

The Extraordinary Miss Sunshine

by Jane Elizabeth Cammack

(Adapted book. Elementary level)

CHAPTER 1

A New School

Parents and grandparents say that the years you spend at school are the best years of your life. Maybe it's true for some young people, but it wasn't like that for me... not at the beginning anyway.

My name is Alice May and I'm eleven years old. I lived with my family in London until my father got a new job in St Ives. We moved to beautiful Cornwall one summer.

This is my story.

* * *

The sun shone over St Ives, a seaside town in Cornwall. It was a busy fishing port. There were small stone houses and white sandy beaches. Lots of families lived there.

The town needed a bigger, more important school, so a famous architect designed a secondary school. The school

was for children between the ages of eleven and eighteen. It was called The Fairbrother Academy.

The architect was very clever and he also loved music.

'Every school needs a concert hall with a stage and lights,' he said. The concert hall he created was wonderful. He also built a large gym, art studios, computer rooms and classrooms that were big and bright.

The outside of the school was beautiful. There was a large front door and lions around a fountain. There were gardens and playgrounds and birds sang in the trees.

Some of the children who came to The Fairbrother Academy didn't want to learn. They were not interested in French or Latin, Maths or History. They pushed their classmates in the playground and called them bad names. These children were good when they were at home with their parents, but terrible when they came to school.

* * *

I can hardly sleep before the first day at my new school The Fairbrother Academy. I am excited and nervous all at the same time.

In the morning, when I walk into my classroom, I see a group of girls. They are talking together. They stop speaking when I come in.

'Hello,' I say. 'I'm Alice.'

The girls don't smile. Their eyes are cold. One of the girls called Iris Fudge, who has an angry face, comes close.

She looks at my long dark hair and blue eyes. Then she makes a scary face and runs back to her best friend Roxy Miller and the group of girls.

'Don't go near her. She bites!' Iris says.

They won't talk to me because I have braces on my teeth. They call me 'Shark Face'.

* * *

I don't look very happy when I arrive home from school. My parents see my sad face.

'How was school?' they ask.

'Fine,' I say.

They ask me about friends and I tell them about the girls in my class and the fun things we do together. It isn't true. I can't tell them what school is really like. If dad speaks to the teachers everything will become worse.

* * *

Every day there is trouble in our classroom. The bullies don't like children who are clever and do well at school or children who wear glasses. They want kids in their group who are not very nice to teachers. They like children who don't do their homework. They think only bad children are cool.

It isn't only the group of girls who are bullies. There is a boy gang too. Their leader is Dexter Crane. He's very tall. Dexter pushes his classmates when they are in the

playground. His friends, Ajax McCoy and Blaze Fenton, watch and laugh. They stand behind him.

* * *

At home in our house, a little bird sings in the tree near my bedroom window. She sees me crying and I tell her what school is like. The little bird shakes her head. She doesn't like it at all.

CHAPTER 2

Isadora Sunshine

The little bird flies across the fields, to an old house near the sea. The windows of the house are open and the little bird flies in and rests on a bookcase. It is Miss Sunshine's house.

Miss Isadora Sunshine has golden hair and bright green eyes. She is standing in front of a canvas, surrounded by paints and brushes. She is painting a picture of a storm and sailing boats.

She has paint on her face and on her clothes, but the painting is wonderful.

When Miss Sunshine sees the little bird fly in, she puts her brush on the table. She takes some bread and puts it in a dish. She brings the bird some water.

'How lovely to see you,' says Miss Sunshine. She knows from the way the bird jumps from one foot to the other that she has something important to tell her.

'Tell me. What's the matter?' she says.

Miss Sunshine sits on a chair and the little bird sings a sad song of trouble. When she finishes Miss Sunshine stands up.

'How sad,' she says. 'You were right to tell me. We can do something to help.'

Miss Sunshine packs a bag with music books, art brushes and strange musical instruments. She puts her bag in the car and starts the engine.

'Hold on tight,' she says to the little bird. 'It will only take forty-five minutes to drive to the school.'

She drives to St Ives.

* * *

Before I continue with the story, I must tell you about the head teacher at The Fairbrother Academy.

