

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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.