finally arrive, I want to do something special for Mom. I write her a heartfelt poem and type it out very neatly on Grandma's old typewriter. I really wish I could do more, but I'm sure she'll understand.

Wonder of all wonders, Mom is finally here! We can't believe how many presents she's brought. The space beneath the tree is so full that we have to stack presents all around the room. Mom keeps teasing me and telling me to stay away from the presents. That's because I have an uncanny ability to feel a package, shake it, and figure out what's inside. She refuses to tell me which one is for whom, but I figure out some of them anyhow.

With Mom home, we have a steady stream of visitors every day. Mom has a lot of friends, and someone is always stopping by to chat for a while. I just sit on the ground by Mom's chair and hug her leg for hours at a time. She plays with my hair and strokes my back, and I haven't been happier all year. I wish I could just freeze these moments and 60

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stay like this forever.

On Christmas Eve, our whole family is together.

Of course Grandma, Mom, Uncle Dylan, Lydia, and I are here. Aunt Sherrell is here with Uncle Javier, Cori, and Cody. Aunt Jenny brings her famous spinach dip, along with Uncle Dave and my sister, Justice. My Papa and his wife, Gina, have come, and I'm always overjoyed to spend time with them.

Even my baby brother, Dusty, is here, running around and causing mischief, as usual. I've really missed the little booger.

Mom allows each of us to open one present on Christmas Eve. I get a bottle of vanilla-scented perfume. Mom has gotten the neatest gift for Papa and Gina. They like to travel

a lot, and Mom got them a road atlas of the United States with a \$100

bill on each page. I guess truck driving is really paying off.

We munch on chips and queso, a veggie tray, spinach dip, sausage cheese balls, and Grandma's fudge. I carry Cori and Cody around everywhere, getting them to say new words. I absolutely adore babies and toddlers. I chase Dusty around and tickle him until he can't take it anymore. I even get into a wrestling match with Dylan, like old times, *61*

### *Whispers*

and Dusty gets in on the fun. I attack Dylan over and over, and he throws me around the room. It's so much fun! He once told my grandma that he loved to wrestle me because he could do anything to me, and I would bounce right back for more.

After all the excitement, I sleep very soundly.

On Christmas morning, I wake up early to help Mom and Grandma with the cooking. I crumble bread and cornbread for Grandma's amazing dressing, make a delicious fruit salad, and even learn how to make my favorite dessert, cherry cheesecake.

Everyone is back today with tons of scrumptious food to share. We have turkey, ham, dressing, mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, green bean casserole, Mexican corn casserole, another casserole of broccoli, rice, and cheese, fruit salad, and sweet potato soufflé. For dessert, we have pumpkin pie, cherry pie, apple pie, German chocolate cake, rice pudding, and cherry cheesecake.

When it's time to open gifts, I'm overwhelmed with Mom's generosity. I get many nice clothes, new albums, and two pieces of real jewelry: a sterling silver necklace with an angel on it and a 62

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gold charm bracelet. I'm entranced by the intricate little charms and the way they jingle on my wrist.

My favorite charm is a tiny bicycle with wheels that actually spin.

I sit and idly spin the wheels as I listen to the happy chatter around me. These rare, precious moments are like an oasis in the desert. I've learned to appreciate them as they come because you never know what tomorrow will bring.

Once all the food has been put away and everyone has gone, we settle in for a relaxing evening. Mom gets comfortable while I listen to my new music. Before long, I'm lost in a world of my own, really belting out the lyrics. As the song comes to an end, I hear my mom laughing fit to burst.

Confused, I turn to her.

"You should see the faces you make," she wheezes, practically in tears.

Dejected, I turn away. I feel like a hot air balloon that's been punctured. All the happiness from the past few weeks drains away, and I'm left feeling emptier and more broken than I had ever thought possible.

How could simple words hurt so much? My mom isn't a mean person. Surely many singers 63

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make funny faces. They would have to in order to hit some notes. Then again, how would I know? I can't see them. There are only three things in the world that help me escape my worries: reading, writing, and singing. Even so, I vow to myself that I'll never sing again.

# Chapter 10

## A Break at Last

During spring semester, I find a way to hide within myself. The whispers continue, but I've found a way to build a shield around my heart. I spend most of my time with Evelyn, Mrs. Lovet, and Ms. Baker. Sometimes, on weekends, I have sleepovers with Marie and Kat. Other than that, I read, write, and study the months away.

By summer, I'm so happy to leave school. It feels like an enormous burden has been lifted from my chest. The thing I'm looking forward to the most is summer camp at the school for the blind. I'll get to visit with old friends in a place where I don't feel like a complete outcast.

When I finally arrive at camp, I'm thrilled to discover that my two best friends from last year, Grace and Tessa, are back. We have so much fun together, and we're the most popular girls in our 65

### *Whispers*

age group on campus. It's so weird to be treated like a normal preteen, and a popular one at that.

