

Feelin' the Chemistry

HIGH SCHOOL 101- BOOK #1

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FIRST EDITION

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Chapter 1

New stuff

Definition of Chemistry:

1. *What stuff is everything made of?*
2. *How does this stuff work?*
3. *Can you create something new with this stuff?*

“Casey Campbell?” My new, slightly overweight, balding chemistry teacher peered over his black reading glasses and waited for me to confirm my identity.

“Yes, sir.” I met his eyes and smiled shyly, standing there beside his desk at the front of the room, shifting my weight from one foot to the other while I waited. I would need to stay on this guy’s good side to make it through this class! I did know how to make teachers like me, though. *I am a TK, a teacher’s Kid*, I reminded myself silently. *And right now, a nervous Teacher’s Kid!*

“All of the students this period have previously assigned lab partners,” Mr. Voss informed me. “A couple of students did transfer out over winter break, however. So, pick an empty seat. Whoever you sit by will be your lab partner.”

He hesitated, and then glared at me, though in a friendly way - a friendly glare?-and channeled my mother by saying, “Choose wisely!”

Choose wisely?

Please!

Such a convenient adult phrase, handing you the sweet freedom of choice you think you want, while adding a big dose of fear that warned, DON'T SCREW UP! I rolled my eyes (inwardly, of course) and turned my head for a five-second power survey of the class.

It was my first class, on the first day of school after winter break, and yay, I was officially starting at a Rayburn High School in the middle of my sophomore year. My choice, believe it or not.

I owned it.

But did I choose wisely? *Right now, I would give anything to be back at good old familiar Lee High!*

The bell would ring any minute, and it was chaos right now, with most kids chatting, some standing and leaning over each other's desks, probably sharing what they did over Break, and some texting... *wait, phones are allowed in class?* I searched for the couple of empty chairs that Mr.Voss said were out there, and spotted one right away, front and center.

The guy sitting at the table right next to the empty chair was- well, he was downright *gorgeous*, with dark, streaked blond hair and a deep tan, like he just strolled over from a sun-kissed beach. I wondered if he smelled like coconut suntan lotion. He was half- turned around in his seat, chatting with the beautiful auburn-haired girl behind him.

Are they dating? Would I be nervous conducting chem experiments with such an adorable guy? What color are his eyes? Is he a jerk, or is he super sweet, or-

Mr. Voss coughed. "Pick a chair," he said, dryly. "The bell is about to ring."

I took a step toward the chair by Tan Guy, still searching quickly for the other open seat that had to be out there. And there it was, in the back row, and sitting next to the chair, my other potential lab partner was balancing a ruler on his nose, totally absorbed in this feat, not seeming to care that no one around him paid attention. No. Nope.

Choice made.

Then the bell rang, and a truly cool thing happened.

The class immediately stopped talking, the stragglers sat down, everyone got out something to write with, looked at the whiteboard at the left side of the room, and started writing stuff down.

I paused in my journey to my chosen chair to sneak a peek at the board. Sure enough, the day's homework assignment and a bellringer were written there in tidy, block letters. I couldn't help it – I turned around and gave Mr. Voss an admiring smile. Well, done, buddy! I appreciated an organized teacher who ran a tight ship! Mr. Voss didn't notice my approval, since he was already at his desk computer, probably taking attendance.

My smile widened.

Then I collected myself, and with all the confidence I could muster, I walked toward the Tan Guy chair. A few kids were glancing at me- well, a lot of kids, actually. I'm the New Kid, I expected this, this was weird but doable, so I started my self-coaching. *Just get to the chair, sit down, class will start, and I can have some relative peace for this first 1/6 of my school day.* Six periods of class time I could handle, especially if I had nonsense teachers, like Mr. Voss.

It was the time between classes, and lunch, that I dreaded.

The social interaction. Or rather, the *lack* of social interaction, walking alone, sitting alone, being whispered about. Did the native kids still do that to the newbie kids, or was that just in movies? No matter. It was the word "alone" that caused my gut to tighten and the accusing, tiring words to start scrolling through my brain like they had for the past two weeks:

I wish I had thought this through.

I put my hand on the chair, ready to pull it back, easing one strap of my backpack down my shoulder, when I heard a soft "psst". I glanced back at the girl seated at the table behind me, not the Auburn-Haired Girl that Tan Guy was talking to- it was the paler, mousy brown-haired girl sitting next to her, obviously her lab partner.

I looked at her questioningly, and she silently shook her head back and forth, an emphatic "NO". Then she jerked her head backwards, in the direction of the ruler-on-the-nose guy.

Oh--kay, I bet Tan Guy is dating Auburn-Haired Girl, and Other Girl is warning me that sitting by Tan Guy could be trouble. Maybe this is girl code, one chica helping out another, reaching out to me in friendship!

I felt a flicker of gratitude toward the girl. I would much rather make a friend today, than try to flirt. I was perfectly willing to sit by Ruler Guy if...

Wait. A. Minute. So what if Tan Guy is cute, or dating? Is he funny, kind, or smart? Will I be warned off by some random girl I don't even know? And-

"Miss Campbell." Mr. Voss had that warning tone, not angry, not questioning, just quiet and calm. He was a Jedi.

And in a split second, I made my first, small but hopefully wise, choice, at my new school.

Chapter 2

Pick one

"If I have a thousand ideas and only one of them turns out to be good, I am satisfied."

~ Alfred Bernhard Nobel,
chemist, founder of the Nobel Prize

I like to take quizzes. Not school quizzes, but those stupid fun social media quizzes like "What Disney Princess are You?", "What Decade Should You Have Lived In?", or "Who Would Be Your Fictional BFF?" They fascinate me, not because I think they have any real value, but because what if they COULD? What if I could write a multiple choice quiz that had meaningful A, B and C options that could pinpoint your truest self, or predict your most successful future?

I know how to write quizzes, sort of. My mom is a high school English teacher, and sometimes we make up silly answers to her quiz questions, for fun. You put the real answer out there, of course, then the ones that sound reasonable but are wrong, and sometimes a really stupid answer.

It's truly amazing how many kids choose the stupid answers. On purpose, because it's funny, or because they really Don't. Have. A. Clue.

Which leads me to my favorite Shakespeare quote:

"I would challenge you to a battle of wits, but I see you are unarmed."

I'm not making fun of these kids, I'm not. We're all unarmed in some way! I'm unarmed in Chemistry. Which is why I need Mr. Voss to like me.

Any-hoo, here are samples of our English quiz questions and answers:

Question #1: Who wrote Hunger Games?

- A. Jennifer Lawrence
- B. Suzanne Collins
- C. Mahatma Gandhi
- D. A and B

Question #2: Who is the main character in "A Christmas Carol"?

- A. Kermit
- B. Tiny Tim
- C. Scrooge
- D. Not A

Too nerdy for you?

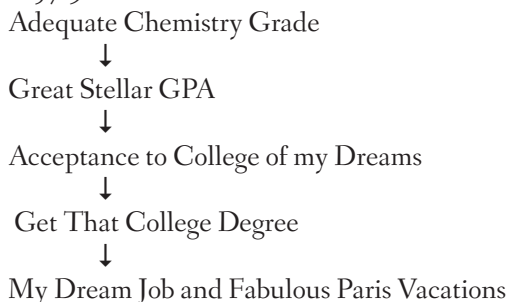
Yeah, I'm a nerd. A blue-eyed, blond nerd, who loves English, tolerates math and struggles with chemistry. Who likes school pretty much, and has big plans for her future. Big plans which need college.

College requires acceptance.

Acceptance requires a decent GPA.

And a decent GPA is helped by a good grade in Chemistry.

Here's a flow chart, since visuals help people retain information about 57.9 % better *:



Aaaaagh. Can you tell I'm avoiding my least favorite subject?

At my old school last semester, I was in an Honors Chem class, worked my rear end off and did quite well, a low but solid B for the first semester.

But that was then, this is now. A lot of stuff happened in my life over winter break. (That's "a lot", two words, not "alot", common mistake.) Much stress have I, much focus I must strive for.

So, here's a little quiz I made up about my choices.

The "Did Casey Choose Wisely?" Quiz

Question #1

Casey's lonely mom, widowed for years, is finally engaged to this amazing guy who really loves her, and they are deciding when they should get married, and who will have to move since their homes are about 200 miles apart. What does Casey say?

A. No, Mom, amazing or not, don't marry the guy. I don't want my life to change.

B. Sure, Mom, get married, but Amazing Guy has to be the one to move, even though it will be hard to relocate his accounting business here, since we've lived in this smallish town my whole entire life, and I don't want to leave my friends and

especially my first real boyfriend who I just started dating and who is ridiculously handsome and I think I might maybe possibly be in serious like if not love with him.

C. Sure, Mom, get married, and we'll just move to Amazing Guy's town next summer, and I'll leave all my friends and my new boyfriend and it won't bother me a bit, what's 200 miles anyway?

D. Sure, Mom, get married right now at Christmas Break since the perfect teaching position just opened up for you in Amazing Guy's town, our lease is up and it makes sense for you to be the one to move. But let me live here in my little town with my best friend Sarah's family at least until summer and you go ahead and move. Catch up with you next summer! Maybe.

Question #2

Casey's ridiculously handsome boyfriend assumes that Casey is moving 200 miles away, during Christmas Break, though he does not take the time to confirm this with her. And so he breaks up with her in a text, saying that he can't do long-distance relationships. And then he immediately texts Casey's best friend Sarah and asks if Sarah wants to catch a movie with him, and maybe get pizza after. What does Casey do?

A. Carefree Casey shakes it off, indeed she starts singing and dancing like Taylor Swift and dreams about the wonderful new town she's moving to and the new friends she will make.