How can I describe him? He is not a handsome man. His face is a bit like your reflection when you look in a kettle - sort of squashed. He is thin, and has long legs. His name is James Weak and his name describes his character. He is weak by name and weak by nature. Some people say he is a good head teacher. Others say he doesn't answer his emails. He is busy in his office every day playing scrabble on his computer.

On this particular day his secretary, Miss Baxter, knocks on the door. 'There's a lady to see you.'

'Oh, really? I wasn't expecting anyone. What lady?' says Mr Weak.

'Miss Isadora Sunshine.'

Mr Weak looks up because the moment he hears the name 'Sunshine', he begins to feel happy. 'Send her in, Miss Baxter.'

Miss Isadora Sunshine is wearing a yellow dress and she smells of sweet flowers. She shakes Mr Weak's hand and sits down.

'I am here for the job of music teacher,' she says.

Mr Weak is confused. 'Um, I don't think there is a job as music teacher at the school.'

'Yes, there is,' shouts Miss Baxter from her office. 'You have an email this morning from the old music teacher', she says. She appears with a printed letter. 'He left yesterday.'

Mr Weak looks even more surprised. 'Well, then yes - there is a job at the school. We are looking for a music teacher.'

'I want good behaviour in the classroom,' says Miss Sunshine.

'Of course,' says Mr Weak. 'But we are a friendly school, Miss Sunshine. We allow children to call teachers by their first names.'

Miss Sunshine smiles and shakes her head. 'I'm sorry, Mr Weak, but I won't allow that in my classroom. Respect is very important and I am here as their teacher, not as their best friend.'

'I see,' says Mr Weak. He looks confused. 'There may be other candidates,' he says in a voice weak as water.

'Mr Weak, there are no other candidates and there is no one better than me.'

Mr Weak looks at Miss Sunshine. He agrees but he doesn't say anything.

'So,' Miss Sunshine says. 'If there are no more questions, I would like a copy of my timetable, so that I can start this minute.'

CHAPTER 3

A Classroom of Sunshine

No one talks to me at school. I feel alone as I stand at the side of the playground. There are the cool kids and there are the ones people don't speak to - children who are different. I want to speak to them, but I'm afraid of Iris Fudge and her gang.

The teachers know there's trouble in our class but they don't see children push their classmates or hear the bad names. The bullies are clever. Sometimes we speak to a teacher, one who has an understanding face.

'Write everything down,' the teacher says to us. 'I will make a report and pass it on to the head teacher.'

We write a letter but nothing happens. Things are getting worse. The bullies can contact me in cyberspace at every moment of the day and night. Why can't they leave me alone!

* * *

And then Miss Sunshine comes into my life.

Children stop talking and texting when she walks into the music room in her yellow dress. Her hair is long and golden. She ties it with a silk scarf. She smiles at us and looks at every child.

She says, 'Good Morning,' then waits.

We look at each other. Why is she waiting? Then we realise and we stand up. Dexter is the last one to stand up. He doesn't look happy.

'No phones during my lesson.' Miss Sunshine has a box and envelopes with our names on. We don't want to give her our phones. Dexter and Ajax are angry.

When Miss Sunshine walks past us there is a lovely perfume. It's the smell of grass and sweet summer flowers. She asks us our names and doesn't forget them. When she gives us our homework we have to say 'thank you.'

* * *

It's our first music lesson and Miss Sunshine wants us to speak about music. 'What music do you like?'

Roxy stands up. 'I hate classical music.'

'Hate is a very strong word, Roxy. We don't hate anyone or anything. Why don't you like classical music?'

'There are too many notes,' she says and her friends laugh.

'I understand your opinion, Roxy. Classical music is difficult. There are a lot of notes.'

'I play jazz with my piano teacher,' Roxy says.

I can feel surprise in the classroom and I see Miss Sunshine smiling. 'Good,' she says.

'What about rap music?' Ajax McCoy says. 'Now rap music is clever.'

'Why is it clever, Ajax?' Miss Sunshine asks.

'Rap artists' songs are like poetry. Each rap song has a message.'

'I like musical theatre,' says Blaze.

'I saw the musical Cats once,' says Ajax.

'Any other important musicians?' asks Miss Sunshine.

Someone says 'The Beatles.' The class says 'No.'

'You're right,' says Miss Sunshine. 'The Beatles were important for all the music that came after them.'