Believe it or not, I even have boys competing for my attention.

Over the summer, Grace teaches me about fashion, and I begin to actually dress like a teenager. I feel like a whole new person, and I begin to feel more confident about myself. As part of the new me, I decide that I want to be called by my middle name, Cheyenne. Just the sound of my

first name gives me a sick feeling in my stomach because I don't want to be that freak anymore.

Tessa and Grace decide to be called by their middle names as well. From now on, Tessa will be Michelle, and Grace will be Charity.

I meet a girl named Katrina who sings like an angel. Spending time with her, I find the joy of singing once again. Still, even as I sing, I hide my face. I'm fairly certain I will hide my face while I sing for the rest of my life.

One evening, as I'm sitting around in the dorm with the girls, we decide to form a singing group to perform at the camp talent show. As we try to decide on a name for our group, we laughingly discover that we are two Black girls, two White 66

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girls, and two Hispanic girls. From that day forward, we shall be known as The Colors. We choose a song together and practice every day.

Over the six weeks of camp, we go so many incredible places. We hang out at the mall several times, tour the state capitol, go to a huge fireworks display on the Fourth of July, spend a day at the lake, visit several parks, and even get to go to a water park. I've never had more fun in my entire life.

To my delight, there's even a dance. I get asked to the dance by six different boys! I have no idea how to turn any of them down. I don't like to hurt anyone's feelings, and this is a brand-new experience for me.

In the end, I choose a boy named Chris. I have so much fun getting ready with all the girls, and my heart is aflutter



when he shows up to walk me to the dance. We dance many songs together, but I dance with other boys as well. For the fast songs, Charity knows all the right moves. She tries to teach me, but it turns out that dancing is not one of my talents. Even in this relaxed atmosphere, my movements are jerky and uncoordinated. We have fun anyhow, and I really enjoy all the slow dances.

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It's hard for me to mess up a simple sway.

On the last day of camp at the talent show, we perform a song a cappella, which means without music. I'm unbelievably nervous, but I make it through because Katrina shares the lead. We link our arms together and sway, and I feel carried away by our harmony. As the song closes, I fall back among my friends in embarrassment, but it actually is a success.

I'm so sad to leave all my friends, but we promise to continue writing and call when we can.

Of course my family refuses to call me Cheyenne, and they don't quite know what to think about the new way I speak and dress. Try as I might, I feel smothered by the person I tried to leave behind. I'm left with the task of melding together the new me and the old me. I'm a confused mess of personality traits. Somehow, I'm timidly confident, bookishly cool, fun-lovingly reserved, a beautiful freak, and a reclusive social butterfly.

Despite my misgivings, I pass the rest of the summer with my friends back home. I spend many nights with Carla, Marie, and Kat. I think they're as confused as I am about my

new look and mannerisms, but they take it well. They even try to *68*

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call me Cheyenne, although it's difficult. I tell them not to worry about it and resign myself to being Amber once again.

What's more, I finally get to spend time with another girl who's blind. She lives about forty minutes away from me. Her name is Terri, and she's very quirky but a lot of fun. Her best friend's name is Samantha, and we hit it off immediately.

Samantha is one of the sweetest, feistiest, funniest people I've ever met. We have an absolute blast together, and I just know we'll be the best of friends forever.

# Chapter 11

## It Must Be Love

Can you believe it? I'm actually talking to a boy in my hometown. He's fully sighted, he knows I'm blind, and he doesn't seem to mind. His name is Nicholas, and we talk for hours and hours on the phone about anything and everything. He invites me to come over to his grandmother's place, but I'm so afraid to meet him. What if he discovers that he doesn't want to be with a freak like me after all?

I hesitantly agree to go, and I spend hours getting ready. I probably change my clothes five times before I settle on denim shorts and a black body suit covered by a sheer purple top. Then I slip into black sandals. I can't say that Grandma approves, but she doesn't make me change.

It turns out that I had nothing to worry about.

Nick and I get along great, and his grandmother is very nice. We have a snack with her, then take a 71

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long walk around the neighborhood. It's just the two of us. I thought it would be awkward, but we're both very relaxed. When I reach for his arm, he takes my hand, and we walk and talk for over an hour.

When I go home, I'm floating on air. This must be what love feels like. He's sweet and handsome, and we have so much fun together. Best of all, he doesn't think I'm a freak for being blind.

The next weekend, I invite Nick to go to the mall with Marie, Kat, and me. He brings along his cousin, Matt, and we hang out at the arcade for a while. Then we do a little window shopping. For some reason, it feels awkward now that other people are with us. Nick hardly comes near me at all. Maybe he's just nervous.