B. Logical Casey calls boyfriend up, points out how wrong he is and how priceless their relationship really is, and he apologizes profusely, they patch things up, and everything's cool.

C. Furious Casey decides that the incredibly cold-hearted idiot boyfriend wasn't worth her time anyway and good riddance, baby! She prays for God's vengeance to fall upon him.

D. Stunned Casey cries a million tears and knows boyfriend was a jerk but still wonders how she could have been so stupid. She was surely an inferior girlfriend since she was dumped so quickly, and had Sarah been flirting with Boyfriend the whole time and she missed it? She sucks it up to smile for Mom's wedding and moves to the new town immediately, the

sooner the better, because she would feel like a total loser at her old school anyway, she never wants to see Ex-Boyfriend again, and she could not possibly live with Sarah's family now.

E. Both **C** and **D**

Question #3

The Amazing Guy, Casey's brand-new stepfather, has three sons, two of them teenagers, and Casey has a younger sister in 3rd grade. They are now a Blended Family. What are Casey's thoughts about this?

A. I actually try not to think about it.

B. I'm hopeful.

C. It's. Just. Shocking.

D. I will not like it.

E. I'm stressed out.

F. They're nice, and it will be cool to have brothers.

G. I just want my mom to be happy.

H. Please, don't make me do this, dear God.

I. All of the above.

There is no answer key, dear readers.

At least not one where I'm sure the answers are correct.

*(totally made-up statistic)

Chapter 3

Creating bonds

Where do living things get energy?

1. *Energy is stored in the form of (chemical) bond energy.*
2. *Create a bond = store energy*
3. *Break a bond = release energy*

My new lab partner smiled amiably at me as I pulled out the empty chair. I tried to smile back, though I bet it looked more like a grimace. I sat down and welcomed the opportunity to avert my face, searching in my backpack, finding my pencil and selecting my brand new lime green spiral notebook, my favorite color to help me get psyched up mentally for my least favorite subject. I wiggled more comfortably into my chair, opened the notebook to a fresh, clean page, and copied the assignment on the board carefully.

“The answer is: chemical change. What is the question?”

Basic concept, I've got this! I didn't know if this would be graded or not, so I hunched over my notebook and wrote every possible “question” I could think of. I kept writing, thinking,

erasing, and writing some more, wanting my very first assignment in this class to be perfect!

As my writing frenzy slowed down, I finally became aware that my new lab partner was leaning back in his chair, with not very good posture, and was not writing a single thing. Well, actually he did, but a furtive glance at his paper revealed that it was just *doodling*. Cartoon characters. Wow, terrific student.

Great. Yet another lovely choice you made, Campbell.

That front-and-center seat by Cute Guy was still empty, so I would ask Mr. Voss if I could switch to that seat tomorrow. I was annoyed with myself for my first, and wrong, choice at my new high school. It felt so unfair to have landed with a lab partner who didn't seem to care about doing well, and if it wasn't so quiet in the class right I would actually have whispered at him, even though that would make me a jerk, I know. At the very least I wish I hadn't given him that feeble smile.

Then I heard a very quiet murmur – “Relax”. Did he say that? I looked straight at Ruler Guy and he looked straight back at me, not smiling either. He had dark brown hair, a little shaggy, touching his shoulders and in need of a trim, and I was distracted for a second by his dark, chocolatey brown eyes. But then he slid his paper over so I could see it better.

And there in front of me was a doodle, all right, but it was... organized. There was Mr. RNA and Mr. DNA, one holding a magnifying glass, and the other sporting a suave mustache, having this conversation, with just a few words in bubbles above their, umm, heads? *Whoa*.

Okay.

My answer to the assignment was a snoozer essay. His was a creative and funny, and quite accurate. *Zing!*

I cautiously raised my eyes to Ruler Guy, because now I was embarrassed since he could obviously tell I had judged him for something as snobby as not being as good a student as me. RG just gave me a half smile and a shrug, and I got the message... no harm done. He didn't seem annoyed. Maybe this partnership would work.

Then Mr. Voss started talking and writing on the board, and we all started taking notes, and we opened our textbooks to

Chapter 14 as instructed. RG moved his textbook over so I could share it, and I started thinking, Chapter 14? To my relief the textbook was the exact same as the one I used in my old chem class, but we had just finished Chapter 11. Was this class really that far ahead of me?

It became clear that yes, they really were that far ahead of me! Mr. Voss reviewed some Chapter 13 stuff that the class finished before Christmas, and I did not know what on earth he was talking about.

I. Hate. That. Feeling.

My stomach started to clench up and hurt just a bit. *Please, Casey, you are not a little girl in first grade, no panic here, you will figure this out, and it doesn't have to be right now.*

The little self-talk helped a bit, though not much, and I tried to follow along again with whatever Mr. Voss was talking about. I frantically wrote down everything he wrote, because even though it meant nothing to me, at least he would see me trying—the earnest, unarmed blonde dying a long chemical death, fighting bravely all the way!

Sigh.

Five minutes before class was over, Mr. Voss walked efficiently around the room, handing an orange post-it note to each student. “This is your ticket out the door,” he told us. “Write your name, and one or two things that we discussed today that you are still confused about. Be specific.”

One thing? Two things? I assumed he didn't want me to write down:

#1. I'm confused about everything in Chapter 12

and

#2. I'm confused about everything in Chapter 13

I stared at my blank post-it note, and then of course glanced over to RG's post-it to sneak a peek. Some students began to talk to each other now, zipping up their backpacks and waiting for the bell to ring.

“Here, you can read it.” RG again noticed my glance, and slid his post-it over to my side of the desk. “What about you, are

you a chemistry genius, since you have no questions?" From most other kids, this would be said in a snarky tone of voice, but RG sounded genuinely curious, like he really thought I might be this chemistry goddess.

I read his post-it before answering, which took about a half second, because the only words he wrote were "I'M GOOD". "It looks like you're the genius," I said snippily, and immediately felt bad. I didn't mean to be so negative, *again*, but I was agitated, wondering how I was going to handle the Being Way Behind situation.

"Nah", RG replied casually, not offended at all. "I just don't wanna write anything, you know? I'm Ben, by the way. And just some advice, you have to write *something* on that post-it before you can leave. Voss actually reads them. What's your name?"

"Casey," I replied. I tried smiling again, since he was being pretty nice, but it was still pretty weak. "You see, I don't know what to write, because at my last school, in my chemistry class there, we"-

The bell rang and cut me off. RG- no, Ben, stood up- wow, he was lanky and tall- and hitched his backpack over his shoulder. "Sorry, gotta run, my next class is way across campus." He hesitated. "Do you know where to go for your next class? I mean, I guess you're really brand new?" He looked genuinely concerned, and my heart melted a bit. Awwwww, if he was concerned about me *now*, just wait until he knew how needy his new lab partner was going to be!

"I'm fine," I lied, hastily. I didn't want to hold him up. "See you tomorrow." Ben gave a little nod, hesitated again, then gave me a thumbs up and headed out the door with all the other students.

I wrote "I NEED HELP" on my post-it, gathered my stuff, stood up, and smoothed out the copy of my schedule on my desk. ENGLISH II, room 312. I had no idea where that was! I started walking toward the door, schedule in hand, and gave the post-it note to Mr. Voss who was collecting them.

It was Day One, I was behind in chemistry already, I didn't know where I was going, and when I found it I would be awkwardly late, all the ingredients for a rotten day so far.

And *yet*.

My stomach felt just a bit less clenched, and I realized I had a very tiny, but genuine, half-smile on my face. What? There was no reason for this! But yeah, I knew good and well why.

Because, in this crowd of unfamiliar faces and voices, at least one non-teacher knew my *name*.

Someone had smiled at me! *Out of politeness, Casey.*

Someone was concerned about me! *Yeah, for a half-second.*

Okay, whatever. But it gave me a little bit of encouraging energy, just enough to make it through the next class. Maybe even the next two. Who knew? Maybe it was the beginning of a decent bond. My first bond at my new high school.

A bond with a guy who doodled and could balance a ruler on his nose?

I'll take it!

As I walked out in search of my next class, I thought fleetingly of those chocolatey brown eyes, wondering if it was my imagination, or did they really did have little flecks of green in them?

Chapter 4

And, releasing bonds

“My atoms love your atoms. It’s chemistry.”

~Atticus,

internet poet

Most kids find it hard to picture their parents at age 17, and don’t particularly want to try. The thought of their parents going on dates, kissing, getting married, and... doing stuff, is not something we’re always comfortable with, right? But I’ve given it some thought in the last year, because to understand why my mom just got married over Christmas Break, you have to turn back the pages in her life a bit, and find a chapter that was written before I was born.

The chapter written when she was seventeen.

My mom, Karen, had a crush on this guy, Harrison Findley, when she was 17. He wasn’t technically the boy next door, but they did go to the same church, and the same school. Karen was the pretty, popular cheerleader, and Harrison was just your normal, average, non-spectacular nice guy. They hung out in the same church youth group, went for pizza with the group, laughed and talked, always in a group, and knew each other pretty well, and their parents knew each other, that kind of thing.

So, as they spent more time together, you know what

happened. Karen started to notice Harrison's sweet smile, and he for sure noticed her, and finally he got up the nerve to ask Karen to the Homecoming Dance at their school.

Karen said yes. They went to the dance, they started dating, and they fell in love. A happy, easy, no-pressure first love. Who gives up a beautiful thing like that?

Karen did. Harrison did.

Because the summer after their senior year, their paths took them in different directions. Harrison went to a college out of state, and Karen went to the local community college. They got distracted. The bond started to loosen, not all at once, just little by little.

They released each other.

And they used that freedom to explore other relationships, until they each fell in love again and married other people.

