

ANJELAH JOHNSON-REYES

Anjelah Johnson-Reyes is the central figure, smiling broadly with her hands on her chest. She has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a bright yellow blazer over a white t-shirt with a graphic print of a motorcycle and a person. She is also wearing black leather shorts, a gold chain necklace, and a diamond ring on her left hand. The background is a solid, vibrant blue.

Who Do I  
Think I Am?

STORIES OF CHOLA WISHES AND CAVIAR DREAMS

# Who Do I Think I Am?

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**ANJELAH JOHNSON-REYES**



New York • Nashville

## CHAPTER 1

# Chola Wishes & Caviar Dreams

**In third grade** I got an assignment to write one of those “What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?” kind of reports. I decided to do mine on becoming a lawyer, which looking back, was very off-brand for me. I hadn’t even seen an episode (or every episode multiple times) of *Law & Order: SVU*. But at the time, I guess I thought it was fancy and paid the bills.

To write about being a lawyer, I felt like I had to play the part. I lived next door to my elementary school and dug through the dumpster outside looking for trashy lawyer treasures thrown away alongside half-eaten bologna sandwiches. I scored some books, binders, broken calculators, and a big telephone with a ton of buttons. I was the Harriet the Spy of law. In my bedroom, I pushed my dresser up to the window, because big shots always had a view of the city, even though in my case, it was a view of the San Jose International Airport. I put the phone and my “law books” on the desk, sat down, and threw

myself into my work. I furiously wrote memos with a red pen, because only adults had red pens. I rifled through important documents and answered a barrage of urgent phone calls, one after the other.

“I know, I know, I’m working on it!” I shouted into the receiver before slamming it down and whispering to no one, “Dammit, Cheryl.”

I sighed dramatically and ran my hands through my hair, a universal sign of being extremely stressed out...at least that’s what they did in the movies. My firm was so busy and successful, but I managed to make the time to turn the window into a drive-thru for legal advice and cheeseburgers—the two professions that meant the most to me, apparently. Between calls, I turned to the pane and said, “Hi, how can I help you today? And do you want fries with that lawsuit?”

Thanks to my in-depth research, I got an A on my paper. But in doing the assignment I discovered—hold all my calls, please—I actually did not want to be a lawyer. I wanted to pretend to be a lawyer. *I shall be an actress.*

From that moment on, my dream of being an actress started to grow. At first, I didn’t say it out loud because I was ashamed. I lived in San Jose. What actresses had I ever heard of from San Jose? Screech from *Saved by the Bell* was born in my hometown, but that didn’t matter, because I didn’t even know about him until I just googled it. I didn’t see actors around town either. It’s not like I’d ever run into Meryl Streep at Casa Vicky Mexican restaurant. But I was gonna be a dramatic actress like Meryl. I practiced making myself cry without the use of Visine, chopped onions, or whatever the ’90s equivalent of Sarah McLachlan’s ASPCA commercials was.

I grew up in the heart of Silicon Valley during the tech boom. While I had no interest in becoming the next Steve Jobs, my dream to be an actress felt just as far-fetched—a fantasy, really. I might as well have said, “I want to be a princess!” The audacity. Who the heck did I think I was—this little Mexican American girl, who’d never acted in

her life—to think that I, of all people, could make it in Hollywood? There was zero evidence I could. Back when I was a kid, there weren't many proud, educated, normal, hardworking Latino families on TV or in the movies to help point me in the right direction. There were no Latino Cosbys. No Cosbys-ez.

My favorite actress growing up was Sandra Bullock. She had darker features and long brown hair, like me. She didn't really look like a white girl, so in my mind, that was close enough for me to adopt her as my representation. After *Speed* came out on VHS, I watched it every day for months. I idolized her, or as the kids say today, I stanned her so hard. That's still a thing they say, right? Anyway, Sandy, if I may call her that, was beautiful and funny and charming. She could shoot somebody *and* make them laugh. When *Miss Congeniality* came out, that was it. I was like, "Oh my God, that's me. I want to do this. I can do this. I'm so good at being congenial."

