

# Chapter One

There is no greater place on earth than the cinema. I don't mean the big chain movie theaters with fancy seats and overpriced food. I mean the old cinemas. The kind that smell like butter and stale popcorn. The kind with threadbare seats. The kind with sticky floors. The kind with velvety panels barely clinging to the walls.

Vi holds my hand as we walk through the lobby of my favorite cinema, The Chestnut.

“Tell me about the posters,” I say as she guides me past the ticket booth and into the cinema’s lobby. She doesn’t have to guide me. I know this place almost as well as I know my own living room. But I always let Vi hold my hand. Her skin is soft and warm.

“Same posters as last week, Preston,” she laughs. “*Dracula Versus the Zombies*, *Sweet Tooth: The Untold Love Story of the World’s Two Greatest Chocolatiers* and *Secret Agent Granny*.”

“You’re making those up.” I nudge her, and she lets out a chuckle.

“You’ll never know,” she teases.

Vivien Henry always teases me. If it were someone else, maybe I would be bothered by it. But Vi is one of the few people who knew me before I was blind. We met when we were babies. Our mothers are friends, and we’ve grown up together.

Besides, I can barely remember a time before I got glaucoma and lost my vision. So it doesn’t bother me when Vi makes up fake movie titles and tries to pass them off as real films. I think it’s actually pretty awesome. Vi’s a serious girl usually. I’m lucky to be one of the few people she jokes around with.

“Come on,” she says now, leading me past the concession stands. “Mrs. Colander’s waiting for us up in the booth.”

Mrs. Colander is the teacher in charge of our school’s film club. She’s the one who helped us organize the amateur film festival The Chestnut will be hosting two nights from now.

“Are the others here yet?” I ask.

“Janelle’s babysitting, so she can’t come,” Vi says as we head into the theater. When we start up the stairs leading to the projection booth, she is moving so fast my arm is completely outstretched in front of me.

“One stair at a time, Vi,” I remind her. She stops and waits for me to catch up before she continues forward again.

“Sorry,” she says. She gives my hand a squeeze, and my whole arm tingles. “So Janelle’s not coming. And Nico’s never been on time for anything in his life.”

I smile. She’s right about Nico. He is always stumbling into class well after the bell rings.

I can hear the sound of nails clacking on a keyboard when we enter the projection booth.

The typing stops. “Hello, Mr. Craft.”

“Hey, Mrs. Colander,” I say, feeling my way over to a seat against the back wall of the small room.

Vi stands beside me. Her foot bumps against mine, but I don’t think she notices.

“My mom hooked the laptop up to the projection system before she left this afternoon,” she says to me. “Mrs. Colander just tested it. When we hit

*Play* on the laptop, the movies appear on the big screen.”

Vi’s parents bought *The Chestnut* before she was born. They divorced when Vi was eight, but they still run the theater together. Vi and I grew up in this cinema. It’s the best spot for the film festival. I still can’t believe Vi’s mom gave us permission to use it on Friday night.

“Okay, so I think everything’s ready to go for Friday,” Mrs. Colander says. She begins typing again, her long fingernails loud against the keyboard. “I’m just finishing up my report for Principal Saunders. I’ll email it to myself, and then I’ll be ready to go. Are you sure you don’t need anything else from me?”

“No, we’ve got it covered, Mrs. Colander,” Vi says in the sweet voice she always uses with authority figures.

“All right, well, I’ll leave you to it,” Mrs. Colander

says. She finishes with the computer. Then her chair scrapes against the floor as she stands up.

“Thanks again for letting us help out,” Vi says.

“Not a problem.” I can hear the smile in Mrs. Colander’s voice. “Thank your parents again for letting us use the theater. It’s a great venue for our film festival.”

“I will. Need me to see you out?”

“No, I’m good. Good night, you two. Have fun screening the films.”

“Definitely,” I say, waving a hand in the air even though Mrs. Colander’s already walking down the stairs. Her footsteps fade as she reaches the first floor and then trails through the lobby. Suddenly it’s just Vi and me.

Tonight we’re going to watch all the films that will be played on Friday. We need to make sure there are no sound issues or problems with the files. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the perfect way to spend a Wednesday night. I love watching movies.

It doesn’t matter if I can’t really see them. I don’t have to. There’s a lot to a movie besides the actual picture. There’s music. There’s dialogue. There’s witty humor, tense sound effects and well-placed shrieks. Besides, I’m not totally blind. I mean, I guess technically I am. But I can still detect light. I know when there’s an absence of light too. And I can make out shadows. So I know when movies are shot in the day or the night. I can even tell if a scene’s been shot on a busy road with headlights shining off traveling cars.

I watch movies in my own way. I love watching movies in my own way.

And I love watching movies with Vi.

“Should we go down and start screening?” she asks. She’s closer than I realized. Her shampoo smells like candy apples. I breathe it in. I nod.

“Yeah, let’s get started.”

Vi helps me back down the steps to the main theater. I sit in the back row while she returns to

the booth to dim the lights and start the videos Mrs. Colander uploaded onto one of the school's laptops. There are five films in the festival this year. Each film runs around fifteen minutes. Which means for the next hour and fifteen minutes, I get to sit in a dark theater next to Vi.

It's not like Vi's my girlfriend or anything. But on a night like this, I think maybe she could be. If the movie's music is just right. If the dialogue is swoony and romantic. If a jump scare catches her off guard and sends her curling into my side for comfort.

The cinema can do it all. It can turn ordinary friends into something much more.

And right now, me and Vi have an entire cinema to ourselves.

A door in the lobby rattles. I jump, glad I'm not holding a bag of popcorn.

"Hey, somebody let me in!"

I almost groan out loud. I forgot about Nico.

So much for the perfect night.

## Chapter Two

I make my way back to the lobby to let Nico in. I've memorized the route. Even if I hadn't, I've got my white cane to help me navigate.

When I get to the lobby doors, Nico is still slamming his fists against the glass.

"The zombies are coming, man! Hurry up!" he yells. "My life depends on it."

I grin, twisting the lock on the door. Nico rushes in like he really is being chased by zombies. He slams the door shut and falls against it, panting.

“Too close for comfort, man,” he says through exaggerated breaths. “Next time I might not make it.”

“If you were ever on time for anything in your life, maybe you wouldn’t have to worry about being locked outside with the zombies,” I tell him.

“What can I say? I’m a busy guy. There’s just not enough of me to go around.”

“Yeah, that must be it,” I mutter.

Much as I would love some time alone with Vi, Nico’s in the film club too, so I can’t tell him to leave. We walk back into the theater together. Vi has come down from the projection booth. She’s dimmed the houselights halfway. I can just make out the dark blur of her body as she approaches us.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Nico says, leaning into her. Nico calls every girl “sweetheart,” as if he is some kind of smooth-talking action hero like James Bond.

“The movies are starting,” Vi says, pushing him away. She takes my arm. Her hand slides down from my elbow to my wrist. I clutch her fingers as soon as they’re close enough to reach.

“We watching the good ones first? If not, I’m raiding the concession stand,” Nico says.

“They’re all good,” Vi responds. I imagine her giving him a sassy look, even if I’m not entirely sure what that would look like. I can’t picture expressions very well. I can’t picture faces very well. Mostly I try not to. I focus on sounds and feelings. I don’t dwell on trying to understand or remember sight.

Nico groans. “Preston, give me the truth.”

I laugh, sitting down in the back row again. Vi sits next to me.