I end up walking around with Kat for most of the day, but Nick calls me that evening as though nothing at all was wrong. I don't say anything about the awkwardness I felt at the mall. Maybe it was just me being paranoid.

The week before school starts, a counselor from Blind Services comes to visit me at home. It's a state agency that helps people with visual impairments get adaptive equipment and teaches them how to

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do tasks at home. She brings some neat gadgets that I can use in the kitchen, such as stackable measuring cups and spoons, giant oven mitts that will protect my hands and arms, a braille timer, and double spatula tongs for flipping things more easily.

She also brings a huge surprise: a Caboodles case of makeup and a ton of hair supplies. Then she teaches me how to put on makeup properly. We label all the colors with braille, and she teaches me which colors go well together. She even shows me how to smooth the makeup so it looks more natural.

She's also brought a curling iron, a blow dryer, hair spray, gel, mousse, hair ties, scrunchies, headbands, and more. She tries to teach me how to do my hair, but I'm absolutely hopeless. At least I can tie it back at the nape of my neck and put a headband on neatly. My hairdressing abilities end

there, no matter how hard I try and which tips she shows me.

My mom has sent money to my grandma to go school shopping with me. I'm extremely picky about my clothes this year. My poor grandma is at her wits' end trying to help me find outfits that I like. I finally decide on things that she despises, but 73

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I actually feel like I can attend school without having to worry about people laughing at the way I dress.

I guess I feel a little more optimistic about this coming year, but a trickle of dread still remains deep in my stomach. I've had an amazing summer, but I imagine that school is like a prison sentence looming just around the corner.

# Chapter 12

## Back to the Grind

Today is the first day of school, and I'm determined to make the best of it. I even wake up early to make sure I have enough time. Grandma is astonished when I eat only two blueberry muffins and hurry off to get ready.

I slip into a nice black and white top, a denim skirt, and black sandals. Then I sit down to apply my makeup, selecting a shimmering blue lipstick and eye shadow. I brush my hair, slip on a shiny black headband, dab on perfume, and am ready to face the day. Instead of looking in the mirror, I ask Grandma if my makeup looks good. Even though she doesn't understand why anyone would wear blue lipstick, she says it's nicely blended.

By the time the bus arrives, I've actually had time to double check my school supplies and read for a bit. I get the impression that the driver and 75

### *Whispers*

assistant are a little surprised by how I'm dressed, but they tell me I look very nice. When I make it to school, I get to spend my first class in the library with my VI teachers again. Evelyn gushes about my makeup, and Mrs. Lovet says she likes my top. I've begun to think that school may not be so bad this year.

For second period, I have reading with a teacher called Mrs. Smith. She's one of those people who speak to me as though I'm a little baby, but I'm sure she means well. I discovered at an early age that many people don't know

how to treat someone who's different from them, especially someone with a disability. I get a lot of people who speak to me like I'm a baby, some people who avoid talking to me at all, and even some people who speak to me in a really loud voice, as if they think my ears don't work. I'll admit that sometimes I return the favor. It probably isn't nice of me, but I often find myself yelling back at them with clear, concise speech or putting on a simpering, sweet voice, as if they were the child. Somehow I don't think this is a good idea with my new teacher, so I just grin and bear it.

After the bell rings and all the students are seated, Mrs. Smith begins to speak.

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"Hello, class! I'm so excited to meet you all. We have a fun year of reading to look forward to together. First, I would like to introduce you to somebody very special who will be joining our class this year. Can you all give a warm welcome to Ms.

Amber Douglass?"

"This can't be happening," I think as I scrunch down in my chair and try to hide my face.

Whispers, giggles, and half-hearted claps fill the room.

"Don't be shy! Please! Come with me to the front of the class, so that we can all get to know you a little better," croons Mrs. Smith as she pats my shoulder.

Mortified, I clamber to my feet and stumble to the front of the classroom.

“I’ll bring your stick and one of your braille books so that you can show the class,” Mrs. Smith calls out. “We have so much to learn about you.”

The rest of this impromptu presentation goes by in a blur. I give very short answers and mumble a lot. I’m thinking that it can’t get any worse when Mrs. Smith takes my hand and tells me to feel my way around the classroom. I basically go limp and allow her to pull me around the room, putting my  
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hand on everything.

By the time I’m allowed to return to my seat, I’m probably the deepest shade of red I’ve ever been in my life. In a daze, I try to ignore the murmurs and snickers. I attempt to lose myself in a book, but I can’t concentrate. I just wish I could hide in a hole.

I’m not sure how I make it to lunch, and I couldn’t tell you which classes I had or the names of any of my teachers. Nonetheless, it’s nice to sit with Selina again, and we have a long chat about what we did over the summer. In the midst of our conversation, I accidentally drip ketchup onto my shirt. A feeling of dread washes over me as I try to dab it clean. Selina says not to worry about it because she sees plenty of kids with spots on their shirts all the time. Somehow, though, I know it will be different for me.

