

CHAPTER 1

I hadn't set foot inside a hearing school in almost five years, and yet here Mom and I were, sitting in our minivan in the parking lot at Engelmann High School—a hearing school. We'd been waiting about fifteen minutes, and not once had my heart stopped pounding out a painful rhythm in my chest.

Mom reached over and tapped my knee, and I looked up from my lap where I'd been picking at a loose thread on my tie-dye T-shirt. She signed, READY?

I felt myself exhaling heavily. I was most certainly not ready, but it wasn't like I had much of a choice. Hearing school was definitely *not* my idea, but with the closest school for the Deaf being over an hour away from our new home near Parker, Colorado, we weren't left with many options.

READY, I signed. WAIT NOT HELP ME.

Yet again I found myself glad that American Sign Language was my preferred method of communication—it was short, sweet, to the point, and nowhere near as formal as English. I doubted I would have been able to string together any one sentence that would make an ounce of sense in English right then.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

Mom gave an overly bright smile as she unfastened her seatbelt and opened the car door. DON'T WORRY, I saw her sign as I unbuckled my own seatbelt.

It was kind of hard not to worry when I knew I was about to become the weird new girl with the interpreter following her around all day. Talk about making an impression. I'd never had to worry about an interpreter before, because at the Pratt School for the Deaf—the school I'd gone to back in Jersey—90 percent of the staff were Deaf or Hard of Hearing, and those that weren't knew ASL and could communicate effectively.

At Engelmann High, I was going to be the one and only Deaf student—an honor I wasn't so sure I was ready to accept.

I grabbed my backpack and hoisted it up on my shoulder as Mom locked the car, and we began the slow walk toward my certain doom.

Okay, so maybe that was a bit dramatic, but the last time I'd gone to a hearing school, I'd actually been, you know, *hearing*. I'd gone to Pratt for so long and gotten used to being around Deaf or HOH people—people who spoke my language—and now I was going to have to resort to lipreading and struggling to follow basic conversation.

And then there was the matter of using my voice, which had me all but paralyzed with fear. I was oral because I'd lost my hearing long after I acquired basic language skills, but the issue was that I couldn't hear my own voice anymore.

Using my voice was sometimes a knee-jerk reaction when I was around people who didn't sign, like the home health care nurses that used to come over a few times a

ALISON GERVAIS

week back in New Jersey to help take care of Connor while Mom was busy working as an associate for a company that specializes in harnessing wind energy.

Even though there was nothing wrong with my voice—I hoped—using it was just downright *weird*. I couldn't hear myself speak, but I could feel the sound reverberating in my skull whenever I spoke. It was a sensation I wasn't all that fond of.

Last Friday, Mom and I met with my new teachers, the principal, and the interpreter the school district arranged to accompany me to all of my classes this year. And today, my interpreter would be the one introducing me to people, communicating with and voicing for me with teachers and which was a surefire way to end up a social outcast by the final bell.

The interpreter's name was Kathleen. She seemed nice enough, and she obviously enjoyed interpreting given how much feeling she put into it—a big part of signing to begin with. No matter how nice she was though, she was still a stranger.

Mom put her hand on my shoulder as we approached the main entrance of the school and signed, BREATHE. YOU FINE HERE.

I shrugged, biting my lower lip. There was no point in correcting her. Plus, my palms were starting to sweat because I was so nervous, and signing with sweaty palms was never fun.

K-A-T-H-L-E-E-N NICE, RIGHT? Mom signed before she held open the door for me. I KNOW YOU WILL LIKE HER.

FINE, I signed back, not wanting to press the issue.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

I hated finger spelling long names, and I made a mental note to ask Kathleen what her sign name was. Sign names were typically representative of the individual, so I bet Kathleen's sign name had something to do with her fly-away red hair.

My sign name was technically the sign for *sweet* because apparently the Deaf teacher who taught my first ASL class thought I was sweet when she gave it to me. I didn't think that applied so much anymore. My given name—Maya—was a much better fit.

BUT? Mom pressed.

BUT HEARING SCHOOL, I signed, making a sweeping gesture around the school's lobby we were now standing in.

Rows of faded red lockers lined the hallway on either side of the entrance. Straight ahead was the main office, a huge clock bolted to the wall above the door displaying the time at 7:15, almost a half hour before school started.

