

★ CHAPTER 1 ★

I have the best friends in my new school. I have the best friends in my new school. I have the best friends in my new school.

I'd been repeating that sentence in my head for a couple weeks, ever since Mom had brought me along to see Regan Halliday, her old college roommate and soon-to-be new boss. Regan was the reason Mom had picked the town of Braywood, Maryland, for us to move to over the summer. I'd be starting fifth grade at the Braywood Intermediate School and Mom would be Regan's new office manager. It was a perfect opportunity for us to have a fresh start, Mom said.

Mom had been Dad's office manager at his dental practice since before I was born. But when my parents decided to split up, working together wasn't an option anymore. The

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week before school started, Mom said we should drop by Regan’s office to say hi. I hadn’t realized that “saying hi” would include Mom leaving me in the waiting room while she went in the back to talk business. To be fair, I don’t think Mom did either, or she probably would’ve told me to bring my summer reading along. Incidentally, summer reading was something I hadn’t had at my old school, but when we got my registration forms, there was a book list included. I picked *The League of Unexceptional Children*.

But I didn’t have the book with me that day. Instead, I grabbed a magazine from the pile on the waiting room coffee table. The actress Erin Lindstrom was on the cover. In the article about her, she said the secret to her success was something called “affirmations.” Basically, if she wanted something to happen, she would say a sentence in her head like it already had. Doing that activated her subconscious mind and helped her achieve her goals. It was how she landed the starring role in *Letters Never Sent*, which got her an Academy Award.

So there was the bright side of accompanying Mom on her errand: I learned about affirmations.

*I have the best friends in my new school. I have
the best friends in my new school. I have the best
friends in my new school.*

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It had been in my head every day since, but especially on the morning of Book Pickup Day, which was another



different thing about Braywood Intermediate. On the Friday before classes began, you had to go to school to pick up all the syllabi and textbooks you'd need for the year.

I'd practiced the walk to my new school a couple times with Mom, but I did it by myself for the first time on Book Pickup Day. Mom said she'd bring the car to get me after, since I'd have a lot to carry on the way home. Plus she wanted to take me to the Standing Oaks Mall to get a new fall jacket. I'd grown out of my old one.

I got to school and followed the signs from the parking lot to the gymnasium. My affirmation was running around my brain in a loop, like a song on repeat:

I have the best friends in my new school. I have the best friends in my new school. I have the best friends in my new school.

Inside the gym, rows of tables had been set up, with piles of books on each of them. I didn't know where to start, and I wished that my best friend Lia Marin was a new girl along with me. She was better at approaching people and asking about whatever it was she needed to know the answer to.

I stood there for a couple minutes, looking around at the tables of books, and at the kids, too. There were at least a couple hundred of them. It was weird not knowing any of their names, and not knowing who would be my friend. At that moment it felt like when I went to the pet store with

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Dad, and we stood in front of a cage of bunnies deciding which one to take home with us. Actually, now it felt more like *I* was the bunny hoping to get picked. I felt a sudden pang for Captain Carrot. I hoped someone would pick me, the way I'd picked him.

So far, no one was picking me. Across the room, I spotted a big sign that said REGISTRATION, and three tables under it, with smaller signs that said A–F, G–R, and S–Z.

I headed over to the third table, and gave my name to the woman behind the table. She flipped through a bunch of papers, and found the one marked “SILVER, CHLOE” on top. “Here’s your schedule. I’ll be seeing you for fourth-period Spanish.” She tapped her name, Señora Rivera. “Go on and get your books.”

“Thanks,” I told her.

“Oh, wait,” she said. “You forgot a pencil case. Everyone gets a pencil case.” She handed me a yellow one, with “Braywood Intermediate School” printed in black letters on the side.

“*Mucho gusto*,” I said, which is the Spanish way to say “thank you very much.”

“*Da nada*,” she told me with a smile. “*Hasta el lunes*.”

I stepped away to let the girl behind me get her schedule. “Hi, I’m Lucy Tanaka,” she told Señora Rivera, while I read over the list of books I’d need for each class. I was about to head over to the other side of the room to get them, when

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I heard Lucy Tanaka say, “Can I get a yellow case instead of green?”

“Sorry, I just gave away my last yellow. How about blue or red?”

“No thanks,” she said. “I guess green will be okay.”

I turned toward her. Lucy Tanaka had slick black hair and was wearing a dress that looked a bit like a man’s shirt. There was a belt around her waist that reminded me of one of the tassels that Mom had bought to tie back the curtains in our new living room. “Do you want to trade?” I asked.

“Really?”

“Sure. I don’t mind a green one.”

“Wow, thanks.” She handed it over, and I gave her the yellow one. “The green case matches your eyes,” she told me. “You look good holding it. I swear I’m not just saying that because I want you to trade.”

“I know you’re not,” I told her. “We already traded after all.”

“Exactly,” Lucy Tanaka said. “What’s your name?”

“Chloe Silver,” I said.

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “And thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

After that, I headed to the book tables. In front of me a girl in a silver T-shirt and white jeans was loading up her arms with about a dozen books. She reminded me of Trissa Thompson from my old school. Trissa had light brown skin

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and she usually wore her hair twisted up in a tight bun. This girl was pale-skinned. Her wavy brown hair was loose and came down just past her shoulders. But she looked confident, like she knew people would want to be her friend. That's how Trissa was.