When I make it to science class, the teacher has not yet arrived. I find a seat near the door and try to focus on reading a book.

“Look at her. She’s so amazing.”



“Yeah. She can read with her fingers.”

“Yeah, but she can’t find her mouth with a French fry.”

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“Hush! She’s making a new fashion statement.”

“She almost learned how to dress over the summer. Too bad she didn’t learn how to eat.”

I become a rigid statue. I will not let their words hurt me. I sit up straight, head held high.

Thankfully, my science teacher is the type that feels uncomfortable speaking to me. I don’t say a word to anyone until PE class. It’s good to speak to Carla and hide from the whispers for a while.

Last period is choir. Ever since I began hiding my face when I sing, I’ve only gently mouthed the words in choir practice. It’s become another part of the nightmare of school that I struggle through each day. I tried to sign up for something else for this year, but the school seemed to think it would be dangerous for me to try a sport or even home economics. I told them that I cook and sew at home, but they insisted that they didn’t want me to get hurt.

Before I take my place, I make a split-second decision. I ask the choir director if I may go speak to the principal. Without hesitation, she gives me a hall pass. Feeling as though I’ve dodged a bullet, I walk through the empty halls.

As I wait to speak with the principal, I slump 79

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down in a chair and read my book. For the first time today, I actually get lost in my reading. By the time he can see me, there are only about twenty minutes left in the period.

“I really don’t want to take choir this year,” I say as I sit down across from his desk. “May I please try band instead? I know plenty of blind people who play instruments. I can play the piano some. I believe I could learn very easily.”

“Well,” he replies with a sigh, “I really don’t see why we couldn’t make that happen. Are you sure this option would be better for you?”

“Anything but choir,” I groan.

“Well,” he chuckles, “if you’re sure, I’ll speak with the band director this afternoon.”

“Thank you so much,” I squeal. “I would really, really appreciate that.”

“We only have about five minutes until the bell,” he says, getting to his feet. “You can just head to the bus.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, gathering my things. “Thank you so much!”

As I skip to the bus, I think, “Schools aren’t so bad with no kids in the halls.”

# Chapter 13

## The Band Debacle

For the past few months, I've been speaking to Nicholas every day after school. We talk for hours about anything and everything. We've even hung out together at the mall on weekends and for a few other small get-togethers. I'm on cloud nine when I think about him, and my problems at school just seem to disappear when we speak. He's asked me to go to the county fair with him in October, so I'm just counting down the days.

After a week with no word, the principal finally lets Mrs. Lovet know that I've been approved to join the school band. I'm so excited that I can hardly stand it, and my Papa takes me to pick out a piccolo at a pawn shop. It's so smooth and small, and I just sit and hold it, thinking of how different things will be if I can just show people that I'm good at something.

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### *Whispers*

The next Monday, I'm waiting outside of the band hall a few minutes before class. The butterflies are back with a vengeance. I simply enter and try to stand out of the way inside the door. This is difficult because of my huge backpack and cane, so I fold the cane up to make myself smaller. The room seems empty, and no one speaks to me. Shortly after the bell rings, students begin to flood into the room. Still, not a single person speaks to me. I begin to shake and get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The bell to begin class rings, and the commotion doesn't die down. It appears that the band director is going to be late. The students take this as an opportunity to goof off, and I hear a few whispers.

"What's that blind girl doing here?"

"Maybe she's lost."

"Maybe you should go ask her."

"No way. You go ask her."

Soft snickering.

After a few moments, the door beside me opens, and the band director enters with another person. He claps his hands and strides to the front of the classroom to begin. A hand touches my

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"I'm very sorry, but it appears that band isn't going to be the best fit for you after all," says the principal once he's closed the door behind us.

"Of course not," I mumble, and I storm down the hall.

"Where are you going?" calls the principal. "You should rejoin the choir this period!"

I continue on, actually walking blindly, oblivious to any sounds or people around me. I go directly to the nearest restroom, enter a stall, and burst into tears. I spend the rest of the school day in the stall in complete misery. I'm far

from stupid. I know that the band director couldn't be bothered with the burden of teaching a blind student. What hurts the most is that he didn't even have the decency to get to know me and my abilities before rejecting the idea. I feel overwhelmed with the despair of never being enough. It's bad enough that I have to go above and beyond every day, just to prove that I'm capable of doing the smallest things.

Too often, I've been finding that I won't even get the opportunity to prove myself.

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### *Whispers*

This blatant dismissal has been like a brutal punch to the core of who I am and how I feel about myself. Still, five minutes before the bell rings, I gather myself, clean my face, and go to the bus. I hold my head high and shove the hurt and disappointment deep within myself.

