



Chapter One

Anything But Dia's Class

Vacation Bible school superintendent Micah and his sister Morgan did not expect to see last year's students so soon. However, as they unloaded VBS supplies from Micah's truck and carried them toward the town hall, they saw two girls come down the steps of Someplace Else, the bar next door. The smaller girl walked down the steps; the older one danced down, as if the steps were a stage and the vehicles parked at the curb were an audience. As she hopped onto the sidewalk, she looked up and saw Micah and Morgan, and she remembered them from VBS the year before.

"Morgan!" Fruit slush from Morgan's pitcher dripped onto the girl's hair as she bounced against her.

"Mike!" The girl ran up to him, clutching his knees and knocking into the cardboard box in his arms.

"When's VBS starting?" the older girl hollered, doing a cartwheel in the strip of patchy grass between the town

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hall and the gravel lot. Dia, at nine years old, could dribble a soccer ball on her knees without a miss for five minutes straight. She could chatter for five minutes without a break, either Spanish or English, or a combination of both languages. But she could not sit still.

Micah lowered the cardboard box and reached under one of the loose top flaps.

"Here's your invitation, Dia. We're going to start July 8. That's next Monday. Are you going to come?"

Instead of answering, Dia tossed the half-sheet invitation into the breeze like a graduation cap. "Hurray! VBS is starting in four days!" Another cartwheel brought her to the edge of the gravel, where the invitation was floating toward Micah's truck. She sprang for it, her small ribs crashing against the grill, her black hair everywhere.

"What about you, Amber? Are you going to come?" Micah asked, squatting beside the five-year-old picking weeds from the sidewalk cracks.

Amber arranged the broad, jagged weed leaves in one pile and the grasses in another. She answered without looking at Micah or Morgan. "If my sister brings me."

"Your sister will bring you, Amber! She can leave Addie with your grandma. You have to come to VBS! It's fun! Even Jasper and Antonio come sometimes." Dia had cartwheeled back, the crumpled invitation pinned by her hair band.

Morgan remembered Dia's brother Antonio, and his friend Jasper. She knew Micah was hoping they would come again. Because she herself had been born in Mexico, Morgan had an eye for Hispanic faces. She could not forget Dia and

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Antonio's mother, a single mom with her arms full of smaller children and her face full of shadows. Morgan wondered where Dia's father was. She knew Dia wondered too, even though she had sung cheerily, "Oh, I don't have a dad!"

"Is Morgan going to be my teacher again?" Amber asked, blowing the grasses off the sidewalk. The other weeds she carefully gathered into the palm of her hand.

"Would you like that?" Morgan asked. "Yes, I think I will, although we're not quite sure yet. I hope you can come."

"Is Mike going to be my teacher again?" asked Dia. "I love Mike! You're the greatest teacher!"

"Nope, not this year," Micah answered. "I'm the principal. I'll set you straight if you're bad."

"I'm too smart to catch! Come, Amber, here comes your sister with Addie!"

Amber's sister walked a stroller down the steps of Someplace Else with one hand and clutched a brown paper bag with a glass bottle in the other. Beneath the hard jaw of her mother, Addie's soft face peered out. It looked as though Amber's sister smiled about as often as Amber carried a conversation. Morgan tried not to stare at the woman's hair. The tangled masses, uncombed in months, said, "Who cares?"

"We'll see you girls next Monday," Micah said to the backs of their heads, grabbing his box and opening the hall door. The two slipped inside.

"Bye, Mike and Morgan!" Dia shouted. Her voice sounded upside down.

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"I hope Amber comes," Morgan sighed. "She was such a cutie last year, even though she never said anything. Sometimes she would snuggle up against me during story time. Her mom's in jail, you know, so she lives with her sister."

The inside hall lights were not quite at full brightness, which showed that Kenneth, the missions board president, had just arrived. The familiar smells of basketballs, dust, bad water, and hidden mold mixed with the citrusy whiffs from the pitcher. Morgan could already almost hear the whirr of skateboard wheels and Rollerblades, the random plunking on the piano with no middle C, and the creak of the peeling blue bleachers.

"Micah! Are you ready for this?" Kenneth was thirty-eight years old. He was always on the missions board; as soon as his term was finished, his fellow church members voted him back on. Besides taking the time to love people, he also worked as a veterinarian, taking care of animals. His life was a never-ending cycle of care for something or someone.

"I'm ready for VBS, but not sure about being principal. Whoever heard of having to be principal when you're twenty-two?"

"I think I did it when I was twenty-one, so you won't get sympathy from me," laughed Kenneth. "You'll do a great job. At least you're taller than all the students." Micah was as tall as Kenneth was short. Micah's dark, curly hair made him look even bigger and older than he was. In fact, in the summer when he worked on hot roofs every day, Micah almost

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matched his adopted sister Morgan. From May to September they didn't hear, "What? You can't be brother and sister!" quite as often.

"Morgan," Kenneth went on, "I still haven't heard from our last teacher. You know, the one who might teach fourth grade. I'm so sorry to keep you in suspense."

Morgan grimaced.

"I'll try to do whatever I have to," she said, "but I just don't know if I can handle fourth grade. It's Dia's class. I'd so much rather have second kindergarten with Amber." Morgan described Amber's sister: the stroller, the bottle, and the unkempt hair.

Kenneth sighed, combing through a sheaf of registration papers.

"I've learned sick animals don't groom themselves, and neither do people, I guess. But it's sad to think of her in charge of Amber."

There was work to be done. While Morgan poured fruit slush into foam cups, Kenneth scribbled on a piece of graph paper. Every year the echoing town hall had to be divided into six curtained classrooms for VBS. The staff spent an afternoon moving furniture into position and pinning sheets and blankets to rolling coatracks. This created classrooms that were cozy, but not soundproof. A frustrated teacher could be heard by every other teacher and student in the hall.

"It worked pretty well to have eighth grade on the stage last year," Kenneth said. "Let's do that again. And we could put . . . let's see . . ." Micah and Morgan joined him and the