NOT ALL HEARING SCHOOLS BAD, Mom signed, giving me an earnest look. I THINK YOU WILL LIKE SCHOOL HERE.

My new interpreter Kathleen came walking out of the main office to greet us, her mess of red curls pulled up into a bun. She signed, GOOD MORNING, with a perky smile.

I wasn't going to bother with a response, but I saw Mom's stern scowl out of the corner of my eye, so I forced myself to sign back, GOOD MORNING.

EXCITED? Kathleen asked me. FIRST DAY NEW SCHOOL.

I shrugged, signing, SURE.

DOCTOR R-I-V-E-R-A WAIT FOR US, Kathleen signed,

ALISON GERVAIS

finger spelling the principal's name, and she gestured behind her to the main office. YOUR SCHEDULE READY.

WONDERFUL, I signed, though I wasn't sure if the expression on my face was as sarcastic as I wanted.

KATHLEEN NOT D-O SOMETHING WRONG, Mom signed as we followed after Kathleen. NICE, she added in a nonverbal threat, pointing a finger at me.

ALWAYS NICE, I signed to Mom, resting my hand on my chest and batting my eyelashes.

Mom rolled her eyes, and I knew she was giving one of her world-weary sighs by the way her shoulders slumped. I officially lost my hearing when I was thirteen, four years ago, but I still remembered what *some* things sounded like, and Mom's dramatic sighs were firmly ingrained in my memory.

The school secretary was seated behind a massive desk just inside the office, and she nodded to Kathleen when we walked in. I watched her say, "Good morning," as Kathleen pulled open a door that led into the inner part of the main office where the principal, Dr. Rivera, other school administrators, and the nurse worked.

Dr. Rivera's office was small and dimly lit with the blinds pulled down, which had made lipreading difficult when we met with him last Friday. I had an interpreter with me, sure, but at the same time I wanted to at least appear like I could understand what was being said. I wasn't incompetent.

Dr. Rivera was standing behind his desk when the three of us entered his office. This time the bright overhead lights were on, the small accent lamp on his desk turned off. Standing beside the one window in the room, arms crossed

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

and looking just about as uncomfortable as I felt, was a girl with a high ponytail wearing a dressy skirt and blouse.

I froze in the doorway. Had Engelmann assigned me a second interpreter? Or was this girl fresh out of 'terp school, here to shadow Kathleen and add to my already awkward entourage?

TWO INTERPRETER? I signed frantically to Mom. DON'T NEED TWO INTERPRETER.

Before my mom could reply, Kathleen jumped into the conversation, signing NOT INTERPRETER, pointing to the girl by the window.

The girl was wearing stylish square-rimmed glasses, but I could see her dark eyes flicking over to the door like she wanted to make a break for it but was forcing herself to stay put.

You and me both, girlfriend, I thought.

HER NAME N-I-N-A T-O-R-R-E-S, Kathleen finger spelled, still pointing to the girl.

Nina clearly didn't know a lick of sign language, but she sure knew we were talking about her with all the pointing we were doing.

DON'T UNDERSTAND, I signed to Mom and Kathleen. WHO SHE? WHY SHE HERE?

Dr. Rivera was talking quickly now, picking up on the tense atmosphere, but I couldn't even think of lipreading at the moment. I wanted to know what this girl Nina was doing here.

Kathleen brushed her fingers up along her forearm, the sign for *slow*, and Dr. Rivera paused, pink in the face. He'd probably never dealt with a Deaf kid—like everyone else in

ALISON GERVAIS

this school, I was willing to bet—and I could tell he wasn't quite sure what to do.

N-I-N-A WONDERFUL STUDENT, Kathleen was signing as Dr. Rivera gestured to Nina, who still looked beyond embarrassed with her cheeks a blazing red. WE ASK HER B-E YOUR PEER MENTOR FOR YOUR FIRST TWO WEEKS HERE.

DON'T UNDERSTAND, I signed in confusion, shaking my head.

Dr. Rivera waved his hands around like he was giving some dramatic Shakespearian monologue as he explained what a "peer mentor" was. I only caught a few words of what he was saying, like "great student" and "grades" and something about student council. He hadn't really seemed to pick up on the whole *you need to slow down so the Deaf kid can understand you* thing.

N-I-N-A SHOW YOU YOUR CLASSES, Kathleen explained to me. WALK YOU AROUND SCHOOL. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE GOOD TIME.