My daddy was Austin Kyle Campbell. I didn't call him Daddy when he was alive - I always called him Dad. But now I always think of him as Daddy, which might make me sound kind of immature, but it's a more personal name. It makes me feel closer to him.

I talk to him sometimes, in bed before I go to sleep, because I really believe he's listening somehow. I tell him things that happened, and how Mom and Riley are doing. And usually, when I'm getting really sleepy, and things get blurry, I know I'm not really talking to Daddy at all, but to God. No, I don't believe my dad is God, nothing weird like that!

It's just that, when I talk to Daddy, I almost can't remember his voice anymore. I've never thought he was going to answer. But sometimes, in the quiet of the night, when I let my thoughts scatter everywhere and my barriers are down, I feel like God does.

Answers me, that is.

Not with an audible voice, nothing weird, nothing spooky. It's just a knowing. Simple, quiet, still. He's like an immovable boulder in the rushing stream of all of my other chaotic, random thoughts.

I see you. I hear you.

And, like a child knowing she is safe, and heard, I fall asleep.

Pop Quiz

Question #1

So, what happened to Harrison?

- A.** Never heard from the guy again.
- B.** Harrison became an accountant, got married, had three sons, and his family lived happily ever after.
- C.** Harrison became an accountant, got married, had three sons, and then his wife left him and they got a divorce.

Question #2

And.....??

A. Karen, widowed for several years, saw Harrison at a high school reunion, their atoms felt that old attraction again, they fell in love, and they got married right away.

B. Karen and Harrison fell in love again, but decided to wait until Casey finished high school so Casey wouldn't have to move from her beloved home town. Casey was cool with that, because why mess with a happy life?

C. Karen and Harrison fell in love again, and decided to wait until Casey finished high school, but Casey was a hero. Get married now, she said. It will be an adventure, she said. If you're happy, I'll be happy, she said. That perfect teaching position in Harrison's town won't wait, she said. I can live with my best friend, if you're okay with it, and finish out my sophomore year.

And then at the last minute - I'll go ahead and move with you, she said. It will be great to get away for awhile, how convenient, she said, to herself.

Casey should have googled the definition of "awhile". "Awhile" means "for a short time". Moving 200 miles away to a new town is not usually done to stay "awhile".

But I was hopeful. Hurting from the reason why I couldn't stay with Sarah, but hopeful. And I really was excited for the happy-dancin' atoms between Mom and Harrison.

Melissa Knight

The atoms between James, Jackson, Jefferson, my new step-brothers, and me and Riley, my little sister, were another matter entirely, however. Okay that was a good one, but truly, no pun intended, ha-ha.

Get it? *Matter*?

Chapter 5

The rest of the first day

“What the elements are to chemistry, what the sounds are to music, are the words to language.”

~ Ernest Klein,

Romanian-born Canadian author

If you haven't realized it by now, I am an English Girl. No, not born in England-I'm a Texas gal born and bred- but I love readin' and writin'. My dreams always include those abilities in some form- maybe I'll be a journalist? Editor? Marketing? Maybe even a lawyer? My dream job is hazy right now, but I know what I DON'T want. I will not be a teacher, and I won't be an author. A teacher works too hard for too little money- hello, Mom? - and an author has to make it really big to earn a living, and what are the odds of that?

No, I'm practical, and I will choose a career with monetary perks. A future with trips and pretty things. Is that shallow?

You see shallow, I see reality.

It's not that I don't appreciate teachers. I respect and admire the Moms and the Mr. Voss's out there. They are rock stars in my world!

I just want a more financially lucrative world!

As I walked into my second hour English classroom this first day, however, I knew I was going to feel at home there, if not

today, then eventually. As expected, I was embarrassingly late, but kids were still talking and it didn't look like anything was happening yet, so I relaxed a bit. I walked to the teacher's desk and quietly apologized.

"Sorry I'm late. I'm Casey Campbell."

Ms. Thomas, a slender thirty-something with dark brown skin and a cute short 'fro, looked up and smiled widely at me. Her desk was cluttered, with stacks of paper and little notes everywhere, and a few books were precariously close to the edge of her desk.

I itched to straighten everything neatly.

"Welcome, Casey, I was wondering if you would show up! You get the new student 'pass' today for being late," she said cheerfully, using her fingers to make air quotation marks. "Please take that seat in that second row over there. Students are discussing the topic on the board for the next few minutes."

Oh, so the conversations going on were supposedly not social! I sat down in the second row and got out my new baby blue spiral notebook, because blue is such a tranquil color and English is my calm, happy place. I looked at the board, wondering if I dared insert my opinion about whatever the kids around me were saying.

"WHY POETRY?" was written on the board.

Poetry, okay. Not my greatest interest, but there are some famous poems that rock.

I listened to a couple of conversations around me. It's like going to a public swimming pool. Do I do a big old cannonball into the deep end and make some outrageous comment? Or do I dip my toe in the shallow end, waiting for an opening and then saying "yes, I agree" meekly without offering anything else?

"Poetry is romannnnn- tic," the girl in front of me was saying in a dreamy voice, twisting a strand of her long, dark hair. "When I get married, my husband will write poems for me expressing his undying luuuuuuv."

The guy in the next row snorted. "What pansy of a guy is gonna do that?"

"Poetry is useless," said another guy in a bored voice.

And then I heard that sound again- psssst, followed by a

tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw the Auburn Haired girl, leaning over from the next row and grinning at me. "Hi, ah'm in your chemistry class, remember? Ah'm Reese." Her Texas drawl was thick, and super cute. I think the term "honeyed accent" applied here.

I smiled back at her. Reese was definitely pretty, with fragile features, hazel eyes, a perfect dimply smile, and such healthy, shiny hair. No split ends there, I would bet. No wonder Tan Guy was talking to her. "I'm Casey!" I replied. I waited for her to say something and she waited for me to say something, and there was this awkward pause.

But, not for long. "Do you have first or second lunch?" she asked. "Because, if you want, you can sit with me if you have second lunch."

"Wow, okay!" I dug out my now-crumpled schedule again and checked it, though I already knew it said **SECOND LUNCH**. I didn't want to appear too eager, right? Although, why was eagerness a problem? I was actually crazy eager for a lunch pal today!

"Yes! I have second lunch! I'll look for you, thanks!" I sounded downright perky, and I felt gratitude as I turned my attention to Ms. Thomas, who was asking us to wrap up our conversations so she could proceed with her lesson.

That was two potential bonds in two periods, Ben and Reese, and I would call that a win!

Ms. Thomas was also a win. Sometimes, I'll admit, the messy teachers are the most inspiring. Like I said, I'm not into poetry, but when something's good, it's good, whether you like the genre or not. Right?

I mean, I don't like country music either, but the right melody, with the right words, can just stop you in your tracks, sending a message straight to your heart. And Ms. Thomas made some strategic poetry choices for us, this first day of a new unit, trying to pique our interest.

Nice set-up, Ms. Thomas.

I left my second period class feeling pretty good, as expected. I chatted with Reese a bit on the way out, promising to look for her in the cafeteria.

And so. I fumbled through the rest of the morning, using my red spiral notebook for geometry (brain on full red alert) and the purple one for history (purple signifies royalty, and think of all those kings, queens and kingdoms in history, yeah.). I noticed that Ben was in my geometry class, but I'm not sure he noticed me, or at least he made no attempt to talk.

And then, it was SECOND LUNCH.

I walked into the cafeteria, oozing with the confidence of knowing I had a lunch invitation! It was a huge cafeteria, with a salad bar station as well as the regular line, and a wall of windows letting in the bright winter sunshine. There were lots of students getting in line, talking, sitting down, eating, the usual cafeteria stuff. Lots, and lots, of students. *This school is so much bigger than my little Lee High School. And I don't see-*

"Over heeeere, Casey!" I saw a hand waving from a table somewhere in the middle of the huge room, and I realized my heart was racing. *Calm down, girl, get something to eat, make a friend, don't trip over that chair there, you're doing great,* I coached myself, walking cautiously around the crowded tables. Even walking seems hard when you're nervous!

I sat down by Reese, and met her friends, Abby and Mia and some others whose names I couldn't remember, but hey, it was my first day. They all seemed friendly but pretty much ignored me once we got past the "where are you from" and "how do you like our school" basics. They talked about who did what over break, and of course mentioned people I didn't know, and such. They didn't mean to leave me out, and I took no offense. I didn't particularly want to answer any more questions right now anyway. I just needed to eat, drink, breathe, and observe.

And then for a minute, as I was eating my ham and cheese sandwich with just a thin layer of Dijon mustard that I made this morning, taking small bites because I wasn't really that hungry, I had this sudden flash of sadness, that I didn't expect. Not pity party stuff...

... a moment of real, true *mourning*.

I'm not with the people who know me.

I could have, should have been sitting in my old cafeteria

with Sarah and, if not for the stupid stuff that happened, with Davis, who would surely still be my boyfriend, right? We would be the ones talking and laughing about common experiences and people we knew and loved, and talking about the people we didn't like, okay I'll admit that, but still. I missed them. I missed my old friends, I missed my old teachers, I missed my old school, I missed my old life.

What. Have. I. Done?

I carefully put the rest of my uneaten sandwich back in the little cooler thing that goes in my backpack, and tore open my bag of chips. Regretfully, I could always eat good old salty chips, and it did make me feel just a tad better. I tried to listen to Reese and Abby and Mia and even nodded and smiled, hopefully at appropriate times, trying to look calm and confident and not like I was on the verge of tears.

My mind drifted to the Robert Frost poem Ms. Thomas had us read this morning.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

I had two roads before me, after Mom's wedding, and I chose one. I still had two roads before me, right now in this cafeteria, or who knows, maybe even three or four roads. Maybe I always would. Have roads to choose from, that is.