'What about Ed Sh-Sh-Sheeran,' says Naomi with a stutter. She never speaks.

'Excellent, Naomi. Ed Sheeran was really good at music when he was a small child, like Mozart. He started singing in his local church at the age of four.'

Everyone is good in that first lesson. It's the second lesson when it all begins to go wrong.

CHAPTER 4

Imagine

Miss Sunshine's eyes are cold as she stands in the door of the classroom. A paper aeroplane flies through the air and lands at her feet. Dexter pulls a small boy's arm behind his back. Two other boys are fighting. Girls are shouting. There's so much noise.

Miss Sunshine walks to the teacher's desk, but the noise doesn't stop. She takes a whistle from her bag and blows it. The sound makes the whole class stop and look at their teacher.

'Good morning,' Miss Sunshine says. She waits for the class to stand. Some of the boys sit in their chairs. They are writing texts on their phones or listening to music. Blaze is humming.

'I see,' says Miss Sunshine. She speaks only to the children who are standing. 'Can you bring your chairs round the piano?'

I take my chair and sit next to Emma. She's a sweet girl who works hard. She's clever and they laugh at her because she wears glasses.

I don't know what Miss Sunshine will do about the other children.

She takes some paper from her bag and gives a sheet of paper to Dexter, Ajax, Blaze, Roxy and Iris.

'I would like you to write me a few paragraphs on The Music I Like,' she says. She walks away. They don't say anything.

She looks at us and says 'Take a deep breath.'

Someone laughs, but Miss Sunshine closes her eyes for a moment. 'Stand up.'

We all stand.

'Shoulders down, stand tall, straight backs.'

We sing some scales. Our music lessons are a lot of fun. Our old teacher didn't let us sing in music lessons.

There are some things in this world that are amazing. I love singing to a real piano. Miss Sunshine plays really well and then she gives us the music to Imagine by John Lennon. We don't look at the words. We know them. We put the music down and sing from memory.

Miss Sunshine asks if anyone would like to sing a solo. The girls whisper 'Emma'. Shy little Emma, who is clever and wears glasses, has a wonderful voice.

And it's strange because now Dexter, Ajax, Blaze, Roxy and Iris are alone.

They are miserable and we are smiling and having fun.

* * *

At the end of the lesson Miss Sunshine collects the sheets of blank paper. She tells them to stay behind.

'I want to speak to each of you,' she says.

'But we'll miss the school bus home,' says Iris. 'My mum will be angry.'

'The driver will return and take you home later. I'll phone your parents and explain everything.'

Roxy gives Iris a killer look and they become even more miserable.

* * *

For the first time, I run laughing out of school with Emma. We are smiling and singing Imagine.

CHAPTER 5

Feeling Good

The next morning we go into the music room. I don't know what Miss Sunshine said to Dexter and the others yesterday, but the mood is better. There is more respect. Roxy and Ajax are sitting quietly. They aren't sending text messages. Blaze isn't humming. Dexter isn't rocking on two legs of his chair.

* * *

I hope we are going to sing round the piano, but Miss Sunshine takes an unusual object from her bag. 'This is a singing bowl,' she says. 'When I run this wooden stick around the bowl, it makes a sound like a bell. This bowl is very old. Listen carefully until you can't hear the sound anymore.'

The singing bowl makes a mysterious sound. It sings in my head. About a minute passes. There is complete silence in the classroom.

'What can you hear?' Miss Sunshine whispers.

'Nothing at all, Miss,' says Emma.

'Remember that there is silence in music too and moments of silence are important in our lives. Sound and music can help and mindfulness helps your brain to work better. Let's make a brain.'

What! We look at each other.

'Put one hand in the air,' says Miss Sunshine. 'Now put your thumb across and curl your fingers over the top - this is the brain.'

'Cool,' says Ajax.

'The mind is complex. It talks. Sometimes there's a lot of stress in our heads.'

'My brain is always talking to me,' says Ajax.

'That's fine, everyone's brain talks,' says Miss Sunshine. 'We can help our brain relax when we are kind to other people. It makes us feel good.'

'Singing makes me feel good. Can we sing again, Miss?' asks Ruby.

'Of course we can. Bring your chairs closer to the piano.'

Miss Sunshine gets us to sing some scales.