I should have seen this coming.

SHE MY BABYSITTER? I signed, jabbing a finger at Nina. WALK ME AROUND, HAVE HEARING KIDS MAKE FRIEND WITH NEW DEAF GIRL?

Mom was pursing her lips, looking uncomfortable while Kathleen relayed what I said to Dr. Rivera and Nina. I watched Nina's face fall as she listened to Kathleen, and I felt a momentary twinge of guilt.

I wanted to get used to the idea of being in a hearing school again at my own pace. Not just be thrown to the wolves and expected to make friends with the first hearing kid to cross my path.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

NOT LIKE THAT, Kathleen interpreted as Nina started to speak. WANT YOU ENJOY E-N-G-E-L-M-A-N-N.

IMPOSSIBLE, I signed back immediately.

I saw Mom give another one of those sighs and scrunch her eyes closed. She took a moment to collect herself and signed to me, WORK WITH HER. I KNOW YOU NOT HAPPY, BUT TRY. PLEASE.

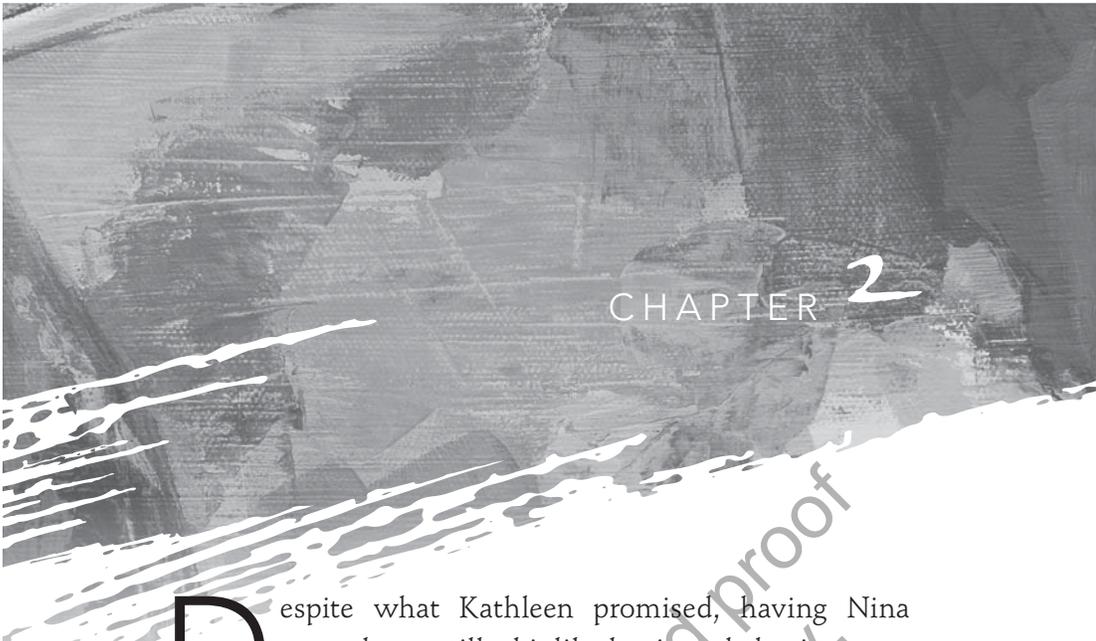
It was the expression on her face that ultimately made me back down. She looked so tired and worn down, and I knew it was partially because of me. I hadn't made things easy on her since she announced we were moving. I knew she was doing everything she could to make a good life for us out here, and she had enough to worry about with my little brother, Connor. When you have a son with cystic fibrosis, somehow your Deaf teenager ends up being the less difficult one—maybe not so much attitude-wise though.

OK, I signed, reaching over to squeeze her forearm. SORRY.

OK, Mom signed, a wobbly smile on her lips.

We sat in the two chairs in front of Dr. Rivera's desk as he sat down again, looking relieved the storm had passed. Kathleen beckoned Nina closer before moving behind Dr. Rivera's desk, standing directly in my line of sight to interpret.

This was pretty much the last thing in the world I wanted to be doing, but probably the sooner I accepted this whole hearing school thing as my new “normal” the better off I might be.



CHAPTER 2

Despite what Kathleen promised, having Nina around was still a bit like having a babysitter.