Thankfully, before I slid off into my emotional pit of deepness, I remembered something else, and sat up in my chair a little straighter.

"Oh, Reese," I said cautiously, when there was a pause in the conversation. "Um, remember in Chemistry when I walked over to the table in front of you? Before class started? I was going to sit there but your lab partner kind of hissed at me and shook her head like I shouldn't? I was just, um, wondering if you know why she did that?"

Reese looked thoughtful. "*Well*, ah wasn't paying attention. Ah *wondered* why you changed your mind all of a sudden. Because, who *wouldn't* want to sit by Colton? He is *hot*. But..."

She studied me briefly, a small frown in her eyes. “Do you have a boyfriend back in your old town?”

“No.” No explanations were needed here. Oh, the irony of being the new kid:

PRO - No one knows your personal history.

CON - No one knows your personal history.

“Wellll,” Reese drawled delicately, leaning over closer to me like she was about to tell me a take-it-to-your-grave secret. “There are a lot of girls who like Colton. And Colton likes a *lot* of girls, you know what ah mean? Maybe Marla did you a *favor*. And you’re sitting by that other guy in the back- what’s his name? Brad? Ah’ll bet he’s happy to have a cute girl like *you* sitting next to him.”

“Ben. His name is Ben.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. As nice as it was to be called “cute”, I was uncomfortable with Reese’s answer. Was I being warned about Colton in a he’s–bad-news way, or was it a stay-away-from-him-he’s-mine way? Did Marla like him too? Was Colton really such a ladies man? Was that bad? Should I take Reese’s word for it? Was Reese a gossip? Or was she trying to be a friend?

The bell rang and second lunch was over. Reese and I smiled at each other, she told me how to get to the gym where my next class was, and after glancing at my schedule, said she would see me in Spanish for sixth period. “How *fun* that we have three classes together!” she cooed in her sweet, happy drawl.

I melted. I didn’t care if she was a gossip right now, at least I would know someone in Spanish class.

Gossip, helpful, kind, indifferent, mean, friendly, angry, positive, ladies man... really, could any person be studied, judged, and summed up so quickly?

I guess first impressions are important, but how important? How did people look at me? How would people sum *me* up?

Oooh! A quiz!

Describe Casey in 10 Words or Less Quiz

- A.** Casey is a (cute) blonde with no boyfriend.
- B.** Casey has big dreams and is very organized.
- C.** Casey has a new stepfamily, new school, and new town.

Feelin' the Chemistry

D. Casey is a dreamer, with a practical side, who feels confused a lot, who likes to analyze things to death, who tries really hard and doesn't always know why, who misses her dad, who listens to God, who loves to read and think deeply about music and sometimes poetry, who loves her family and was really hurt by her first love, or serious like, who wants everyone to be happy and....

E. A person cannot possibly be summed up in 10 words. Ever.

The correct answer is **E**.

Chapter 6

The J's

“Chemistry begins in the stars.”

~ Peter Atkins,

Chemist

I first met my stepbrothers-to-be, James, Jackson, and Jefferson, on this big family “date”. Mom and Harrison had been catching up online for awhile, then meeting for dates on weekends, which was tough because of all the travel it meant for one or both of them. Usually they met halfway, or near Dallas, but sometimes Harrison would drive over to our town on Friday night and he and Mom would spend most of Saturday together.

Eventually, last April they started getting serious and decided it was time for the kids to all get together, which you and I both know has AWKWARD written all over it. How to do this, how to make this momentous meeting of the minions more mellow than monstrous? (Some alliteration there, you’re welcome.)

Mom’s idea was that we should all go see a movie first, and then go out to dinner after the movie so it would give us kids something natural and casual to talk about, you know? No “what is your favorite subject in school” or “what are your hobbies” topics. I thought it sounded good, Harrison’s boys, ages 18, 17 (a year older than me!) and 10, agreed, and Riley didn’t

much care. We would meet for a matinee near Dallas, and then go out for pizza.

So, we had to pick a movie. The latest "Star Wars" movie was out, the logical choice, duh. At least I thought it was the logical choice. Everyone loves Star Wars.

Wait... you said Harrison's boys are okay with it even though they've never seen a Star Wars movie? Um, come *again*?

Mom had to explain to me that there are some people in this world, who are not into Star Wars, who actually lead normal, productive, and sometimes even happy, lives.

I could hardly take it in.

My shock had worn off a bit when we met at the movie theater, a little early, but not too early, so we could get the basic introductions over with. Harrison and his sons met us with smiles at the front of the theater. Harrison kissed Mom and nodded at Riley and I, and each of the boys took turns greeting Mom and giving her little side hugs.

They don't look at alike, was my first mental assessment, then as they took turns introducing themselves to me and Riley, that changed to "*I can so tell they are brothers.*" It was their eyes. They all had the same deep blue eyes. Harrison didn't have those eyes, so I assumed this was a trait inherited from their mother.

"Hey, I'm James." Tall, good-looking, dark brown hair, serious but kind expression.

"JACKSON HERE!", the next one said in a booming voice, sticking out his hand for a shake. Shorter, stocky, built like a linebacker, lighter brown hair. I don't use the adjective "booming" very much but yeah, this was a guy whose voice took over a room.

"Hello, my name is Jefferson." I looked into the youngest one's mischievous blue eyes, heard his formal introduction, and knew I had met trouble. Riley's eyes had that same "I'm-always-ahead-of-you" twinkle. He and Riley were close in age...

Lord, help us.

"Hi, I'm Riley and this is Casey," Riley said, before I could speak. "Mom says you've never seen Star Wars so Casey thinks your childhood must have been"-

"Wonderful," I interrupted quickly. I squeezed Riley's arm, hard but not enough for her to whine. "Just a little deprived, but wonderful." I smiled and gave a little laugh. What to do? I squeezed Riley's arm harder.

"Deprived, that's a good one," James chuckled. At least he had a sense of humor. "It's not that we've been avoiding seeing the movies, we just never thought about it."

"Are they on NETFLIX?" Jackson asked. His loud voice attracted the attention of others standing nearby. This guy could be a coach, or an announcer. No microphone needed.

"I don't know, but we have all the DVDs, if you want to watch them in order someday," I offered.

"That would be AWESOME", boomed Jackson. He pumped his fist in the air. "Marathon movies and pizza, YEAH!"

"Well, if we like this sequel, that is," James corrected him. "We'll see. If not, we'll introduce Casey to the Terminator series." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Unless you've seen them already?"

I swallowed. Was this what it would take to bond? Watching Schwarzenegger? Or was this some sort of challenge?

"Come on," Riley was tugging on my arm. "We need to get good seats!"

"But we've got to get popcorn!" Jefferson piped up. "Dad, we need popcorn!"

We finally all made it into the theater, hopes high, popcorn in hand. We found good seats, the lights dimmed, the previews began.

I hated the sequel.

James, Jackson, and Jefferson loved it, their very first Star Wars movie.

We debated over pizza. I was so conflicted. I was glad they liked it, but sad that they had not seen the first trilogy, for a reference point. Not as good as the originals, I said. It stands on its own, they argued. We went back and forth, and Mom and Harrison just listened and smiled, and didn't say much, and I knew that Mom had scored. We were talking! We were arguing! Yes!

So, the family date went well, and at the end I felt comfortable enough to expose some of my nerdy tendencies. "I just realized how to keep your sons' names straight," I said to Harrison as we were gathering our stuff, getting ready to leave the pizza restaurant and go to our separate cars. "James is the oldest, and his name has one syllable. Jackson is next, and his name has two syllables, and Jefferson is the youngest, with three syllables! Gotta hand it to ya! Did you name them that way on purpose?"

Harrison blinked. "I never realized that," he said slowly. "Wow. Hmmm. Their mother picked out the names, so maybe she had this master plan." He looked very serious, like he was going to go home and call her right away and ask. I hoped he would.

The others had been listening. "If you and Mom get married and have a baby, and it's a boy, then you have to come up with a J-name with four syllables", Riley told Harrison solemnly.

"GROSS!" Jefferson said, disgusted.

Everyone laughed, Mom blushed, and Harrison looked at Mom in this way. Like they were the only ones in the room, instead of this crowded restaurant. Like the thought of making a baby wasn't embarrassing or unappealing at all. Like, he could just look at her all day long.

I hope Davis looks at me like that someday, I thought. I glanced at James and Jackson to see if they noticed their dad's lovesickness, but they were already starting to walk to the door.

Family date was over.

The drive home that evening was quiet. Riley fell asleep in the back seat while I sat in the passenger seat in the front, knowing I needed to process the possibility that the three J's might be around a whole lot more often in my world. The look Harrison had given Mom was a true love kind of look, in my inexperienced opinion. These were deep, wide, troubling, intriguing thoughts.

I knew Mom was eager to talk over the evening, waiting for me to say something, hoping I could be genuinely positive, needing to hear from me. I felt sorry for her, because I know

what that feels like, waiting for affirmation about something that means a lot to you, but I just couldn't give her the words, not yet, not the right ones. I did need to talk over this day with someone, but not Mom. Not yet.

I needed Sarah. I got out my phone and texted her. *Call in a couple hours?* This conversation required serious voice-to-voice, not texting. Her thumbs up sign came back promptly.

I checked for any message from Davis, but there was nothing. No big deal. We didn't get to have our usual Saturday get-together, but Davis had been cool with that. He was probably doing something with his jock friends.

I sighed anyway.

So, I alternated between playing a game on my phone, listening to music with my earbuds, and staring out the window, watching the headlights flash by. Thinking.

"So, tell me," Mom said lightheartedly, when we were almost home. I cringed.

Please, Mom. I prepared to open my mouth and admit that the evening had been fine, no problems, I just needed to think, but Mom spoke again before I could continue.