Miss Sunshine asks Roxy to play the piano. Roxy looks shy at first and says she's too embarrassed to play in front of everyone.

When Miss Sunshine says that Roxy can play some jazz, she jumps up. Roxy has got great rhythm. She's really good. I didn't know she had this talent.

We sing a song my mum likes, You've got a Friend by Carole King. I like the words of this song and singing together makes us feel more united as a class.

Singing and mindfulness are helping. My brain feels better by the end of class. I'm less stressed and more relaxed. When the bell rings, we skip to our next lesson.

CHAPTER 6

Fire!

Dexter and I sit near each other every day on the bus. We get on and off at the same stop but he doesn't walk with me. He walks far behind me. He kicks stones along the road. I hurry ahead because I want to get home.

I know where Dexter lives. I pass his house every day, but this afternoon as I look across his front garden, I stop.

'Dexter,' I shout. 'Quick. Hurry! There's a fire!' My voice is high. I am afraid.

He starts to run. Together we run towards the smoke and flames.

'Who's in there?' I say.

'Mum and my little sister. She's only three.'

I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial 999. I shout 'fire' when they ask me what service I need. I try to breathe slowly and calm myself down. My voice is shaking when I give them the address.

Dexter opens the front door and there's lots of black smoke.

'I'm going in,' he says.

'Wait!' I run to an outside tap and hold my scarf under the water. I run back and tie the scarf around Dexter's nose

and mouth. I pull my jacket up over my mouth. 'I'm coming with you.'

He pushes me back. 'No, you're not. It's too dangerous. I know where mum and my sister will be.'

Then he goes inside and all I can do is cry and wait.

* * *

One minute, two minutes pass. It seems longer. The fire brigade arrives, then two ambulances. Dexter appears through the smoke. He is carrying his sister. His hands are burned, but he wants to go back for his mother.

'Leave it to us,' says a fireman. Firemen pull Dexter away from the burning house. He doesn't want to leave. They lift Dexter and his sister into the ambulance and put on the emergency blue light. That scares me.

A fireman appears carrying a woman. And at that moment there's an explosion.

'Move away from here. It isn't safe.' A fireman says to me. I can smell fire on my clothes and in my hair. There's nothing for me to do. I walk home.

Dexter is away from school for ten days and when he returns he has bandages on his hands. Everyone is pleased to see him, especially Miss Sunshine.

'How is your mother and your little sister?' she asks.

* * *

Dexter smiles. 'They're doing well. The doctors are great. They are still in hospital but they will be home soon.'

'So, you are living with your grandma.'

Dexter smiles again. 'Yeah, she's lovely. We'll be there for a while until the builders repair our house.'

'You were very brave, Dexter,' Miss Sunshine says.

Dexter looks at his shoes. 'Not really. I was scared when I went into the house. I couldn't see anything and it was really hot in there.'

'Do the police know what started the fire?' Miss Sunshine asks.

'They don't know.' Dexter looks around the classroom for me. 'Alice was there. She gave me her scarf to put over my mouth. It's the smoke that kills. You saved my life. Thanks, Alice.'

And our class cheer and I'm crying. Dexter is looking down and trying not to cry.

'I have something, for both of you.' Miss Sunshine gives Dexter a large package and a smaller one to me. Dexter's is a violin... a really good one. I can see he's pleased.

'It's awesome!' he says. 'I love it.'

'I don't play the violin anymore. I want you to play it.'

Miss Sunshine turns to the class. 'I don't think you know that Dexter is very talented. He plays jazz violin very well.'

She looks at Dexter. 'You can't play at the moment. Will you play for us when your hands are better?'

Dexter smiles. 'Of course.'

In my package there is a ukulele.

'For the ukulele band we're starting,' Miss Sunshine says. 'It's easy to learn and I want the band to play in the school musical.'

'A musical!' everyone says together. We all smile.

CHAPTER 7

Everyone Has a Talent

My world is different and everything is better. We all talk about the musical. We don't walk to classes, we dance along the corridors. Ajax, who's good with words, is writing the story and we practice the songs every day. Our voices are better, stronger with Miss Sunshine teaching us. Mr Weak hums when he passes the music room.

* * *

'Everyone has a talent. You just have to find it,' Miss Sunshine says during our lesson.

