

# 1

## First Day Surprises

I thought my biggest problem on the first day of sixth grade would be fitting in. Turns out it was demons.

Even at an elite boarding school, kids treated me the same. They shuffled around me awkwardly. They stared at my “interesting” face and my super slick wheelchair. Ever since I’d won the scholarship here, I’d been brainstorming what I could do to make things different. Now I was just waiting for the right moment to do it.

Everything else about Morton Academy of Technology was different. First off, second period was held outside in a pavilion overlooking a sparkling lake. Brick buildings towered over a field, gardens, and a creepy cemetery. I felt the school’s age in my brittle bones, like secrets reaching out to me.

The moment I saw the smooth basketball court, I knew it was the perfect place. I pushed to the center of the blacktop in front of the stream of students.

Before anyone could stop me, I raced forward and popped the perfect 360 wheelie.

That spinning trick always gathered a crowd, although my parents forbade it. “Too dangerous,” they said. But I was on my own now. I was going to do whatever it took *not* to be labeled “the awkward disabled girl.” Being disabled wasn’t a bad thing. Everyone else just *thought* it was.

Several students stopped to look. Time for a longer set of spins. A little risky, but hopefully, it would be worth it. I set my hands at the back of my pushrims and tilted back so my little front caster wheels tipped off the ground. I had just settled into a comfortable wheelie when a dark shadow crossed my path.

It crept along the court beside me.

I looked over, but I was alone on the blacktop. Must’ve been my imagination. Fear of losing my big moment took over. I went for it.

I spun once, twice. This time, my classmates knew I was doing something cool. They clapped.

I beamed. *Yes! It’s working!*

Three spins in, and I felt like a smooth ice skater. I spun faster and faster. But on the fifth spin, I tilted back slightly too much. Before panic could set in and I lost control, I had to stop. I shifted my focus and came out of the spin. My caster wheels landed safely on the ground.

*Phew!* I hadn’t fallen over. In my excitement, I might have gone a little too fast.

The buzz of applause came, but from farther away. *Well, that didn’t go as planned.*

And then I knew why.

A long shadow towered over me. Mrs. Eight, my Life Science teacher, had just interrupted my shining moment.

At least this shadow belonged to someone.

Mrs. Eight's oversized glasses covered her pretty face. With her rosy cheeks and healthy complexion, she clearly enjoyed being outside.

While I readied myself for a scolding, I tried to decide whether to take up the "poor me, it's so hard to make friends with a contorted face like mine" attitude or pretend my face was normal. Of course, everyone's face is different—mine was just a little more so.

I'd long accepted my Craniofacial Difference, but that didn't mean my appearance didn't make *other* people uncomfortable. My skull didn't form properly before birth. Even after multiple surgeries, my face looked like an artist jumbled parts together in Photoshop. They put my left eye a little too low, twisted my mouth, and made my nose crooked. I also hit the jackpot with Osteogenesis Imperfecta Type 1 (OI). It's a rare condition that made my bones weak and my legs too small.

I recalled my big brother's advice: "You do you up there. Don't let anyone beat you down." Corey had always watched out for me. At fifteen, he was going into high school this year. He was a big goof who made friends easily. I wished I was like that, so I tried to be confident too.

My mischievous side wanted to use the victim card. But I knew if I did, I'd be labeled that way for the rest of my schooling here.

“Virginia Warden,” Mrs. Eight said, as if my full name were a scolding in itself. “Didn’t you hear the bell ring?” She raised her eyebrows, obviously irritated to have been taken away from her class.

“Vera, please,” I corrected. I hated my first name. “I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

Get it? Carried? By my wheelchair. Always loved that joke. But the Normals, as I liked to call them, were always so afraid of hurting my feelings that they didn’t know what to say. But not Mrs. Eight, who treated me like her other students. Which I kind of resented but also secretly appreciated.

“Class is starting now.” She pointed to the pavilion. Eleven other students gathered around the picnic tables. “Do you need assistance?”

I shook my head. To prove it, I immediately did a wheelie pop-up to transfer to the grass.

Once Mrs. Eight was behind me, I scowled. She’d gone and ruined my big moment.

I’d done all this hoping they’d rush around me, talk to me excitedly, and become my friends. The instant she’d marched through the crowd, they’d dispersed, not wanting to get in trouble.

I was back alone, pushing through the bumpy grass.

Now, who to sit with? This was always the hardest part. I didn’t want to force myself on someone, but I had to sit somewhere. I’d been hoping to get invited to a table after my 360-wheelie trick, but Mrs. Eight had taken that away.

*Stop it, Vera! Be confident! You have to.*

Luckily, these students were also in my first-period homeroom. It was easy to remember the talkative girls. Claire and Penny huddled together, talking with hands over their mouths. Claire's wavy brown hair looked done by a stylist, and Penny's diamond studs sparkled with her straight red hair. They both had selfie-worthy makeup on their ivory skin. Even their school uniforms looked fancier than everyone else's.