Nina took her position as peer mentor very seriously and was quite thorough as she led Kathleen and me on a tour around Engelmann. Every classroom, hallway, and office were described in painstaking detail, even though Engelmann wasn't all that different from Pratt—just bigger. And every time I looked up, either Nina or Kathleen was watching me like they were escorting a toddler instead of a seventeen-year-old.

To be fair, I'd had a split second of panic saying goodbye to Mom before Nina took us off on the tour. I was thrown into a flashback of my first day of kindergarten, terrified to see Mom go and leave me behind in a foreign place with total strangers. I'd wanted to hug her, take in the comforting scent of her amber perfume, beg her not to make me do this. Instead I squeezed her hand three times and signed, SEE YOU LATER.

It was difficult to stay focused on Kathleen while she was interpreting what Nina was saying when students started trickling inside the closer we came to the first bell.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

People gravitated to their lockers that lined the hallways, chatting with one another or shuffling around still half asleep. At first, none of them noticed me. But Kathleen was very into her signing, and she threw her whole self into it with the facial expressions to match. I appreciated her enthusiasm, but it attracted attention more than I would've liked. It didn't take very long before heads were turning as we passed through the halls.

Kathleen waved a hand to get my attention for what was probably the sixth time, redirecting me toward Nina. We'd just reached the back door beside the cafeteria and Nina was talking animatedly, using her hands almost as much as she would have if she were signing.

SHE TALK A LOT, I signed to Kathleen, and her lips twitched like she was fighting back a smile.

The last stop on our tour of Engelmann was my locker before we were required to be in the gym for a first-day-of-school assembly to bolster our excitement for the new school year. I was probably the only person excited about the assembly, because it meant I could sit quietly and anonymously for a few minutes of this wacky day.

It took some jiggling to get my locker door to unstick, and as soon as it popped open I understood why. Whoever had the locker before me hadn't been the tidiest; a bunch of old assignments lay crumpled at the bottom, a variety of gum and food wrappers sprinkled on top. Gross. Gingerly, I hung my backpack on the hook inside, wondering if the universe was actually conspiring against me. It probably was.

ASSEMBLY NOW, Kathleen signed for Nina as I swung

ALISON GERVAIS

my locker shut. SOMETIMES BORING, BUT STUDENT COUNCIL LIKE CANDY.

Oh, well, as long as there's candy involved, I thought.

By the time we reached the gym almost all the bleachers were full, and my desire to end up in the very back row was thwarted. Nina raced across the floor toward an empty portion of the first row of bleachers, motioning for Kathleen and me to follow. She waved at a bunch of people by a table set up underneath one of the basketball hoops as we ran by, then threw herself down on the bleachers as Dr. Rivera stepped into the middle of the gym, microphone in hand.

I quickly sat down in the empty space next to Nina, and Kathleen stood a few feet off to the side, ready to interpret when the assembly started. Dr. Rivera was too far away for me to try to lipread, but he looked like he was trying to get the students to quiet down with how he was making a shushing gesture with his free hand.

I couldn't tell if people were following his instructions because the conversation, the constant movement, and the dull tremble of microphone noise reverberated in the bleachers where I sat. Kathleen only got a few signs into Dr. Rivera's speech when I turned my hearing aids off.

I didn't actually hear much of anything with my hearing aids like some people seemed to think. At best I could hear *some* ambient noise, like a quiet *thud* if someone slammed a door. My hearing aids really only served to help me be somewhat more aware of my surroundings and weren't a cure-all—just a temporary solution to a permanent problem.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

If I just closed my eyes, hearing aids off, I was entirely alone in the world, and sometimes I preferred it that way instead of being sucked into all the hubbub around me. It was one thing I enjoyed about being deaf—the ability to disconnect from everything.

After only a few minutes, I could tell from Kathleen's signs that Dr. Rivera's speech was similar to every "it's the first day of school so let's do our best" speech I'd gotten at Pratt. I tuned most of it out, though I did pay attention when Kathleen mentioned something about lunchtime, because . . . food. I also perked up when a couple of guys threw candy into the bleachers and a Snickers landed in my lap. It was by far the best part of my strange and stressful morning.

As soon as Dr. Rivera finished his speech, Nina placed a hand on my shoulder, pointing to the person walking toward us. It was one of the guys who'd been throwing candy a minute ago, but he had a black T-shirt in hand now. I could see the outline of a green Spartan soldier on the shirt, the words ENGELMANN HIGH printed above it. This guy was tall and a little gangly—awkward even. His dark hair was a mess, like he'd just rolled out of bed, and yet it seemed stylish in an I-don't-care kind of way.

