

Chapter One

I undo the braid in my hair and work my fingers through the auburn waves. As loose hairs fall to the floor, Mom gives me a look that says, *Not at the breakfast table.* My shoulders slump as she lays a bowl of soupy oatmeal in front of me. My younger brother, Toby, is loading his spoon with only the pink Froot Loops. He has the morning paper in front of him.

"*Matthews, Karen. Died August 22. She is survived by her brother...*" he reads.

"Does he have to do this every morning?" I ask.

"He has a name." Mom dips a piece of toast in her oatmeal. Some spills onto her skirt. "Damn, I don't have time for this."

"Damn," repeats Toby. "*Peters, Shirley. Died...*"

"Quit it, Toby."

"*Tobias,*" he says and jams another spoonful of the pink cereal into his mouth.

My sigh goes unnoticed. After one reading, Toby will have the obituaries memorized. Then he'll repeat them all day long.

"Randi, I'm going to be late. If you and Toby don't hurry, you'll be late too. Is that how you want to begin the school year?"

The last thing I want is to be late for my first day of high school. As I swallow the gray goop, Mom finishes her toast. Before she heads out of the

kitchen, she gives Toby a slurpy kiss on the top of his head. He smooths his oily black hair back into place.

I was looking forward to eighth grade. I would finally have freedom. Finally get away from the responsibility of looking after my brother all day long. I hear what the other kids say when we pass by. *There goes that girl and her brother. Did you hear him wailing in the assembly last year? Do you know he'll repeat swearwords if you say them?* Then they spew a bunch of bad words and wait for Toby to repeat them. Laughter usually follows.

They judge me by my brother. High school was going to be my chance to stand on my own.

Then Mom crashed my party. I have to walk Toby to and from his school. Every day. That means five blocks out of the way. That means the end of my social life.

No chance to be normal.

I hear the door slam as Mom leaves for work. "Come on, Toby," I say. "Finish your breakfast so we aren't late." I still have to fiddle with my new contact lenses.

"*To...bias,*" he replies, then gets up and puts his bowl on the counter instead of in the dishwasher. I'm about to reprimand him when I notice his hands flap. He begins to rock back and forth on the balls of his feet. Giving him heck when he's in this state might put him over the edge. And then I'll definitely be late.

I take a deep breath so I don't sound mad. "Remember, Ms. Banyan is your teacher again this year. And your favorite staff, Miss Maureen, will be waiting for you. Just like always."

"Maureen loves turtles," he says. I help him tie his shoes. He stops rocking but still flaps his hands. He pats me on the head as I finish. "You will be in eighth grade."

"That's right," I answer. "Remember, you have to wait for me after school." I doubt he will forget. Toby has waited for me every day for three years. This year I have to leave early from my last class to get to Toby's school for the bell. He works best with solid routines.

I brush my teeth but don't stress about getting Toby to do his. I don't need the hassle.

Putting my contacts in is tricky. Not only is this the third time I have *ever* put them in, but my hands are sweating as I think about school. I don't want to lose a lens down the drain. I asked the doctor a million times if the contacts can slip *behind* my eyes. He said no, but I place them on each of my green eyes slowly, just to be sure.

The first day of high school would be easier if I still had my best friend. But Laurel moved to Calgary over the summer. As I put my dangly earrings in, I focus on the one good thing about

being in high school—we have an elective. I chose drama. I finally get to pursue my dream of being an actress.

Mr. Dean will be our drama teacher. I met him at orientation, and he is *super* cute.

By the time I return to the kitchen with my knapsack, Toby has untied one shoe.

“We don’t have time for this crap,” I say.

“Crap. We don’t have time.”

“Come on, Toby. *Don’t do this.*” I hear my mother’s voice reminding me to be patient with him. “We went to school every day last year. I drop you at your class. Then I pick you up at the end of the day.” I slide my feet into my new flats and tie his shoe again.

The sun hits us as we head out the door. September is usually a hot month in Vancouver. Now I wish we had three months for summer vacation.

Toby has pulled his knapsack off by the time we reach his school. He claims it’s too itchy. Before we enter his class, he tugs on my shirt. Miss Maureen comes to the door and greets us.

“Welcome back, Tobias. Great to see you. Hope you had a good summer?” She takes his knapsack from me and puts one hand on his shoulder. He grabs my hand and squeezes it tightly. He doesn’t like to be touched.

“You know everyone here,” I whisper. “You know Miss Maureen, and there is Ms. Banyan, see?” I point to his teacher. Toby is in a split class, so that he can have consistency with the same teacher and support worker he had last year. They’ve both been awesome with him.

Ms. Banyan waves our way. I gently guide Toby into the room.

“Tobias, I am happy you’re here. Missy will help you with your things. You’ll share a space in the

cloakroom.” A girl I remember from last year skips our way. Toby lets my hand go and follows Missy into the cloakroom.

“See you after school,” I say to his back. Miss Maureen waves, and I fly down the hall and out the door. I make it to my homeroom as the second bell rings. I am dripping with sweat, and I didn’t have a chance to check my hair in the bathroom. Now I wish I had worn my hoodie—then I could hide. Note to self: leave home earlier to have time to fix hair and check clothes!

At our school, homeroom is made up of students from grades eight to twelve. It turns out Mr. Dean is also our teacher-advisor. “Welcome back to the returning students and glad to have you aboard, grade eights,” he says. “Just a few notes to share with you before we get ready for first block.”

I shuffle uneasily in my seat. I can feel someone’s eyes boring into me from three seats

over, but I can’t make out the person’s face in my peripheral vision. I’m contemplating taking out my makeup mirror so I can see who is staring at me when Mr. Dean drops a bomb.

“The school board had to make some tough decisions, and one of them was to cancel the drama program for the eighth and ninth grades. But don’t worry. You can take it in grade ten.”

So much for having any fun in high school.

Chapter Two

With Mr. Dean's news, several students shout out their disappointment.

I feel deflated. Drama was the one thing I was looking forward to this year. As I wonder which class will replace it, a Twelfth grade student passes me a sheet with my new elective. I am now in home economics. *Crap!* I have to learn to sew. Who sews? Your socks get a hole, you throw them out.

Even if I'd gotten an elective I like, it wouldn't take away the sting of losing drama.

"Believe me, I am just as disappointed," says Mr. Dean. "I lose two blocks of teaching a subject I love."

"Isn't there anything we can do? Talk to someone maybe? Like someone on the school board?"

I turn my head to see who owns the voice. It's the guy who was staring at me a few minutes ago. His dark eyes shoot a glance my way, and I look at the floor. I fiddle with the green streak in my hair and listen to the conversation.

"That's a great idea, Josh. But I don't think it will have any impact. The numbers aren't going to change between now and this afternoon, and the district won't give any more money to the school."

"Well, there are twenty of us in homeroom. That means twenty possible ideas. Let's brainstorm