I don't speak of this to anyone. When they ask about band, I just say it didn't work out. Although he never says it, I get the feeling that my Papa is disappointed in me. It's as if he believes I gave up too easily after he spent good money.

I don't know why, but I never talk to anyone about the whispers I hear at school or the way that I feel like such a burden, such a waste of space. If I did, they would only tell me to get over it or make excuses. No one would understand. Besides, I don't want to make things worse for myself by snitching on people, and there's nothing anyone can do to make my classmates see me as anything other than a freak.



# Chapter 14

## The County Fair

The next month goes by in a blur. I keep my head down at school and just block out all that I can. I'm not sure if the kids get bored with talking about me or if I've just learned to ignore the whispers. I'm sure my teachers find me difficult because I rarely speak. I don't find the same joy in learning that I did in elementary school, but I spend a lot of time reading books for pleasure and talking on the phone after school to Nicholas and his cousin, Matt.

Of course I still speak to Kat, Marie, and Samantha plenty as well. We spend as many weekends together as possible.

When the fair finally arrives, a furious assault of the butterflies ensues. I pick a cute skirt and top, brush my hair back and secure it with a sparkly headband, and spend a great deal of time making sure that my makeup is perfect. Kat picks me up 85

### *Whispers*

with her dad and Marie. When he drops us off at the fair, I realize that this will be my first year going without adults. Excitedly, we purchase tickets and wait for Nicholas, Matt, and a couple of their friends to arrive.

When they arrive, it's a whirlwind of activity.

Nick says hello to me awkwardly before rushing off with his friends. Confused, I try to tell myself that he's just excited. Matt stops to talk to us for a few minutes and seems apologetic when they call him to follow.

I stumble through the rest of the evening in a daze, linking arms with Marie. After a while of just seeing the boys in passing, I ask my friends if something happened. With a sigh, Marie pats my hand. She says that Nick's friends were teasing him for being with a blind girl, so he told them he was only using me to get something that he wanted.

These words feel like a physical blow. I wrench away in shock, not wanting to believe it. After all the hours we spoke and even the times we spent around one another, I never felt like Nick judged me for my blindness. He was one of the only people who made me feel like a real person, a normal teenager. Had that all been a lie, or did the opinions *86*

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of his friends matter so much to him that he could crush me like an insect under his shoe?

I don't remember the rest of that night. My friends try to comfort me, but I cram all the emotions down deep until I get home. The dam bursts when I'm finally alone, and I cry for hours.

Matt calls to say how sorry he is and that Nicholas isn't interested in speaking to me again.

Deep down, I know that this was just a schoolyard romance, but nonetheless, something has broken in me. All the feelings that I've been bottling up deep inside escape in a torrent that I can't control. I can't fall asleep until the early morning hours. When it's time for school, I can't face it. I bury my head in my pillow and tell Grandma that I'm sick. I guess I'm so pitiful that she actually believes me. My stomach is so upset that I actually throw up. She's convinced I have some kind of bug, and I spend days moping around, crying like I've never cried before.



I can't speak to my friends. I'm so deeply ashamed. I can't focus on reading or television. Just the thought of food makes me queasy. I just listen to sad music and drip tears in a slow, steady cadence of hopelessness.

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# Chapter 15

## The Final Straw

After a few days of pathetic wallowing in my own misery, I'm forced to return to school. It's so hard, but I put one foot in front of the other and try to function to the best of my ability. I'm not sure if anyone notices, but I'm even quieter than usual. I still don't feel like talking to my friends, and they've pretty much given up trying to call me.

This year, Mrs. Lovet has decided that I need to start orientation and mobility training again. I took these classes in elementary school and really enjoyed them. The school hires a special teacher to come in and show me how to navigate around town. We practice crossing streets at different types of intersections and safe ways to use my cane.

In the beginning, I'm excited because it means I get out of reading class once a week. Now it's become a weekly embarrassment because my classmates

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hate the fact that I get to "skip class every week to go wave a stupid stick around."

What's more, my mobility instructor and I don't get along very well. This is probably because I'm so embarrassed to use my cane and come up with every excuse I can find to avoid using it. I've grown to really and truly despise my cane. Somehow, it represents everything that makes me stand out, everything that shows the world that I'm blind. You would think that someone who works with kids like me

on a regular basis might understand that, but apparently I'm just "a stubborn pre-teen who's not interested

in

learning

how

to

become

independent."

During my next mobility lesson, we practice traveling in a light rain. I don't mind the rain, but I almost always wear cute sandals to school these days. Slowly and reluctantly, I stumble through my lesson.

When I twist my ankle, my teacher snaps at me.

"You know we have this lesson every week at the same time. Why don't you prepare and wear appropriate clothing and shoes for the weather of the day?"

Suddenly, something comes over me. I've never *90*

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raised my voice to a teacher before, but I explode.