"I know you googled it. What did you come up with?"

The cool thing is that I knew exactly what she was talking about. I had to hand it to her, this woman knew me very, very well! I looked over and smiled at her in the dark, and she smiled at me, turning her head to look at me briefly. I felt grateful.

Grateful that she wasn't quizzing me, grateful that she loved me enough to give me time, grateful that Karen was my mom.

And I gave her the answer she asked for.

"So, here are your choices." I cleared my throat, and made my voice go deep, like a TV announcer. "Jabarius, Jedidiah, Jacameron, Jamarion..."

After we pulled into our driveway, Mom gently woke up Riley and led her into the house that we had rented for several years. I paused outside, in the small front yard, looking up at the clear spring night sky, not cloudy tonight, unlike my thoughts.

I looked up at the brilliant stars, pinpricks of light peeking through a dark velvet blanket.

Feelin' the Chemistry

I see.

One star, maybe a planet, seemed a lot brighter than the others.

I hear.

And then, faintly...

Jeremiah.

I grinned.

Chapter 7

The Elements

“There are 119 elements currently on the periodic table. Only 98 of them occur naturally”
~ from my chemistry notes

I almost texted her. As I rode home after that first day of school in the elderly Dodge that James and Jackson shared, I got out my phone and looked over the 32 texts from Sarah that I never answered, since I got the break-up text from Davis, and yes I do mean 32 because I was keeping count. Every text crumbled just a bit more of the wall I had built around my heart, but that whole situation with Davis asking her out was still too raw and confusing, and made my head hurt. That’s what I told myself.

But in the back seat, half listening to the radio James flipped on, random thoughts ping-ponged in my mind about my day, lunch conversations, old memories, and possible new friends. One thought finally rolled to a stop on my mental ping-pong table and steadied, still and clear as it could be.

I miss Sarah.

I missed talking over everything with her, like best friends do. I missed Davis, of course, but not like I missed Sarah. Was I doing this wrong? Shouldn’t I be missing the potential love of my life even more than my childhood friend?

We pulled up in the driveway, and I shook off my thoughts

and went in the house, the house that was now my new home, though I still felt like I was a visitor and had yet to walk around in my scuzzy Little Mermaid sweatpants, and I still felt awkward opening kitchen drawers to look for the forks or whatever.

Mom wasn't home yet. Her new teaching job was at my new high school, and I wished I could have gone to her classroom and waited to ride home with her, but she had asked me to be here when Riley and Jefferson got off their bus, in about thirty more minutes.

I hunted for a snack in the kitchen pantry, grabbed a granola bar, and wandered into the room I shared with Riley. I laid flat on my back on one of the twin beds and stared at the ceiling, letting my gaze drift down to the walls.

They were beige and blank, with nothing to see other than flecks of white around some pinholes, where the beige paint had come off. This used to be Jackson's room, before he moved in with James to make room for Riley and I. Jefferson was the only one of us with his own room, the lucky kid.

Jackson had been taking his posters off the walls and gathering up his stuff, when Riley and I walked in with our suitcases, just over a week ago.

"WELCOME, MADAMES!" he had practically shouted. "SHE'S ALL YOURS!" He bowed dramatically, somewhat hindered by the posters and clothes he had bundled under his arms.

"How do you know this room is a SHE?" Riley asked immediately, but Jackson hadn't answered, just left and went down the hall with a cheerful grin on his face. He had years of experience in ignoring his little brother, I bet, but I knew Riley. Wait for it, wait for it...

Riley dropped her suitcase on the floor and ran after Jackson. "Wait, Jackson! Can I call you Jack? Did you hear me? How do you know that room is a SHE? Is this your new room? Is it bigger than ours? Did you hear me?"

I grinned and claimed the bed by the window.

So now, I stretched out on my bed, staring at the walls, wondering again how long it would take me to get used to every-

thing being new. Moving is supposed to be one of the most stressful things ever, plus starting a new school, plus being dumped by your boyfriend, plus being betrayed by your best friend, all in about three weeks...

Text #1

Call me I need to talk to you asap!!!!

Text #3

I never went out with him, you know!! Why are you treating me like this??Case talk to me!!!

Text #8

I never even flirted with him if that's what you're thinking!!I could never do that!!!

Text #17

Davis was a jerk!!!You're taking his mistake out on me!!!

Text # 28

I miss you so much Case and I know you're missing me too.I think everything just happened at once and you're like in panic mode or something.I'm here for you and I will not give up on you!!

Text #31

Case??????

Text # 32

I will never, never give up on you.

That was two days ago, and there has been no Text #33.

Thirty-two texts, and that's not counting the unanswered phone calls Sarah made. I'm very sure I would have given up long before that. How easily would I give up on a friend? After ten texts? Five? How quickly would my pride take over?

If she won't talk to me, fine. There are other friends to be made.

The answer was immediate, forceful, and carried the quiet certainty of truth. I gave up on Sarah immediately.

I never gave her one, single chance.

I met that truth, shook its hand, steered it to the back of my mental bus, and made it sit down. I couldn't get it off my bus, but I would not deal with it now.

I couldn't keep the tear back, though, that ran down my left cheek, nor could I ignore the shame that sat there, on the back of my bus.

I made myself get off the bed, still holding my unopened granola bar, any appetite I had completely gone. All of our stuff, mine and Riley's, was pretty well organized already, except for decorating our bedroom walls. It helped that most of Riley's Barbies and toys were in the enormous game room upstairs, along with Jefferson's toys, a pool table, two comfy leather couches and a huge wide screen TV. This house was beautiful, no doubt. Large and roomy, though we could sure use another bedroom, but I was determined not to complain. The J's had their lives disrupted too, and they weren't complaining!

It didn't seem to bother them a bit. Was this a guy thing, was it their laid-back personalities, or was it because they didn't have to move to a new town, even though their bachelor pad had been invaded by three females now? Or could it actually, really be because they were happy that Mom, Riley and I were here?

I checked my phone. Time for Riley and Jefferson's bus. Hopefully almost time for Mom to get home. And, almost time for another Blended Family Dinner.

I grimaced.

After Harrison and Mom got engaged, just a few weeks after our first family date at the Star Wars movie, I began some serious research. How should I prepare for a stepdad and step-brothers? What would it be like to live with males in the house? What habits would I need to change, or start?

I went to my two best sources, friends and Google.

So, what was the consensus among my friends with step-whatevers?

A. It's fine. I love my step-(fill in the blank).

B. It's awful. I can't stand my step-(fill in the blank).

C. It's okay. It's hard. We have our ups and downs.

Most of the answers were either **A** or **C**. But what if my experience turned out to be a **B**? I liked Harrison and his boys, but living with them sounded bizarre.

And, the results of my Google research?

A. There's a ton of advice out there.

B. That advice is mostly for the adults of the family.

C. The advice is overwhelming.

D. ALL OF THE ABOVE.

It's **D**, people, it's **D**. My research lasted about 27 minutes, which is how long my patience lasted with "have rules about greeting each other nicely in the morning" and "listen to every one's point of view."

I gave up and found a good sci-fi movie on Netflix, one I had seen before. It helped me process. While the oozing alien was closing in on the unsuspecting human, I decided a few things. Here were my thoughts:

The Elements of a Successful Blended Family

- Just be nice.
- Give a little.
- Be natural. (Unless, your "natural" is mean, then obviously that won't work.)
- This isn't much different than any other family.

I met Riley and Jefferson's bus, and Ry actually hugged me

when she got off the bus. It startled me, since Ry was not much of a hugger, but I figured she needed that hug, and I did, too. Jefferson said hi and raced ahead of us, full of after-school plans, and Ry started chattering a mile a minute as we walked to the house.

"Will you meet me every day, Case? I like my teacher, and I made two new friends today. What's for dinner? Are you making dinner tonight? Can we have mac and cheese? When will Mom be home?" Riley's chatter got on my nerves most of the time, but today I just smiled and listened, offering her my uneaten granola bar, which she accepted happily.

This, this was *familiar*. Ry's questions were endless, but they were natural, and normal, and I needed a big dose of normal right now.

We wound up ordering pizza for dinner, to celebrate lots of firsts: the first day of the new semester, the first day at a new school for Mom, Riley and I, and the first day of Mom's new position as an honors senior English teacher. As we sat around the dining room table, digging into the pizza, Mom cleared her throat.

"Let's start a new tradition," she announced brightly. "An everyday one. Starting with the youngest, let's give everyone a turn to tell something about their day! You first, Ry." She nodded at Riley and smiled encouragingly. Hmmm, I wonder if Mom did her own research about building healthy, blended families.

If so, I felt she just made a tactical error.

"Okay!" This would not be a problem for Riley. The child was born talking in paragraphs. "Wellllll, when I got up this morning I had my most favorite breakfast ever which made me happy. I love, love, *love* blueberry pop tarts with the icing on them. They are SO much better than the plain ones. Then I changed my mind about what I was going to wear. I wanted to wear that new blue shirt I got for Christmas but I spilled something on it last time I wore it and I forgot to put it in the laundry so I had to look for something else and Casey was in the bathroom a long long *long* time and I didn't want to get dressed until I brushed my teeth and..."

And so it went. I enjoyed watching the expressions on the faces of Harrison and The J's. Harrison was giving Riley his full attention, making eye contact and nodding, and my heart melted a little. Atta-boy! He was trying so hard, even though I noted that his eyes were glazing over.

As for my stepbrothers, James and Jackson were devouring the pizza like it was their last meal on this earth. James caught my eye and winked, so he had probably caught on that Ry needs stop signs. I look over at Jefferson, and-

"May I be excused, please?" Jefferson asked politely, interrupting Riley's detailed explanation of what she did in math class. "I'm done!" He pushed his chair back with a screech.