On one hand, it seemed impossible and silly. On the other, I had this nagging feeling that wouldn't go away. I'd get mad at the movies because I wasn't in them. I was obsessed with anyone who looked like me who made it in Hollywood. Especially the cholas from any movie or TV show about gangs. To some people the movie *Training Day* was a film that showed corruption and violence, to me it was my dream come true! I remember watching *Blood In Blood Out*, and like most cholas/aspiring cholas, I swooned over Benjamin Bratt's dreamy Paco (that was his character's name; get your mind out of the gutter), but I was more focused on all the chola extras in the background. I was all, "Vatos locos forever" but I was also like, "Pfft, I could stand by that car!" I knew if somebody taught me how to get in a movie, I could do that. I just didn't know how to do it or where the car was parked to even stand near it. So I tucked the dream away in my heart.

I didn't try out for school plays, and I didn't realize I could sing until I got older. My sister, Veronica, sang the national anthem at local events, but I was way too shy for that stuff when I was younger. I

was introverted and I was a homebody—so much so that I got special permission to run home from school during the lunch break. It was my ideal scenario—my grandma made me soup and we watched her Mexican game shows. They talked so fast in Spanish, and a bunch of beautiful girls would dance all over the place.

My mom signed me up for all kinds of activities, like tap and acrobatics, but I didn't last long. She put me in tae kwon do, and I never got past the white belt that came with the uniform. Follow-through was not my strongest trait.

The only activity that ever stuck was cheerleading, and even that had a shaky start. When I was eight, I joined the Santa Clara Lions, a local Pop Warner organization. My sister, Veronica, who is three years older than me, practiced across the field with her team while I would practice with my team, comprised of younger kids. The cheer we had to learn was super simple, like step clap to the left, step clap to the right, keep your arms stiff in a box, and then step clap some more. Yeah. Well. I couldn't step clap. The stiffness I nailed, though. I was totally off beat and had the coordination of a baby giraffe approximately one second after birth. I felt so dumb. I looked across the field and saw my sister watching me with such disgust. I vividly remember disappointing her because I couldn't get it right. (Don't worry, later on, she ends up being my biggest cheerleader in life!)

Somehow I made the squad (everyone did; that's part of the sign-up fee) and became a Thundercat. In my first year of cheerleading I was so shy and embarrassed, I stared at the ground the whole time and never smiled. By my second year, I broke out of my shell big time and became like the Gabi Butler of the Santa Clara Lions organization, without the blue eyes and zit cream endorsements, although I could have used some of the cream. I worked hard and became the flyer, the girl at the top of the pyramid. I went from hiding in the background to step clapping my way front and center.

I loved the competitiveness of cheerleading. I loved the ritual

and pride of putting on our red, black, and white uniforms. Though, back in the day, somebody—probably the same guy who would later invent the thong—decided cheerleading tops should be itchy sweaters. I don't recommend doing athletic activities while wearing wool in the summer in California. Sweating profusely was worth it because my squads were hella good, and I got to be a part of making us hella good. We usually won first place at competitions (sometimes second place to stupid Oak Grove), and as I graduated from Thundercat to Panther to Wildcat (trust me, that's impressive), we made it all the way to nationals at Disney World in Florida (also impressive).

I was a cheerleader. That was my identity. I would follow behind my mom's grocery cart at Safeway practicing my cheers. I lived and breathed and grocery shopped cheerleading. And as every cheerleader knows, once a cheerleader, always a cheerleader—figuratively, anyway. These days, I'd need a chiropractor visit and a long nap if I were to try any pyramid situation.

I learned from a pretty early age that I did not like doing things I wasn't good at. Which is why this nagging desire to be an actress wouldn't go away. I really felt like if I tried it, I'd be good at it. Cheerleading officially made me a performer, but I still didn't dare tell anyone about my secret dream. When I was a teenager, I sat on the carpet in my bedroom in front of a long mirror and imagined I was acting and giving acceptance speeches for my critically acclaimed lead roles. I'd wave to Meryl in the audience, and she'd blow me a kiss with both hands, even though I won the award and she didn't, which is just so Meryl.

But I learned early on I had this tool inside of me...a sense of humor. And it didn't take me long to learn how to use it—in a good way, not an evil comic book villain way. I went through my old yearbook recently and all of the messages people wrote were about how “nice” and “funny” I was, which made me want to cry because it confirmed that being kind and funny has always been my thing—except

for that one time in sixth grade I was mean to a girl named Natasha for no reason, and I still regret that. I was always quick-witted. It was like a game to me. I'd say a zinger and then someone would laugh. And that was a win for me. And then I'd go, *Oh, I got another one!* Some girls knew their good angle in a photo. I knew the jokes people responded best to. Charm was my gift, and it gave me confidence. I knew I wasn't the hottest girl in school (I was medium), but I also knew the hottest girl in school couldn't make everyone laugh. So, go me.