"Who do you think you are to speak to me that way? If you want me to wear specific clothes to school, why don't you buy them for me? I'm tired of you talking to me like I'm a piece of dirt. I don't need your help, and I couldn't care less if I ever have to speak to you again."

In stunned silence, we stand in the rain.

“I’m reporting you to the principal!” he shouts.

“I’ve never had a student be so disrespectful to me in my entire career. How is your ankle? Can you walk back to campus?”

“Don’t pretend to care about my ankle now,” I snap. “I can walk just fine. It’s not my problem that no one else has ever told you the truth. Go ahead.

Report me. I don’t care. I’m never working with you again!”

Limping back to school, I refuse to speak to him. He marches me into the office, and I’m too mad to even care that this is my very first time to get in trouble at school for anything. I’m asked to sit and wait while he goes in to speak privately with the principal. Then I’m called in to speak with both of them.

“I’m shocked and extremely disappointed by 91

*Whispers*

your behavior,” says the principal. “Why would you possibly think that you could get away with speaking to a teacher in that manner?”

“I can’t stand him,” I declare. “I meant every word, and I won’t take it back. He isn’t fit to teach, and I refuse to spend another moment with him.”

After an awkward pause, the mobility instructor begins to sputter indignantly.

Getting to my feet, I growl, “Not another moment.”

Fuming, I ignore their raised voices as I storm out of the office. I spend an entire period in the restroom, pacing and shaking with rage. I don't say a word to anyone for the rest of the day.

It isn't until I get home that I realize what I've done. My grandma's disappointment crushes me, and I'm left feeling hopeless and despondent.

"They're giving you three days of in-school suspension," Grandma moans. "What has gotten into you?"

I really try, but I can't explain all the bottled-up emotions that have brought me here. What's more, I no longer care at all about what happens to me at school. I can't even bear thinking about the place, so I just shrug my shoulders and keep my thoughts to *92*

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myself.

The days of in-school suspension, or ISS, turn out to be the most peaceful ones I've ever had in middle school. I go straight into a private room and spend my days alone, doing my work and reading.

They even bring my lunch to me. I don't have to listen to any whispers or endure the feel of the burning eyes on me. At the end of my sentence, the principal comes to speak with me.

"Have you learned anything from this experience?" he asks softly.

"Yes," I say with a twisted smile. "I know what you want me to say, but I wasn't wrong. Maybe I overreacted, but I spoke

my true opinion. What's more, I would do it a thousand times again if it meant I got to do my work in here with peace and quiet."

In disbelief, he sputters, "Well, we're well aware that things are not working out for you at school right now. We've called a special meeting to speak to your teachers and grandmother about how we need to proceed with you. I think you should be present."

I've known for a while that my teachers have had meetings with my mom and grandma to talk *93*

### *Whispers*

about how best to help me at school. I've never been invited to join one before, though.

"Thank you," I say with relief.

"I don't approve of your behavior," the principal sighs, "but it's obvious that we need your feedback to figure out how to carry on from here."

# Chapter 16

## The Meeting

I have an entire week to think about what I want to say at this special meeting. Although I feel bad about my shocking behavior, I spend my time coaching myself on ways to actually make a difference at school. Over and over, I tell myself that I need to speak up and make my voice heard. I need to tell them that I'm not content with the way my teachers treat me. I need to tell them that it's completely unfair that I don't get to choose my elective classes. Most of all, I need to tell them I'm tired of being made to look like a circus freak to my classmates.

With a twinge of doubt, I fear that I won't be able to say any of these things because I can't tell anyone the real reason that I feel the way I do. I can't tell them that the whispers are soaring into a savage symphony of softly spoken insults,  
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### *Whispers*

smothering the very essence of who I am. I can't tell them all the things I hear that make me want to change everything that I am. They can't know that I'm aware of what a burden I am to everyone who knows me: to my teachers, to my family, to my friends, and to the poor students they assign to help me with things in school.

After all, they're only doing the best they can with a difficult situation. They're trying to teach me things that I need to learn in order to become an independent person. They're introducing me to new technology that can make my life much easier in the long run. It's not their fault that I'm blind,

and I know that they're really trying to help. It's no one's fault that I'm the way I am. Why can't the kids at school just accept that I'm different? When will I feel comfortable in my own skin again?

My mind is plagued with endless turmoil for the week, but I know what I have to do. It's definitely a long shot, but I have a huge request to make of my school and my family.

If I thought I had butterflies before this, I must have hornets in my stomach today. The day of the meeting has finally arrived. If I don't find the courage to say what I need and why, I'll be doomed 96

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to continue along this unbearable path until graduation.

Mrs. Lovet and Evelyn are here to help me find solutions. They both give me a big hug as I enter. To my chagrin, the mobility teacher is also present, along with the principal and many of my teachers.