"Hold on there," Harrison said firmly. "Let Riley finish, and then it's your turn to say something. And, then, it's Casey's turn, and then... all the rest of us..." His voice trailed off and he looked at Mom for help. Obviously our family dinner would be a marathon.

Mom was exhausted, I could tell, but that teacher mode was never far away and it automatically kicked into gear. "Perhaps we need some guidelines," she admitted. "Ry, you've talked about several things, so it's time to let someone else have a turn. Let's all pick just *one* thing. Jefferson, you're next. What was the best part of your day?"

Jefferson eyed Mom. "Eating pizza," he said. "Are you going to make me use complete sentences?"

Mom eyed him right back. "No," she said in a tired, but gentle, voice. "Not tonight. Maybe in the future, I don't know." They held each other's gaze for a moment. "Your turn, Casey."

I crumpled my napkin and stared at my piece of sausage pizza. Hmmm, what should I say? What was a highlight of my day?

Finding out I'm behind in Chemistry? Nope.

Making friends, sort of, with Reese? That was a possibility.

Having someone to sit by at lunch? Another good thing.

Realizing how much I probably hurt my dearest, best friend in the entire world? I banished that thought yet again, to the back of my bus.

Everyone was looking at me, waiting expectantly, even

Jefferson, who was forced to sit with us until we all had our turns, I guess. So, I faked a smile, opened my mouth to tell about Reese and lunch, and-

And, I started to cry.

Not a cute, heartbreaking cry, like in the movies where the heroine is telling her true love goodbye and looking mistily noble and beautiful. No, this was an ugly, hiccupping, grab the napkins and blow my nose SOBBING. I tried, but once I started, I couldn't stop.

The guys were at first frozen, looking at me in consternation, and then they looked at each other furtively, like, um, what are we supposed to do?

But the gals knew what to do.

Mom and Riley got out of their chairs, came over to me, wrapped their arms around me and just held me. If this ugly cry was the single most embarrassing thing I had ever done, in front of my new stepfather and stepbrothers who didn't really know me, then the act of holding me, wordlessly sheltering me, was the sweetest thing my mom and sister had ever done. And, that made not just one but *two* hugs from my little sister today.

My crying slowed down and I blew my nose again loudly, considering running to my room to hide, but I was suddenly exhausted, and tired, and didn't seem to care anymore about my dignity. And while I wasn't quite okay, this heavy weight in my heart, that I didn't even know was there until I started to cry, lifted a little.

Mom handed me more napkins, and Ry, apparently discovering her nurturing talents, rubbed me on my back. "There, there, everything will be all right," she said soothingly, like Mom has said to her, and to me, a thousand times. I reached around and hugged Ry again, and I believed her. Maybe things wouldn't be all right any time soon, but I guessed they would be. Eventually.

I sighed and looked at my male audience, who had settled on staring intently down at the crumbs on their paper plates, obviously uncomfortable. The first one to peek up at me was Jackson.

"I'm okay, guys," I told them in a wobbly voice, a bit

surprised that they stayed at the table through my unexpected cry-fest. "Sorry.I just... I just.... " Oh help, the tears might come back again!

Jackson was still looking at me, like he was trying to decide what to do. He evidently made up his mind. "I'm NEXT," he announced in that loud voice. "And the best part of MY day was watching Casey get REAL with us just now. That takes GUTS. WAY TO GO, CASE!"

There was a tiny pause, and then James started to smile and clap slowly, and then everyone laughed, and kind of applauded, even Mom and Ry, and the tension was broken. "Way to go, Casey, do it again!" Jefferson yelled, and my moment of humiliation was turned into a family-building moment, apparently, by Coach Jackson.

Be nice, give a little, be natural.

The elements.

I felt better, and in one of those random thoughts we all have sometimes, I knew at least two things I would do, later this evening.

After the pizza boxes had been cleared, homework dealt with, and random activities for the next day discussed, I took my shower, washed my hair, and did thing number one.

I put on my scuzzy Little Mermaid sweatpants.

Let 'em see the natural Casey.

Then I took a deep breath and proceeded to thing number two.

I picked up my phone and called Sarah. She answered on the first ring. "Case??"

I heard her voice, and started my second big weep-fest of the day. I thought I had cried out every last tear inside of me. But these fresh, salty tears felt good, really good.

And the unwelcome, insistent passenger on my bus was flooded right out, shame swept off its seat by Sarah's current of mercy, and by my tears of relief.

And, gratitude.

Chapter 8

Progress

“I was taught that the way of progress was neither swift nor easy.”

~Marie Curie,

Polish-French physicist and chemist

As I walked into Chemistry class the next morning, Mr. Voss caught my eye and waved me over to his desk. “I saw your cry for help,” he said in this deadpan voice, all business-like, giving me his full attention. “Be specific, Miss Campbell. How can I assist you?”

I explained my situation. “Maybe I should transfer to a non-Honors class, since your class is so far ahead of me. Now would be the best time, since we just started the new semester, right?”

Mr. Voss leaned back in his chair and studied me. “Yes, now is the best time to transfer, and it would be the safest route. I’ll email your counselor and give my approval if that’s the route you choose to take.”

He *had* approved of my plan, right? So why was he conveying that strong undercurrent of doubt in his voice, maybe even disapproval? My question was answered with his next words.

“Or, you could get some tutoring, and with some extra effort and sweat, you could catch up within a month, maybe

less, I believe. The chapter we are currently exploring covers concepts that are relatively easy to grasp, as does the next chapter. I can also provide you with a vocabulary cheat sheet to refer to during class, while you catch up.” The bell rang, he cleared his throat, and then he stood up. My private consultation was over.

“Give it some thought, before you make a decision. An honors class is an asset on your high school transcript.” He looked at me over the top of his black bifocals, holding my gaze.

“And, I believe you can do this.”

Terrific, another “choose wisely” challenge! Fabulous. I bet he knew he hit a nerve with the comment about my high school transcript!

I sighed, and turned around to make my way to the back of the room. As I passed his table, I glanced over at Colton, who was actually watching me in an interested way. Well! I smiled at him tentatively, and he winked at me in this roguish manner. Then he turned around immediately to whisper something to Reese, and she giggled.

I sighed again.

I trudged to my chair, next to Ben, who smiled at me pleasantly, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. How many times in a minute can a girl sigh? Yet, I did. Again.

I jerked open my lime green notebook. So the chapter we were on was easy to grasp? Yesterday it could have been Greek, or Japanese, or Wookie, or any language that makes no sense. I had no choice, my mind was made up! How could I catch up? I would definitely transfer out of this class! There was no point in torturing myself!

Today, Mr. Voss showed a video that reviewed our notes from yesterday. I listened like my life depended on it, and found that I got it, barely, kinda, sorta. Then he went to the board and started doing things in what I assume was the old-fashioned way.

He did problem, after problem, after problem, after problem. The same kind of problem, not starting easy and getting harder. Just the same problem, worded in different ways. No tricks here, no videos, not much variety. Just sweating it out,

over and over, like doing jumping-jacks or push-ups 50 times in a row.

I saw kids yawning, and one did a face-plant in his textbook. Ben was doodling again, and I didn't think it was chemistry-related. Some were listening intently, like me. I was desperate. I was an empty test tube, urgently in need of some, I don't know, water? Information?

Hope?

But, after about the tenth problem, I got it. I got it! I. GOT. IT.

Hope is a glorious thing. The sun shines brighter, you get pep in your step, life is better. And sometimes, you get a little too cocky.

When the bell rang, I made sure I was the last student out the door. I handed the required post-it note, pink this time, to Mr. Voss, and I paused. "Mr. Voss, could you recommend a tutor?"

He regarded me gravely. *Does Yoda ever smile*, I wondered? *Would it kill him?*

"There are several tutors available, who charge by the hour, and it's not cheap. I can give you a list tomorrow. However, in my opinion, if you can get one of your fellow students, who happens to be in this class, to agree, I believe he would be an excellent tutor, and a more inexpensive choice."

He? Someone in this class? Tan-Guy Colton was the first guy I hoped for, I'll admit.

Mr. Voss was waiting. "Okay, well, um, who is that fellow student?"

"Mr. Edwards," he replied. "Your lab partner, Ben Edwards."

I sat by Reese and her friends again, in the cafeteria, and while they talked I looked around, trying to spot Ben, with no success. Maybe he had first lunch? I hadn't had time to talk to him in Geometry.

I did see Marla, the girl who warned me away from Colton in Chemistry yesterday, sitting several tables over. Marla was easy to miss, easy to overlook, the kind of girl who blends in

with the crowd. Shoulder-length mousy brown hair, fair complexion, shorter than me, and I'm not very tall. She was sitting alone, eating her lunch, and had a book propped open which she was intently reading.

I considered going over to her table to talk to her, since nobody was really talking to me here, at Reese's table. I'm not Miss Congeniality, but hey, maybe Marla could use a friend, too? Maybe I could be her hero, the one who put herself out there, who made her day better, her whole life brighter...

I wiped my mouth with my napkin, murmured to Reese that I would be right back, pushed back my chair, and stood up. I started walking over to Marla's table, dodging students and chairs, and then I paused.

Colton was also approaching Marla's table, though he didn't notice me. He came up stealthily behind Marla, reached over her head, and flipped her book shut, like a naughty boy in second grade. Well, okay, that was immature! Whoa! He backed away, laughing.

Marla looked around, saw Colton, and swatted at him, scowling. But then she grinned, and rolled her eyes, and turned back to finish her lunch. Colton was still laughing, and he pulled out an empty chair next to her, sat down, and they start talking like they were old buddies. Marla's life, apparently, did not need brightening up.

Well, then. So Marla DID like Colton? And he liked HER? The ladies' man and the just average-looking girl?