I learned what worked for me, then used it to my benefit. One of my first jobs was at a theme park, saying funny things on a microphone to guess people's weight, age, or birthday. I flirted with guys on the microphone as they walked by: "Excuse me, sir. Hop on this scale so I can guess your digits! If I'm wrong, I'll give you mine. Ayeoooo!"

When I was fifteen, I finally felt confident enough to take a job at being an award-winning actress. I heard a commercial on the radio for an open casting call, one of those ads like, "If you want to be in movies or be a model, come to the Holiday Inn Express on July 8!"

I didn't think it was creepy at all, which clearly shows my level of commitment. I found myself standing in a hotel ballroom in front of a handsome, yet slightly oily man who looked me up and down before marking YES on my registration card and sending me to the next audition round. You probably had to have three eyes and medical-grade BO to get a NO on your card, but in my mind, I had just gotten a three-picture deal at Paramount. I was so excited and naïve, I didn't realize they said yes to everyone in order to get more money.

One thousand dollars later, the next step was a trip down to a convention center in Palm Springs to parade myself in front of thirty "talent agencies." My mom and I drove down to the desert in our station wagon and got to stay in a hotel, which was so fancy. I was told to bring two photos of myself to show the agents, but all I had were some pictures a friend took of me for photography class that weren't

even exposed correctly. The first day, we had to take a bunch of classes. In one, we were taught to walk like a model who was approximately eight feet tall and strutted down the runway with a sensual death stare. In a previous class we'd been told to "smile big and show big energy at all times," so I was very confused.

"Are we supposed to be serious or smile?" I whispered to my mom. "Cuz they said to smile, but she's doing, like, sexy face."

They'd set up a microphone in the middle of the audience so we could ask questions.

"I don't know," my mom whispered back. "Why don't you ask?"

I got up, walked up to the microphone, and addressed the model.

"Like, you said that we're supposed to be smiling for the agents. But then when you did the example, you have, like, a real serious face. Like, which one do we do?"

With the nastiest look on her face she hissed, "I didn't say that," clearly forgetting that she, in fact, did say that. *Okay, girl.*

Shut down in front of the entire class, I slunk back to my seat, devastated I might have destroyed my dream of being an actress with one dumb question. Luckily, I had one more shot to make it. The organizers set up a big runway, with "talent agents" sitting all alongside it, though they could have been businessmen looking for the bar, who knows. I got to walk down it, like Gisele before she was Gisele, and show my headshots to all the agents as I walked by. Picture a flight attendant walking down the aisle holding out a tray of Biscoff and Stroopwafels, but all the passengers stare straight ahead or are sleeping. I basically was the flight attendant, and nobody wanted my cookies.

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I didn't get any inquiries or get signed by anybody. It was crushing, humiliating. Getting knocked down like that, I did have the thought,

*Who do I think I am?* At the same time, I still had that burning desire in me to be an actress. The flame had dimmed, but it wasn't extinguished. So I tried again a couple years later when I was seventeen, this time applying to a child acting school in San Francisco. I made a resume, even though I didn't even know how to make a resume. I used a bunch of crazy fonts, like Caviar Dreams and DejaVu Sans, and made it purple so it looked pretty.

I was accepted, but on the first day, I was informed that classes cost \$1,700, which was \$1,700 more than I had, so I quit. Not long after, I got a phone call from the school administrator.

"Are you still interested in joining our program?" the man asked me sweetly.

"No, I'm sorry, it's way too expensive for me," I answered sadly.

There was a pause.

"Honey," he suddenly sneered sassily, "you need us way more than we need you."

Click. And that was the end of that.

First of all, what did I even say to make him snap? Maybe he had been told no one too many times that day—like the people trying to get you to sign a petition to save the whales while you're walking into the grocery store. I was rejected again, but I refused to give up. I snail mailed my pretty purple resume to every talent agency on the planet and waited. And waited. In the meantime, I was barely passing high school because I just didn't care. The future I had in mind didn't require social studies or math or knowing how to fold notes in cute little shapes. The only reason I bothered to show up at all was cheerleading.