Lia and I had *sort of* been friends with Trissa, though not as close as we'd wanted to be. I knew if Lia were with me, she'd want to be close friends with this girl. She'd probably start talking to her. I stood there, thinking of my affirmation, hoping it would make the right words come out of my mouth.

And then *the girl* started talking to *me!*

Well, not to me, exactly. But close enough to give me a chance to talk back to her. What she said, to no one in particular, was, "Ugh. Figures I'd get the worst itch on my back when I don't have any free arms to scratch it."

So then I said, "I could scratch it for you, if you want."

She turned around. "I have a free hand," I added. "It'd be easy for me to do."

The girl's eyes moved up and down quickly, sizing me up. "Actually, that would be great," she said. "It's on the left side. By my shoulder." I scratched. "A little higher," she said. "A little lower. Ooh, that's just right." Then she laughed to herself. "I sound like Goldilocks. Thanks. That's much better."

"Hey, Monroe," another girl called, racing over.

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“Rachael, OMG,” the girl with the formerly itchy back said. “Did you see—”

Before she could finish her sentence, the textbook on the top of the pile in her arms slipped to the floor. The other girl—Rachael—and I both reached down to grab it. I got it first: *Beginner’s Spanish*.

“That textbook’s on my list, too,” I said, standing back up.

“You must be in fifth grade then,” Rachael said.

I nodded and slipped the Spanish book back on top of the pile in Monroe’s arms. She had a silver cuff bracelet on her right forearm. “Your bracelet is really cool,” I told her. “I saw a picture of Erin Lindstrom wearing one just like it.”

“I’ll tell my mom to tell her.”

“Tell *Erin Lindstrom*?” I asked, incredulous. “Your mom *knows* her?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. Have you ever met her?”

“Once or twice,” Monroe said, in a voice like it was no big thing. “So, did you just move here?”

“Over the summer.”

“Well, you should know Look Now at the Standing Oaks Mall is the best place to shop. That’s where I got this.” She gestured toward the bracelet with her chin.

“My mom and I are going to the mall right after this,” I said. “I’ll definitely look for it.”

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“Wait a sec,” Rachael said. “You can’t get the same thing as Monroe.”

“Relax, Rach,” Monroe said. “It’s a free country. Besides, Erin Lindstrom has it, too.” She turned to me. “Thanks for the Spanish book—and the back scratch.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What were you saying before?” Rachael asked her.

“Oh,” Monroe said. “I was about to ask if you saw what *she* was wearing today.”

“I did,” Rachael said. “To be honest I thought it wasn’t that bad. Remember when she wore that vest of patches?”

“How could I forget? She had a new patch every day. Ms. Smit finally made her take it off when she added the one with the bells on it.”

The two of them laughed. I wondered who they were talking about. But mostly I wondered whether Monroe would say something to me again. They were standing right by me, but we weren’t exactly standing together. If I walked away, she probably wouldn’t notice. Rachael, either. This was the hardest part about being the new kid—everyone else already had their friends all set. They didn’t need me.

But Erin Lindstrom was right about one thing—my affirmation kept me focused on my goal.

“Hello, hello, hello!” a voice boomed. A tallish, baldish man came over and gave Rachael a fist bump. He couldn’t

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fist-bump Monroe because of the books in her arms, so he bumped her elbow gently with his. Then he looked over at me. “I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

“I just moved here,” I explained.

“Welcome,” he said. He held out a fist, and I bumped it with mine. “I’m the principal, Mr. Dibble.”

“I’m Chloe,” I told him. “Chloe Silver.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said. “What grade are you in?”

“I’m starting fifth.”

“Same with these two,” Mr. Dibble said. “I assume they’re showing you the Braywood Welcome Wagon spirit.”

I nodded, shyly.

“Excellent,” he said. “What teachers do you all have?”

“Danos,” Monroe said.

“Ms. Danos,” Mr. Dibble said. “She’s wonderful.”

“I have Mr. Goldfarb,” Rachael said, giving Monroe a sad face.

“Mr. Goldfarb is also wonderful,” Mr. Dibble said. “You should know, Ms. Silver, that we have nothing but wonderful teachers here at our school.”

“I’m also in Ms. Danos’s class,” I told him.

“Well, Ms. Reeser,” he said, turning to Monroe. “Can I count on you to show your new classmate the ropes on Monday?”

“Sure,” she said.

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“Excellent,” he said again. “Why don’t you stop by my office at lunchtime and let me know how your first day is going. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Mr. Dibble!” someone called from across the room.

“I’m sorry, girls. It seems I’m being paged,” he told us. “But I think we have everything squared away here, right?”

“You bet,” Monroe told him.

He crossed the room in a few long strides, bumping fists and elbows along the way. Rachael said good-bye to me.

“’Bye,” Monroe said. Then she added, “Hey, you know what? You should wear a french braid on Monday.”

Rachael spun around. “Really?” she asked.

“Yes,” Monroe said, nodding firmly. She turned back to me. “Not a regular braid. A french braid. On Monday.”

“Okay,” I said.

They said good-bye for real and walked off. I went to pick up my own school books. I barely noticed the weight of them as I walked out to Mom’s car. I was too busy thinking about the bright side to Book Pickup Day. I hadn’t wanted my parents to split up, and I hadn’t wanted to move. But maybe some things would work out after all.

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