Don't be mean, Casey, I scolded myself. *You are going to be kind and nonjudgmental*. I haven't figured me out yet completely, but I can work on the no judging thing.

"Need some popcorn?" asked the guy sitting at the table next to me, sarcastically. I felt my face turning red. Yep, I had been standing here awhile, watching that little scene play out over there, mesmerized.

"No, thanks", I mumbled sheepishly, and I turned around and made my escape back to Reese's table. I reached for my old friend, my already-opened bag of chips, and munched, feeling a bit subdued.

Later, in gym class, I realized that Marla was in this class with me. In all fairness, it was a large class and I was all focused yesterday on just surviving, not noticing details. We were doing basketball drills, shooting hoops in one station, dribbling in another station, that kind of thing, and the P.E. teacher, Coach Lovell, divided us into groups. I managed to get in Marla's group.

Now, I have this love/hate relationship with Physical Education. Let's examine this relationship.

Question #1 – On the One Hand...

Why does Casey love P.E.?

- A.** As long as you dress out and participate, it's an easy A!
- B.** P.E provides a nice break from the hard subjects
- C.** All the boys trying to show off their athletic skills, say no more.
- D.** You can chat with your friends all period, pretty much.
- E.** All of the above.

Question #2 - On the other hand....

Why does Casey hate P.E.?

- A.** You get hot and sweaty.
- B.** Showering at school.No like.
- C.** I like to be good at things, and I'm just a mediocre athlete. Okay, even calling myself an athlete is a stretch. I do walk, and I breathe hard sometimes. I've been known to run (and grab a donut out of Riley's hands). But running is running, yes?
- D.** All of the above.

So, I was at the hoop shooting station, in a group of about ten kids, and we were all taking turns shooting, retrieving the ball, tossing it to the next person, then going to the end of the line to wait for our turn again. I smiled at Marla as I passed her in line, after missing my shot, and recognition dawned. She left her place and followed me to the end of the line.

"Hey, you're in my chemistry class, right? I'm Marla, by the way."

"I'm Casey," I replied. I never know what to say next. I'm not really shy, but for all my love of words, and my ability to talk endlessly to myself and my friends, I'm not that good with strangers. All that stranger danger training when I was a kid, maybe?

"You're probably wondering why I motioned for you to not sit by Colton, in Chem yesterday. Aren't you? I guess it seemed rude, sorry."

Wow, a woman who gets right to the point! I smiled. The line moved quickly, and it was almost my turn to shoot again.

"Well, yeah, I did wonder..." I caught the ball that the person in front of me tossed over, and got ready for my shot. I positioned my feet, flexed my knees, gripped the ball, and shot it cleanly to the right of the goal. It didn't even hit the backboard. No worries.

I ran after the ball, tossed it to Marla, she took her shot, which she also missed, and we resumed our conversation at the back of the line.

"I did you a favor," Marla said. "Colton's a good guy and all and some girls think he's adorable, but Ben is *smart*. And he's *nice*, and he just gets... *overlooked*." She looked at me earnestly.

Funny, that's what I had thought about Marla, just minutes ago in the cafeteria. That she was easy to overlook, I mean. Is there, like, a club of Overlooked People, who stick together? Should there be?

"Well, Ben does seem nice. Thanks, I guess." I felt awkward, but since she brought it up... "So, do *you* think Colton is adorable?" I said in a joking kind of way. I turned to catch the basketball again.

We took our turns, we both missed, and we both returned to the back of the line. "Absolutely," she said. "Colton is a dreamboat. He's cute, he's funny, and we've taken baths together."

I gasped, she paused dramatically, and then delivered her punch line- "When we were *babies*. I've known him *forever*. And, by the way, he's adorable, but I *don't* have a crush on him."

We smiled at each other, and just like that, another bond was created, and it became easy to talk to Marla. Her explanation for shoo-ing me away from Colton still seemed a bit odd,

and her voice was a little too perky when she claimed she did not have a crush on Colton, but I was willing to go with it.

We chatted all during P.E., about superficial stuff, yeah, but sometimes that's just where you have to start. It's progress. I did think to ask her about Ben as we went back to the locker room at the end of class, though.

"Do you think Ben would tutor me in Chemistry? Mr. Voss suggested it. Does he tutor other students?"

"I don't know," Marla shrugged. "Just ask, I'm sure he would." Her expression shifted just a bit. "Yeah, just smile and flip that pretty blond hair and I bet he will." Her voice held the faintest trace of sarcasm. And not the ha-ha, funny kind.

Wow, where did that come from? Was I just complimented, or insulted? I guess Marla realized the same thing, because she immediately apologized. "I am SO sorry," she said, stopping in her tracks and looking at me imploringly. "That was snarky. I mean, I'm sure Ben will do it, and you don't have to flip your *hair*, and you are so *nice*, and... I'm just sorry," she trailed off lamely.

Please. Marla's remark was just a drop of water, compared to the ocean of offense that Sarah forgave me for, last night over the phone.

"No problem," I reassured Marla with a genuine smile. "Come on, we'll be late." We went to the locker room, and got ready for our next class. Marla still seemed troubled when the bell rang, but I waved at her cheerfully, and then I flipped my hair over my shoulder, slowly and dramatically, and said, "See ya tomorrow!"

That got me a grin, and she waved back, relieved.

Jackson was driving us home today, since James had basketball practice after school for the next few weeks. James was on the varsity team and was apparently pretty good. I made my way to the student parking lot, and there, like a gift, was Ben Edwards, walking toward a white pick-up truck, kind of old-looking but clean.

"Ben!" I called out, and hurried across the parking lot to catch up with him. He turned around and waited for me.

"Hey! What, you need a ride or something?", he said casually, like he gave rides all the time.

"Oh no, I've got a ride. Hey, I was just wondering if you would be willing to tutor me in Chemistry? Mr. Voss said you might." I smiled, and then I thought about the whole flipping my hair thing, and maybe I should bat my eyes a bit because wouldn't that be pretty funny? That thought started to give me the giggles, because I was a little nervous anyway and I usually giggle and talk too much when I'm nervous. I tried to suppress those giggles, which has never worked yet, so my smile just got bigger and bigger, and I hugged myself tightly, and of course I looked like I was just going to bust out laughing.

And then I did. I let out a snicker, and did indeed bust out laughing. I couldn't help it. It was like the tears last night- it just HAPPENED. I was literally shaking with laughter, wiping tears from my eyes. Poor Ben just stood there looking at me, puzzled and a little embarrassed.

"I'm- so-sorry!" I gasped. "Oh, my, ohmyohmy." I leaned against a car, still shaking. I realized I was attracting attention from the other students in the lot, and that helped to sober me up. Good grief, would Ben consider spending even a minute more with this blonde goofball?

I composed myself. "Listen, Ben, I'm *sorry*. I was thinking of something else, and I just lost it. Please, forgive me." Lots of forgiveness was being asked for lately!

Ben started walking again to his truck, and I trotted along behind him. He opened the driver's side door and shoved his backpack across the seat. "You're thinking about something else, while you're asking for tutoring in a crazy hard subject?" he asked me sternly. "That does not seem like a recipe for success, young lady."

He sounded angry, but he was just playing because then he grinned, and I start to giggle again. With great effort I reined it in. My stomach was starting to hurt from laughing so much.

"Listen, maybe you can think about it, and we'll talk

tomorrow before class. I can pay you, if it's not too much, though my mom won't mind, I'm sure..."

"It's okay, I'll help you out," Ben said, cutting me off gently. He climbed in behind the driver's wheel and started the engine. "Uh, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm gonna be late if I don't get going. See you tomorrow, okay?"

"Oh! I am so sorry! I didn't mean to hold you up!" I felt my face start to heat up. This poor guy, held up by this crazy laughing hyena, just trying to get to- where was he going, anyway?

Wherever it was, I bet he couldn't get away from me fast enough. And then I thought, did Ben think I was laughing *at* him? Oh, no....

About that time, I heard my name loudly announced over the school intercom.

Actually, no, it was not the intercom, it was just Jackson's coach voice, roaring yet amiable, calling my name from across the parking lot, where he was waiting in the car for me.

"CASEY! TIME TO GO, SWEETHEART!"

Ben heard it, I heard it, and shoot, everyone within a mile heard it. I rolled my eyes and looked apologetically at Ben through his still-opened drivers-side door. "That's for me," I said. "Thanks, Ben, I'll see you tomorrow."

Ben looked at me questioningly. "Found a sweetheart already, huh?" he said, and gave me a half smile. I opened my mouth to correct him, but Jackson was calling my name again, so I just closed my mouth. I could 'splain everything tomorrow. Not that Ben cared.

With a little good-bye wave, I hurried over to Jackson's car, and he greeted me cheerfully. "HOP IN, SWEETHEART!"

I did as instructed, and then I couldn't help it. I gave Jackson a grin. Maybe I was just feeling mellow from all that laughing, but his big loud voice was becoming familiar, and it didn't startle me like it used to.

"*Don't* call me 'Sweetheart'," I told him sternly, though.

"You got it, DARLIN'", he responded seriously. I am honestly not sure if he was joking or not. Laughter bubbled up inside me AGAIN, but this time I kept it in check. It's kind of

Melissa Knight

nice being called “Darlin”, though I just went *hmmph*, and looked out the window.

That night, when it was my turn at the dinner table, I kept it short, sweet, and sincere. “The favorite part of my day was shooting baskets in P.E. And laughing a lot, instead of crying.”

It was progress. Not swift.

Not easy.

Chapter 9

Madness

"Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness."
~ F. Scott Fitzgerald

Me:

Ben has these amazing chocolate brown eyes. And no, I'm not interested, it's just an observation.