I did have one teacher in particular, Mrs. Zamora, who mentored me. She taught AP art, and even though I couldn't even draw a stick figure, she let me be her teacher's assistant because anyone could clean paintbrushes. I would make her laugh while I swept paper clippings. She sent me to other classrooms on secret performance missions. "Go

over to Mr. Roark's class and sing something funny," she'd say. So I'd burst in and belt out the song "I Will Survive." In my yearbook, she wrote that she would see me on *Saturday Night Live* one day. Mrs. Zamora didn't just think of me as a class clown who was a nuisance. She truly believed I was a performer with real talent that would take me places.

But still, I didn't tell her or anyone about my dream of making it in showbiz. There was only one person I felt comfortable confessing my biggest secret to. Sandra was a friend of my cousin Michelle who I met before she moved to Hollywood. She moved totally on her own and was making it happen. She'd landed an NSYNC music video and a commercial for Ross. When I reluctantly admitted to her that I'd love to do what she was doing, she didn't laugh or brush me off. She said seriously, "If you ever move down to LA, I will help you. I will show you how to get started."

I was barely making it to school, so LA seemed more like a pipe dream than a possibility. By some miracle I graduated and got into junior college. For the next three years, though, I was aimless and didn't know what I was doing with my life. I enrolled in a drama class at JC, and it was one of the only things I looked forward to. Another student in the class had also ventured off to Hollywood, and like a vet back from 'Nam, regaled us amateurs with cautionary tales and sage advice.

"Don't be an extra," she warned.

But what about the cholas I saw in *Training Day*...

"Nobody respects the extras," she insisted. "You're the bottom of the totem pole. *Whatever you do, don't be an extra.*"

With no plans and no prospects, I did what every other twenty-year-old did in San Jose. I hung out with my girls and went clubbing. I was underage, but we were pros. We rolled up to the club in a group ten deep. My sister, who was legal, went past the bouncer first, then passed her ID back until it got to me at the end. By the time the

bouncer saw ten hot Latina girls with long brown hair, he didn't know which way was up. Worked every time.

One of those nights, I ran into an old friend named Monique on the dance floor. Literally. I definitely heel toed right onto her toe. As we danced to "Get Ur Freak On," she leaned in and screamed in my ear over the music.

"Hey, guess what!"

"Yeah?!"

"I'm a cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders!"

"No way!"

She showed me her necklace, a silver pendant with the official Oakland Raiders logo on it. Only real Raiderettes got this special necklace, she told me proudly.

"That's amazing!" Monique was basically a celebrity.

"We have tryouts next week!"

"You're going on trial next week?!"

"*No*, we have *tryouts* next week! You should come try out!"

"Oh, that's not really my thing, but thank you! I'm good!"

I wasn't a shake your pom-poms and show cleavage kind of cheerleader. I was the kind who did very difficult stunts and wore sweaters. But when I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about Monique's offer to try out. It wasn't my style, and I wasn't a trained dancer, but what the heck else did I have going on in my life? I went to a school I didn't care about and out to clubs even though I didn't even drink. I didn't really want to be a Raiderette, but I did want to be an actress. I thought about Sandra's offer to help me if I ever made it to LA. *Maybe I could make it down there if I was a Raiderette first?* When that thought crossed my mind, for the first time, my dream didn't seem unattainable.

I was still unsure, so I prayed about it. I asked God, "What do I do with my life? I have no direction, but I have this opportunity to audition for the Oakland Raiderettes." Suddenly, I felt something

unexplainable in my gut and my spirit and I came to a decision—I was going to try out for the Oakland Raiderettes. I was going to use this as my sign from God because it felt like a step in the entertainment direction. If I made the squad, I'd do it for one year, then I'd move to LA and pursue my dream of being an actress. If I didn't make the squad, LA was a no-go, and I'd take that as my sign to let the dream go and pursue something else I could be good at, like massage therapy or dog walking. I liked dogs. And walking was okay. I promised myself if I didn't make the squad, I would scratch the entertainment industry off the list forever.

Moving to LA would be the biggest leap of faith I ever took in my life. I'd never lived anywhere outside of my mom's house. I'd never paid rent or bought my own groceries. But I was going to use the Raiderettes tryout as a sign and go with whatever happened, good or bad.