My grandma is sitting next to me, and she keeps patting and squeezing my hand to show her support.

To my relief, Mrs. Lovet begins.

"Cheyenne, we know that the last two years have not been easy for you. We've done our best to figure this out, but things are obviously getting worse instead of better. Do you have any ideas about how we can make changes, so that we can begin traveling in a positive direction?"

"Well," I squeak, clearing my throat, "I'm very sorry about my behavior lately. I know that you're all trying to help me, but I just don't belong here."



“What do you mean?” asks Evelyn. “Of course you do. We all love having you here.”

“Yes,” I laugh. “I’ve been a real bundle of joy.”

As a nervous round of laughter begins, I sigh, then continue. “I know that none of you are going to be happy with this idea, but will you please all hear 97

*Whispers*

me out?”

“Of course,” says the principal.

“Well,” I say, “I’ve spent the last two summers at the Texas School for the Blind, and they happen to have a year-round program for students who are struggling in their local school districts.”

“You can’t go and stay the whole year in Austin!” cries Grandma. “It’s over a four-hour drive from here!”

“Please, just listen,” I beg. “At that school, I could participate in any extracurricular activities I chose. I could take home economics, run track, play in band, get a part in a play, or even be a cheerleader. Can you honestly promise me any of that if I stay at this school?”

“Well,” sighs the principal, “not those things, but we can ensure that you succeed with your academics.”

“Can you make everyone stop whispering about me?” I say softly, looking down with tears in my eyes.

“What was that?” asks Evelyn in concern.

Without another word, my grandma wraps her arms around me. From my other side, Evelyn traces soft circles on my back. Dissolving into tears, I lean 98

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into my grandma and sob out all the pain, all my hopelessness, all my despair. The room is very quiet until I'm able to pull myself together.

Taking my hand, Grandma says, "What do we need to do to get her enrolled at the school for the blind?"

In this moment, I love Grandma more than anyone else on the planet. Actually, to be fair, I always do.

"Are you serious?" I gasp.

"If that's what it will take to make you happy and to help you succeed, then that's what we'll do,"

she says, squeezing my hand reassuringly. "We'll miss you so much, but I want you to be happy."

Fully aware of her sacrifice, I hug my grandma joyfully. The rest of the meeting speeds by in a blur.

We speak about all the details and expectations.

They tell me that it won't be a sure deal until they submit an application on my behalf. For me, however, the biggest battle has been won.

I can hardly believe that they're actually going to allow me to go. It feels like the weight of the world is lifted from my shoulders, and I can finally breathe again. Smiling from ear to ear, I'm ready to conquer the rest of the school year.



# Chapter 17

## Goodbyes

For a few weeks, I can't even hear the whispers. I know they must be there, but not one invades the bubble of joy that's become my cocoon. It's hard to believe that I'm actually going to a place where I'll be considered normal. My mind is a buzz of excitement as I try to focus on getting through this final school year.

After a few weeks pass, I begin to think about all the people I'll miss. Of course I'll miss Grandma and all the rest of my family. Even more upsettingly, I'll have to miss out on seeing my baby cousins grow. I console myself by thinking that I'll be home on holidays, and I try not to think about becoming distant with Samantha, Kat, Marie, and even Matt.

Believe it or not, Matt and I have gotten really close and talk a lot on the phone these days. I've *101*

### *Whispers*

come to realize that I was mostly hurt because of the way Nick treated me. I'm sure he felt under a lot of pressure from his friends, and, although I like to think I would have handled it differently if I'd been in his shoes, there's no way I can really know that.

When I begin to hear the whispers again, I react in a completely unexpected way. When I accidentally touch a guy's foot with my cane, I hear, "Watch out, dude."

"She might hit you somewhere that hurts if you don't learn to get out of the way."

“Why they let her have that deadly weapon in school, I don’t know!”

Without a thought, I retort, “Aww! Are you afraid of a little blind girl?”

There’s total silence as I smirk and continue walking.

The next day, I’m reading a braille book in science class, and I hear, “Wow! She reads fast.”

“Stop staring at her, dude.”

“Have you seen her type?”

“Yeah. A regular wonder!”

“I’m just saying. I bet she’s good with those hands.”

Disgusted, I flip my hair over my shoulder and *102*

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hiss, “I bet you never find out.”

There’s a stunned pause. Then the room bursts out into laughter.

“Man, you got told!” his friend chortles, clapping him on the back.

After I have the courage to respond to their whispering, I find that it trickles away altogether.

I’m positive that they still talk about me behind my back, but it doesn’t matter to me anymore because I’ve already left this place far behind in my mind.