The school uniform was pretty cute: a gray collared shirt with a fitted blue dress over it. It would've been fun to see some boys in skirts. Instead, they wore gray slacks and either a vest or a suit jacket.

Claire's table was the closest. I inched over, then winced as she stuck out her arm, barring two girls from sitting. "Seat saved."

Nope. Definitely not an option. I wasn't about to sit at the empty table.

Luke Taylor seemed pretty enthused about my wheelie. He had a suave air about him and perfect brown skin. I pushed over, and stopped at the edge of his front row table.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a slight cringe. That was normal. I'd seen it a zillion times, though people never thought I did. I liked to keep it that way.

I said, "Hey."

Luke relaxed.

False confidence. Always worked.

A Korean-American girl rushed over and plopped beside Luke. "Thanks for holding my seat." She waved. "I'm Sandara Seong."

I waved back.

The fancy picnic tables had a frame that kept me from pulling my chair underneath. So like most things, these tables were not wheelchair accessible. But class outside? I'd trade that for accessibility any day. I decided to use my notebook as a surface. A light breeze swept through the pavilion, bringing the scent of flowers and fresh air.

I breathed in deeply, grateful to be away from sterile hospital scents.

Luke kept reaching out on the table as if his cell phone were there. But those had all been confiscated when we first arrived. I tried not to think about how empty I felt without my constant companion.

"Sweet ride," Luke said. He quickly added, "No, wait, I shouldn't have said—"

"All good," I said, my catchphrase. I mean, what *do* you say to a short girl in a wheelchair who kinda looks like Quasimodo?

"You, uh, a first-year?" he asked nervously, although he seemed like he was normally a confident boy. I'd seen him talking to the popular students when we'd first gathered in the grand hall.

Not wanting him to feel embarrassed since this was a first-year class, I said, "Sure, I'm twelve. First generation to attend Morton Tech. I won the Richie Novus Scholarship."

He perked up at my invitation for real conversation. "I'm third generation. My grandparents attended when the school first opened, way before modern technology."

Suddenly, his brown eyes lit up, and he pointed at me. “You’re the girl who created *Ghostblast!* My brother and I love that game.”

I blushed. I couldn’t help it. Even though I’d won the prestigious Akari Suko Game Creator Contest in the ten-to-twelve-year-old category, it still seemed unreal.

Everyone around me shushed. They were pointing at me, but not because of my disabilities. I’d been outed as a game developer. It felt good.

But once again, Mrs. Eight had to steal my thunder. The middle-aged woman set her supplies on the table in the front and clapped her hands. “Eyes on me. Let’s have order.”

I turned to face her. My heart pounded, not from all the people sneaking glances at me, but because I was *here*.

This was one of the most prestigious private schools in the country. With the scholarship, I felt like I didn’t belong. All my classmates’ parents were multi-millionaires and important people. My parents were so “normal”—my mom was a doctor, and my dad was a Jujutsu instructor.

“Welcome to Life Science.” Mrs. Eight tapped a shiny red bag on her table. “I have something special for you.”

Everyone was so distracted trying to look at me that they couldn’t focus.

I needed a new strategy. I didn’t think I could handle going the rest of the school year with no friends. Already I missed my best buds, Shameka and Zed. Especially Zed. I think we’ve watched more *Starbase Control* than anyone in the world.

At Morton Tech making real friends seemed harder than usual. Maybe it was because my support system was so far away. Sure, the school had medical staff and a physical therapist for me, but my parents, my big brother, and my friends weren't here.

I had snagged one of the private first-floor rooms for my wheelchair access. It was definitely a luxury upgrade. But it meant I didn't have a roommate.

“Class, attention up here!” Mrs. Eight clapped once. My head snapped forward, and so did everyone else's—except for the table next to me. She glared at the whispering posse. When they still didn't stop, she cleared her throat and the pavilion went silent.

Mrs. Eight smiled from behind her table. “Now that I have your attention, I can welcome you. Let's do a little exercise so you can get to know each other better. One by one, I'm going to call you to the front. Tell us your name, the program you're focusing on here, and one interesting thing people might not know about you.”

Groans and grumbles echoed around the pavilion. I swallowed hard and sank down a bit in my chair. Nobody likes icebreakers, but for a kid like me they're the literal worst. Just another chance for people to stare and make fun of stuff they know nothing about.

And then there's the waiting. I imagined my anxiety building—like that long minute waiting for my phone to reboot.

In an instant, I knew what I had to do.



## 2

# A Bold Move

The sound of noisy students faded in my mind. I only had one focus: get to the front of the class and get this over with. The sooner I embarrassed myself, the sooner I could return to actually learning. I took off down the aisle.