Smiling, the guy said something to Nina first and then he turned to me, a rush of color flooding into his cheeks as he said *hello*. Whatever he said next was totally lost on me given how quickly his lips were moving, so I settled for doing the universal sign for *I can't hear you*—pointing to my ear and shaking my head, making sure to frown in confusion.

ALISON GERVAIS

MY FRIEND, Kathleen signed for Nina, jumping into the introductions when she realized I wasn't absorbing anything the guy was saying. NAME B-E-A-U W-A-T-S-O-N. STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT.

NICE TO MEET YOU, I signed, keeping it simple.

I wasn't sure what kind of name *Beau* was but it seemed fancy, a name you might expect the student body president to have.

As he spoke, Beau's cheeks went from pink to crimson while I lip-read what he was saying. The focus it took to lipread sometimes tended to make people uncomfortable, which I secretly found hilarious.

"It's nice . . . you. Great to . . . here. I thought you . . . T-shirt? You know . . . thing and . . . that."

I looked to Kathleen, unable to decipher all that he was saying to me.

HE BRING SCHOOL T-SHIRT FOR YOU, Kathleen signed. WELCOME GIFT.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised to see the look that came over Beau's face as he watched Kathleen sign to me. It was a mixture of confusion and surprise, but mostly confusion. Usually what followed what I called *the look* was the shouting, as if they spoke loudly enough I might actually be able to hear them. Either that or pity once the realization that I couldn't hear sunk in.

But I had enough T-shirts stuffed in boxes filling up my new room at the moment so my response was to sign, NO, THANK YOU, with a shake of my head.

Beau bit his lip as Kathleen told him the message. He looked to Nina like he didn't know what to do next.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

Nina introduced Kathleen instead, and I caught a few words of what she was saying, like “interpreter” and “classes.”

“Oh,” Beau said. “That’s . . . cool.”

Watching him get all uneasy as his eyes darted back and forth from me to Kathleen was strange. It was clear he didn’t know who he should be talking to—me or her. This wasn’t the first time someone spoke to an interpreter instead of to me, like I wasn’t literally right in front of them and perfectly capable of being included in the conversation. But I had hoped I’d make it further into the day—preferably after first period—until it happened here.

HEY, I signed to Kathleen. ASSEMBLY ALL DONE? CLASS START NOW, RIGHT?

There were thundering footsteps shaking the bleachers as students scrambled their way out of the gym. First period had to be just minutes away from starting.

I was on my feet the second Kathleen signed, ALL DONE.

I made a sweeping gesture to let Nina know she was free to lead the way to first period. Nina waved to Beau as she grabbed her bag and Beau gave a halfhearted wave in return before we quickly exited the gym, using our elbows to get around a few people. Kathleen somehow fell behind us, and when she caught up out in the hallway she had that shirt Beau tried to give me a minute ago.

I raised an eyebrow in a silent question. What did she expect me to do with it?

NICE GIFT, Kathleen signed with one hand, holding out the T-shirt to me. HE LOOK LIKE NICE BOY.

Actually, Beau looked like a scared—albeit very

ALISON GERVAIS

tall—rabbit. I'd only signed *nice to meet you* and *no, thank you* to the guy, and he'd looked at me like I was speaking Klingon. Not a very nice feeling.

I took the T-shirt from Kathleen and made a mental note to stuff it in my backpack once I retrieved it from my locker. If Mom started up another box of donations to be taken to a thrift store while we were unpacking, I was going to toss the shirt into it.

Nina directed us to my first period class—AP Statistics—in the math wing. She hovered outside the doorway, looking apologetic.

I HAVE DIFFERENT CLASS NOW, Kathleen signed for Nina. I COME BACK WHEN CLASS ALL DONE, WALK WITH YOU NEXT CLASS.

OK, I signed, and because I didn't want to come across as totally ungrateful I added, THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP.

"No problem," Nina said, to *me* instead of to Kathleen.

I was so surprised, I actually smiled at her. This girl really must be smart if she'd figured out the art of interpretation. It was . . . something. But still not enough to convince me this whole hearing school thing wouldn't turn out to be a complete and total disaster.