The day of the tryout I drove to Oakland by myself. I brought several outfit changes, like I was the Latina member of Destiny's Child at the VMAs or something. Monique told me to wear tight clothing that showed off my body, so I wore sparkly shorts and a form-fitting crop top with rhinestones from Forever 21. When I walked into the Hilton conference center, I had flashbacks to the Palm Springs fiasco, where I felt so small and weak. This time, I felt like I had nothing to lose, and that gave me strength and power. There were seven hundred women milling around, vying for fifty Raiderettes' spots. My initial reaction was like *Oh, no*, but then I took one look at some of the outfits, and it changed to *Oh, honey, no...*" I eliminated at least two hundred girls right off the bat. I'm no Tan France, but a leather Catwoman costume should only be worn on Halloween or if you're trying out for *Cats*.

Just like in Palm Springs, the first part of the tryout was a cattle call. The judges literally looked us up and down, asked a couple of questions, and said yes or no on the spot. It was about personality and

looks and nothing more. Along with three hundred other hopefuls, I got a yes and a callback.

On day 2, we had to learn a dance routine in a giant banquet hall. They had a choreographer up on a stage with a Britney Spears mic strapped to her head so she could count out the steps as she demonstrated complicated technical moves I'd never done before in my life. I had rhythm by now, but this was way above my pay grade. So I just sold it with attitude. Fake it till you make it, right? My face was twisting into all the poses my body couldn't hang with. I may not have spotted during my turns, but my hair flips were on point.

Suddenly, the choreographer paused the music, weaved her way through the crowd, and came right up to me. "Clearly you have no dance training," she said, "but you have something that cannot be taught." This was the most powerful backhanded compliment I ever received in my life.

After the audition, we all sat on the floor of the banquet hall anxiously awaiting our fate. When they called 193—my number—my first thought wasn't *Oh my God, I'm going to be cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders!* In that moment, I knew I was going to be an actress.

But first, I had to get through a season of football. At our old Pop Warner games, if I wasn't cheering, I was only interested in the snacks and hanging out with my friends. I'd never even been to a professional football game in my life, let alone been in one. Now, as an Oakland Raiderette, I had to look and play the part 100 percent, 24/7. We were more than dancers; we were representatives of the team on the field and off the field—we had to dress to impress even just walking from the locker room to our cars. For me, dressing to impress usually meant a cute lil' hat and not a sports bra. We were given a guidebook on how to act, walk, and dress, and we had mandatory weigh-ins to make sure we didn't spend more time with garlic fries than we did at the gym. We were given punishments for being tardy and took etiquette classes to learn which fork did what (start from the outside

in) and how to put our napkins in our laps. Most important, anytime we took a sip of water, we had to wipe our lipstick off the glass—a problem I didn't realize was a problem.

At the time, every team in the NFL had a strict rule forbidding the fraternization of players and cheerleaders—except the Oakland Raiders. On our team, the official policy was a vague “it's frowned upon.” But I was in my season of being a good Christian girl, and I didn't drink or carouse with football players. Non-football players... well, that was a different story. Stay tuned. So, while some of my fellow Raiderettes not-so-secretly partied with the players, in every sense of the word, I got a rep for being a bit of a Goody Two-shoes. I rarely got hit on by anyone and was relegated to the role of “funny little sister.” I'd make everyone laugh doing funny accents and impressions of all the people I grew up with in San Jose or saw in movies. They particularly loved the impersonation I did of my manicurist. “Do the nail salon lady!” they'd beg. It was like I was back in Mrs. Zamora's class being asked to say and do funny things.

It's hard to explain how drastically my life changed in the year I was an Oakland Raiderette. I went from rarely leaving a few-mile radius around my house to jetting to Hawaii for a calendar photo shoot. I high-kicked my way onto a Jumbotron, made root beer floats at charity events, and signed pictures of myself at mall appearances. Even though I only got paid \$80 per game (I know, I know), they did allow us to buy our calendars at cost, sell them at a higher price, and keep the profits.

I was interviewed for magazine stories even though I had no clue how to be a public figure. *Raider Nation* did a profile of me called “Anjelah Johnson: Accent on Personality and Sincerity.” Apparently my impersonations were already newsworthy.