She's right. There are so many people in our class who have a special talent. Iris Fudge is a brilliant dancer. We didn't know. I love watching her when she's dancing. She becomes someone else, so beautiful and full of life. She's practising after school every day with some girls who study ballet.

People who are good at art are painting the scenery.

And me? I'm singing in the chorus and learning the ukulele in my free time. I follow lessons online and I practise in my bedroom.

* * *

Dexter is responsible for the orchestra and their rehearsals. He's very musical. He has a great feel for

rhythm. And he's changed! He's kind to people and that can make you feel good.

And the funny thing is that Dexter is different physically too. His eyes are not small and hard. They are soft. He looks taller, more responsible. He smiles a lot. Dexter is someone I can trust.

He's playing the violin again now that his hands are better. The sound he makes is beautiful. When he plays I feel happy.

We travel home together on the bus and he talks about the music and performers he loves. He wants to go to Music College in London when he finishes school.

'How often do you practise?' I ask him.

'Every day. An hour before school and a couple of hours when I get home.'

'Wow!' I say.

'If I work really hard, I'll pass the audition.'

'And then what?' I ask.

'A career in music, I think,' he says. 'I can play in an orchestra or form my own jazz group. What do you want to do, Alice?'

'I want to be a doctor,' I say in a small voice.

We sit in silence for a minute and I start to panic. I'm expecting him to laugh and return to the old Dexter. But he smiles.

'You'll do it, Alice. It won't be easy and you'll have to work hard, but I know you'll do it.'

And I'm not sure why, but I feel strange.

CHAPTER 8

The Talent Scout

There is no bullying anymore and there is more respect for the teachers. The school magazine is all about the musical - interviews with the cast and with Ajax. The story is about people who are different. We can't all be the same. The message is to be kind to someone every day. Most of all it is about the power of friendship.

Tickets are sold out for all five performances and we are all excited. I'm playing the ukulele in one song and I'm singing in the chorus. The songs make us happy. We are full of confidence. School has a greater purpose.

'This is your musical,' Miss Sunshine says. 'Smile and enjoy the evening.'

* * *

We are nervous as we wait. It's five minutes before the musical starts and I look round the curtain at the audience. The concert hall is full. Why have all those parents brought video cameras?

The music starts. This is it. We step into another world of lights and costumes. And little shy Emma sings beautifully on stage. It's a new and exciting experience. A live performance is very different. We can hear the audience laugh and clap. It's great to see their reaction. Their eyes are wide, their faces are smiling, they are

enjoying every moment. I can see my parents surprise when the chorus sings. We are fantastic.

* * *

We sing and dance for five nights. On the first night Mr Weak gives flowers to Miss Sunshine and the other teachers. We have a party. We are happy!

* * *

One morning Miss Sunshine comes into the music room. She has something to tell us. She closes her eyes until there's silence, then opens them again.

'An American talent scout came to one of your performances.'

She can see we don't understand what a talent scout is. She tries again. 'A talent scout is someone who recognises great talent and promotes it.'

'Ooooooh,' we all say.

'His name is Addison Bell. He's a friend of mine and he came to talk to me at the end of the musical. He's American, from Los Angeles. He wants to take your musical to Hollywood this summer!

Silence. Then there are cheers and laughter and crying.

'He thinks there's great talent in this show and he wants American children to hear your message of friendship,' Miss Sunshine says.

* * *

The summer holidays arrive and we fly to Hollywood. Limousines pick us up at the airport. I feel like a celebrity when I walk the red carpet entrance to the Beverly Hills Hotel. It's great. There's a pool surrounded by palm trees in tropical gardens. Dexter is happy because musicians play jazz in the restaurant. There isn't much free time, but when we do have a moment we watch people and Lamborghinis in the city centre. Rehearsals are going well and we will perform in a theatre.

It's our first night tomorrow and we are all excited. I don't want this to end. I don't want to come back down to earth. But with Miss Sunshine in our lives, what will happen next?

* * *

And I suppose you think this is the end of my story, but not quite.

Music is a powerful force and I love Dexter's violin playing. We spend a lot of time together. We watch the sunsets, we laugh and talk. When his hand touches mine and our fingers meet, we don't let go.

- THE END -