“Hugo Hexton,” Mrs. Eight called. A boy with curly blond hair in the front row got up, but I pushed past him. In my hurry to get in front of her table, I knocked the boy slightly off-balance with my pushrim.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

Hugo looked startled but then smiled gratefully. He scrambled back to his bench, probably wanting to sit before I could change my mind.

“Young lady, what do you think—” Mrs. Eight started, baffled at my disruptive behavior.

I hoped digging in would answer her question. “Hi. My name is Vera Warden. I came to Morton Tech to study coding and—”

“Gross,” Penny hissed. A few classmates looked at each other, shocked. I was used to it, but I couldn’t say it didn’t hurt.

I cringed. I had thought going first would make this easier, but I had forgotten to address the elephant in the room. No one would be interested in me until they got over the otherness of my chair and my face. I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders back, trying to give off as much confidence as possible. Like my brother always said, “Fake it till you make it.”

“All right, I get it. I look weird. So I’m going to give you one chance. You have thirty seconds to stare, then I’m going back to my spot.”

A late summer breeze swept across the wood floor. Geese and swans splashed on the lake. A dozen sets of eyes focused on me.

Nero Blackbird, a boy with a messy mop of dark hair, let his jaw drop slightly before clamping it closed. His eyes bulged and his already pale complexion grew even lighter, as if he’d seen a ghost. I didn’t think I was *that* scary. *I’m still human.*

Mrs. Eight seemed surprised, but she started a timer on her fitness watch.

I could already tell we were going to have a love-hate relationship.

I’d done something similar before. I found it worked really well for moving on with life. Everyone *wanted* to look, but every decent human knew it was rude. It shouldn’t

really be my responsibility to fix, but it was just easier this way.

Not wanting to catch anyone's eye, I focused on the carved pillars holding up the roof.

I let them stare: five seconds at the drooping left side of my face, ten seconds at my actually nice brown hair that covered my squished ears, ten seconds at my mostly normal arms and smaller legs, and the last five seconds for my super cute, sloth-patterned leg braces.

"Time," Mrs. Eight announced as everyone seemed to get over the intrigue of checking me out. Or perhaps they were too consumed with the awful sulfur stench. The worst smelling fart of all time swept through the pavilion. Everyone was gagging, dramatically plugging their noses, and looking for the culprit.

Mrs. Eight coughed once. The air cleared. "Thank you, Miss Warden," she said politely as I went back to Luke's table. "Now, can we return to class?"

"Only if Zachary stops those death farts!" Diego Walker shouted. He was a skinny boy with tan skin and a buzz cut.

Everyone laughed except Mrs. Eight.

Luke and Sandara high-fived me while the rest of the first-years murmured to each other.

After introductions, class got underway, and I was glad for that. A few students still studied me, but most already seemed bored with my face and gave their attention to Mrs. Eight.

It made me happy and excited that I, too, could focus on the Life Science lesson. And whatever surprise was in that red bag.

We watched in awe as Mrs. Eight pulled out a jar of bees. They buzzed around, anxious to escape.

As she explained the assignment, a few students complained. But I thought it was easier to chart parts of a bee than to make friends—I mean quality friends. Just hanging out with fun kids wasn't *too* hard. But it was a special kind of friendship when they'd stick around, even when I had a bad day. Or week.

It felt like someone was at the back of the pavilion watching us, but every time I turned around, no one was there.

I was grateful when class was dismissed. For a first day, it wasn't too bad. It could've been much worse. Like my first day at Sandalwood Elementary, when a girl changed my nametag to "Vera Wheelin'."

I had just left the pavilion behind Luke and Sandara when a rotten-egg stench filled the air.

Great, another death fart. What had been *in* their breakfast?

But then I wondered. I could even taste this fart on the back of my tongue. That wasn't natural. Nor was the squirting noise in the wind.

Everyone dispersed toward the main building for lunch. At first, I thought nothing of the shadow on the lawn. As I lagged further behind the group, I realized it didn't belong.

*Shadows don't hover.*

Goosebumps prickled my skin. My gut swirled like when I'd met the wicked ghost at University Hospital.

*Get a hold of yourself, Vera.* I told myself. *It has to be a prank.*

The moment I screamed or acted afraid, they'd jump out and yell, "Gotcha!"

Then they'd post on Grambook. It would go viral. And I'd be embarrassed the rest of my life. No way I'd let that happen.

But where were the cameras? There were no cell phones, backpacks, or anyone looking my way. Maybe hidden in the oak trees? But the closest ones were fifty feet away—too far to create shade near the path.

As I pushed to catch up with my class, I saw to my horror that the shadow was growing.

Bigger. Darker.

Soon it hovered over the path.

I let out a gasp. I stopped mid-roll.

It wasn't a prank.