I picked the best year to be an Oakland Raiderette. Unbelievably, we went to the Super Bowl (unfortunately only down in San Diego, where I had been many times, and we got spanked by the Tampa Bay

Buccaneers), and I won “Rookie of the Year” on the Raiderettes. After the season ended, I deposited my \$580 paycheck plus another \$2,000 I made from calendar sales in my bank account, and the very next weekend, I headed to LA with \$2,580 to my name.

I had my ducks in order. My mom gave me her emerald-green Toyota Camry station wagon and my cousin Joe Grande, a popular radio personality in LA, said I could live with him in Monrovia if I paid something called rent. I’ll never forget driving down there and arriving in LA at dusk, seeing downtown’s sparkling lights from the 210 freeway and getting butterflies—then driving right past it and thirty miles later being like, *Is Monrovia lost? Where the heck is this place?!*

So, I was a little farther away from Hollywood than I thought I’d be, but it didn’t matter. I made it. The first thing I did when I got to LA was call up my friend Sandra. Like a boss, she kept her word. She helped me create a real resume, which was not purple. She helped me get professional headshots. She gave me cute hand-me-down clothes and shoes appropriate for auditions because I was poor and didn’t have any money, and rent was steep in Hollywood-adjacent.

Best of all, she showed me how to sign up to be an extra.

A month after I arrived in Hollywood, I was ready for my first open call at Central Casting. “Now, when you get there,” Sandra instructed, “you’re going to see a line of people out the door waiting to sign up to be an extra. I don’t want you to wait in that line. I want you to go up to the front window and ask for Sam. Before you go, I want you to stop at Ralphs and buy a tray of cookies. Bring that and a signed Raiderette headshot and give it to Sam and tell him you’re new to LA and want to be an extra...”

“This sounds...real sleazy,” I said as I envisioned the type of casting couches I for sure wanted to avoid.

“Just make sure they’re chocolate chip, not Funfetti,” Sandra said in all seriousness.

I assumed that Funfetti was some sort of Hollywood code cookie indicating that I'd be up for doing anything to land the part.

"I don't know why that's important, but you were in a Ross commercial, so I trust you," I said.

The first time I went to be an extra, I stopped at Ralphs and got some cookies. Then I headed to Central Casting armed with my bribe/delicious tray of baked goods and signed Raiderette photo. Sure enough, there was a line out the door. I walked past everyone, hiding my sleazy cookies behind my back, and went right up to the window. I knocked and said, "I'm here for Sam."

"Okay, he'll be right out."

I sat in a waiting room, and a few minutes later Sam came walking out of the back office wearing...an Oakland Raiders hat. "Hey, what's up?" he said.

"Hi, these cookies are for you. They aren't Funfetti, so don't get any ideas. And this is my headshot," I said (with a smirk, knowing he was about to flip out when he saw it was a Raiderette headshot). "I'd love to be an extra."

"No way!" he said beaming at the photo. "Give me your phone number and we'll get you signed up."

Sandra was the queen.

Two days later, Sam called me and asked if I wanted to be an extra.

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I do," I said trying to sound nonchalant while silently freaking out. Sam gave me all the info I needed and told me to report to Stage 24 at Warner Bros. Studio the next day.

It was the first day of the rest of my life in Hollywood. As I walked across the lot, I spotted the historic water tower featured in the Looney Tunes franchise and walked past the soundstages for *ER*, *Two and a Half Men*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *The West Wing*. It was magical, and I was overcome with emotion.

Here I was, this young Mexican girl, this little chola, who had the audacity to turn a fantasy, a dream, into something real. Tour trams

whizzed by me, and I wondered if the people on them thought I was someone famous or important. It made me hold my head up even higher.

When I arrived at Stage 24, I saw the plaque on the wall and welled up. I was going to be an extra on season 9 of *Friends*, one of the most iconic shows in history.

I didn't want to look like a hot mess for my television debut, so I pulled myself together. I walked onto the set and saw Joey and Chandler's apartment and the Central Perk coffee shop, and my heart was so happy. The buzz of the bell ringing and people scurrying about doing very important things, the instantly familiar smell of the soundstage—wood and paint—it all hit me to my core. I never wanted to forget this feeling. I never wanted to be anywhere else. I could not believe this was my life. And to think I was almost a lawyer.