I'll be turning thirteen in May, and Grandma lets me plan a big party. I invite anyone and everyone I can, and I'm surprised by how many people actually come. I get a karaoke machine from my family, and I know we'll have a blast. Here are Kat and Marie, Samantha and Terri, Matt and Nick, Carla and Luis, and even Selina. Terri's boyfriend has come and has brought a friend as well.

I press Record on the karaoke machine and let it go throughout the entire party. The microphone gets passed around, although the guy who tagged along with Terri's boyfriend becomes our unofficial MC. He tells a lot of jokes and picks on everyone, and I know that this recording will be something that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

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### *Whispers*

When I walk out of my school for the last time, it feels like a ton of bricks is lifted from my shoulders. I'm light and carefree as I spend the summer with my friends and family. I spend weeks with my friends and learn to cherish every second with my family. I snuggle and tickle my baby cousins every chance I get and try not to think about what I'll be missing when I'm away. Instead, I focus on enjoying the moments and become determined to build a new, confident me in a brand-new environment.

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# Chapter 18

## Social Butterfly

The school for the blind is everything I hoped it would be for academics, extracurricular activities, and my social life. I tell everyone that I prefer to go by my middle name, Cheyenne. From now on, Amber, that awkward and timid girl I once was, is dead to me. She only rises to the surface when I'm back in my hometown or around my family.

On the first day of school, I'm feeling very shy, but guys keep popping up to show me to different classes. At lunch, my table fills up with people who want to know all about me. I make a ton of friends immediately, and I'm in awe to discover that boys keep asking to walk with me or if I want to hang out at the recreation center after school. Overnight, it's as if I've transformed from an ugly, disabled caterpillar into a brilliant social butterfly. I would like to say that I take on the change gracefully, but I 105

### *Whispers*

definitely take some time adjusting. One benefit of having experienced being the lowest of the low and the highest of the high socially is that I make friends in absolutely every social circle. I'm not bound to cliques and enjoy hanging out with all different types of people.

My language arts teacher is amazing, and I'm thrilled to discover that she's also my advisor. We form a very close bond, and the same goes for all the rest of my teachers. When my science teacher finds out about my love for marine biology, we spend months diving deeper into the

subject. She brings in every shell, starfish, sea sponge, piece of coral, and sand dollar she can find for us to explore.

She even helps me look into what it would take to become a marine biologist and encourages me by helping me brainstorm ways of making that career choice a reality.

My advisor picks up on my love for learning right away and puts me into a pre-algebra class with a number of high school students. The math teacher is out of this world. She gently teases me about being a blind girl who is a visual learner.

Then she finds ways to make every math problem, every graph, every equation, every graphic into *106*

*Feather Chel e* something that I can feel. With teachers who understand my methods of learning, I reach even further heights of academic success.

My home economics teachers are incredible. I gain a ton of confidence with my cooking, finding joy in preparing yummy treats for all my friends and instructors. I find that it's fun to experiment with recipes in order to make them my own. I even learn how to sew actual clothing, using an honest-to-goodness sewing machine, and I also use an iron, things that my family was not sure how to teach me to do safely.

I join track, become a cheerleader, and even perform in a play. I jump at every opportunity to learn something new, and I discover that I'm good at a lot of things but not so great at others. I become involved with petty schoolyard drama, go on dates with different guys, and work on the me that I've always wanted to be.

When my advisor speaks to me about taking honors courses at the public high school the next year, my stomach



clines tight, and I'm afraid to step out of my new comfort zone to the whispers I'm sure will be there. However, I don't let it show and agree to give it a try. Deep down, I know that

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### *Whispers*

my new confidence will shield me from the whispered words that will wash over and around me. I know that the whispers that have drowned out all my thoughts in the past cannot hurt me now.

They were never more than breaths of wind, no matter the words they carried. I am me, and I have tons of people who accept me the way I am.

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### About the Author

Mom's Choice Award recipient Feather Chelle is a single mother of five who lives in Texas, along with two grandpuppies and two grandpiggies (guinea pigs). She is totally blind due to a battle with cancer and enjoys homeschooling with her family. She has been in love with the ocean since she was five years old and loves learning more about it every day. She loves to teach and has been writing since the first grade, although her first book was not published until the end of 2020.

If you are interested in receiving a free, printable copy of her ability awareness activity book, *The Colors of Darkness*, send an email with the word "subscribe" to:  
feather.chelle.author@gmail.com

If you would like to learn more about her interactive classroom visits on the topic of ability awareness, you may

also email the above address.

You can find her educational videos on TikTok or on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/featherchelle/>

Her book-related website is

<https://www.dldbooks.com/featherchelle/>

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More books by this author, which are available on Amazon, include: *Stranded: The Cetacea Chronicles Volume 1*

*Invisible Me*

*The Colors of Darkness*

*Ode to Mom*

*Ode to Dad*

*Mommy, Sing Me a Lullyby!*

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