Sarah:

Sure sure

(Sarah does not observe punctuation too well when she texts)

been meaning to ask why did your mom get married at Christmas instead of waiting for summer? Wasn't that the plan???? It all happened so fast!!!!

Me:

2 big reasons.

Me:

#1, the perfect job opened up for my mom at our new high school but she had to start in January or the opportunity would be gone.

Me:

#2, the lease was up on the house we were renting anyway.

Me:

And I guess #3 is that she and Harrison just didn't want to wait. They're like young newlyweds, seriously, it's so cute and weird at the same time.

Sarah:

THAT IS SO SWEET!!YOUR MOM IS ADORABLE!!!

Sarah:

<3<3<3

Sarah:

but why did you move too??? you could have finished the school year and stayed at my house.....my mom said you could.... you were really that mad at me you moron???

Me:

I know, I was so stupid. But I was hurt and embarrassed and moving didn't seem so bad. Fresh start, you know?

Sarah:

Did Davis really break your heart? Truth?

I didn't answer right away. I was starting to suspect that while my heart was broken a little, maybe it was my pride that took the biggest hit.

Davis is cute, popular, athletic, and all the girls, well, maybe just 89%, at my old school had a crush on him, including me. So when he noticed me, the studious, unathletic non-cheerleader, I was floored, and flattered. He laughed at my jokes, I went to his football games, and he became easy to talk to.

Then, my secret, hopeless little crush suddenly became full-blown when he asked me to the Homecoming Dance last fall, my very first date ever. I seriously thought I would die from happiness.

We became a couple, and there was no pressure, nothing but sweetness, I'm *serious*. Like seventeen-year-old Karen and Harrison used to be. We held hands, we watched movies at his house with his family, and we hung out together with our friends. Davis gave me my first kiss, and since I hadn't yet died from acute happiness, I started making Senior Prom plans, though we were just sophomores. What *would* I wear?

I loved being somebody's girlfriend, especially the handsome jock's girlfriend. Walking through the halls with Davis, eating lunch with Davis, laughing together at our little secret jokes while other girls sighed with envy... I reveled in the prestige. It was addictive.

Nothing prepared me for the break-up text from Davis, after school, the evening before Christmas Break began.

Case, we need to end things now. You're moving away, and we're too young for a long-distance relationship. Sorry I don't have the guts to say this face to face. I just hate to break your heart.

My heart.

He didn't want to break *my* heart. He never said *his* heart would be broken. I noticed this very grave omission right away, and I was devastated. Our sweet, almost three-month relationship meant nothing to him? He let me go, just like that?

I never answered him. I could have told him that I had permission to stay with Sarah's family and finish my sophomore year at Lee High, but what was the point? Then Sarah texted me later that night and told me that Davis had just asked her out. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything, but she did it in the interest of full disclosure as best friends, I know this.

But I flipped out. I assumed the worst. This had to be it! Sarah was the other woman! She was the real reason Davis had broken up with me! It gave me a certain, small relief to blame Sarah, to use her as the reason why Davis could possibly abandon me so abruptly.

Blame, jealousy, pride, anger, heartbreak, and being sixteen. It's a pretty sick mix. Chemical madness.

I finally texted Sarah back.

Me:

Yes, Davis did break my heart just a little. I thought maybe I loved him and he loved me. I feel stupid now, but it was real for me.

Me:

And he messed with my pride. And my senior prom plans. And my plans for marrying him and having 4 kids.

Sarah:

LOL LOL LOL be strong girl! Time for a rebound boyfriend!!!

Me:

No, thank you. Way too soon. I just want to pass chemistry right now.

After my shower, I took my time picking out what to wear tomorrow. What would look *muy bonita* with my safety goggles in Chemistry? We do lab experiments on Wednesdays, I learned today. I was actually looking forward to it.

I did not stop to analyze why I could possibly be looking forward to Chemistry. Nor would I spend a single second wondering why I had to look good in that class.

Or, for whom.

Chapter 10

And dreams

“Think like a proton and stay positive”

~ seen on a t-shirt

“I work on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, until about 7 or 7:30,” Ben told me during Chemistry lab on Wednesday. “And I work on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.”

“I have no life,” I responded truthfully, looking at him through my safety goggles. “The only thing I have to do is be at home right after school to meet my little sister’s bus. And my little brother. My stepbrother.” It still felt weird, saying that. “So, I guess that leaves Mondays or Wednesdays after school?”

I didn’t even mention Fridays after school. Friday afternoons are sacred. The beginning of the weekend, freedom, couch time,

.Netflix, hanging out with friends... maybe Reese and her group? Marla?

Ben had a slight frown, not a good sign. “I’m president of the FFA chapter here, and we meet on Mondays after school, so that won’t work. And Wednesdays, I’ve got to catch up on homework...How about Fridays? We could start this Friday.”

Friday it was. I was at his mercy. I smiled, nodding my head and thanking Ben, but inwardly I was groaning. Getting tutored

in Chemistry on a Friday afternoon sounded about as appealing as a kale and spinach smoothie on my birthday.

But, positive I would be. It was only for about a month, according to Mr. Voss. Ben agreed to drive to my house right after school on Friday, and when I asked him again how much I should pay him, he shrugged it off. "Pay me in snacks," he said. "I'm pretty hungry after school. Now, come on, lab partner, we'd better get our assignment over with."

And that was that. Our experiment went well, we got our notes done, and I managed to chat a bit with Reese, Marla, and Colton, who always seemed friendly. When the bell rang, I handed Mr. Voss my yellow post-it note as I shuffled past him, behind the other students headed for the classroom door. Mr. Voss wasn't requiring a post-it every day now, but he had told us we could leave him a question or a message anytime. I definitely had a message for him today.

BEN WILL TUTOR ME! the post-it said, next to a happy face. Mr. Voss scanned it quickly and nodded at me as I walked out the door. Still no smile. *I'm going to get Mr. Voss to smile if it takes all semester*, I decided, *because I like him, he's cool, and it gives me a fun little Chemistry goal.*

I was feeling good because hope was now in sight for getting caught up in Chem, my outfit was cute today, and I didn't spill anything on it, and... why did that even matter?

But it did. Goals were being met, and dreams, tiny little dreams, were coming true. I was in a *bueno* mood.

The good mood carried me through English, where Ms. Thomas was ALWAYS smiling, and Geometry, where Ben seemed to finally notice I was there and gave me a little wave, not that I cared that much, and History, where we had a sub and got to watch some movie about the Roman Empire, which we were not studying, but hey, it was in the history category. Subs have a hard job and I always try to help them out, usually just by sitting down and shutting up.

So by lunchtime, it had been a very positive morning and I was feeling fine because over half of the school day was checked off the Wednesday list. I settled in with Reese, Abby, Mia and a couple of other girls whose names I still couldn't remember, and

unwrapped my sandwich, preparing to listen more attentively to their conversations today. I took my first bite, started chewing, and slowly noticed something.

The silence.

Not the silence in the cafeteria, because it was as chaotic as ever, with hundreds of students talking and laughing.

No, the silence at our table.

Reese, Abby, Mia, and the others were all looking at me, quietly and expectantly.

"What?" I said, after swallowing that first bite. "Do I have something on my face?" I picked up a napkin and turned to Reese, who was sitting next to me, ready to wipe my chin, my mouth, or wherever she indicated.

"No, no, you're fine!" Reese reassured me. It sounded like "f-ahhh-n". She leaned closer, her eyes dancing. "You've been holdin' out on us! You've got to tell us *everything*!"

I was clearly confused, and Mia helped me out. "I *saw* you yesterday! In the parking lot! Riding home with JACKSON FINDLEY! You *know* him? Do you know James, too??"

She squealed and all the girls kind of give this sigh. This dreamy, how-I-envy-you, sigh. I blinked.

Well, now. Jackson? Jackson was a Cute Guy On Campus? Now James, I got that, because he's got that tall, dark and handsome thing going on, and he's also a really nice person. I knew he had a girlfriend already, because she came to the wedding. Jackson was nice too, I was discovering, but it was taking me awhile to get past that loud personality. And I didn't think he was really all that cute.

My girls obviously disagreed.

"Are you two going out? Already??"

"Or did you know him before you moved here? Jackson is *hot*."

Ewww, ewwww. "WAIT!" I almost yelled, holding up my hand in the universal "stop" position. I refused to even allow "hot" and "stepbrother" in the same sentence. I had thought about this before the wedding, wondering- well, what if I was *attracted* to my older stepbrothers? Or what if they were attracted to *me*? James, Jackson and I were teenagers, after all,

with the usual hormones, and we weren't really related. How would that be *handled*? I had agonized over this with Sarah, last fall, and she just laughed.

"I wouldn't worry about it," she told me. "You've never had a brother, and I have three. I love them, but they're stinky and gross. Trust me."

That wasn't a satisfactory answer, but I had to admit, in the short time I had lived with the Findley men, there had been a fair amount of belching, body odors, and facial hair left in the sink. They were sweet, but some of their habits were disgusting, and having a crush on the teenage Findleys did not appear to be an issue. Nor did they seem overly interested in me. It must have been the scuzzy Little Mermaid sweatpants, combined with my bedhead- and- no- makeup moments.

"Well?" Abby demanded, and I lowered my stop-sign hand.

"It's not what you think!" I squeaked. "Jackson is my new *stepbrother*. My mom just married his dad, over Christmas break, and now we all live together. Like a *family*. We ride to the same house together. To our home. My new home."

The girls were still gaping at me, mouths open. Apparently this was jaw-dropping news.

"What's it like?" Abby squealed.

"Yeah, what are they like? My mom always says you don't really know someone until you live with them," Reese added sagely.

"Are you doing okay?" Mia asked gently.

Her question surprised me. No one had asked me that since our move, not one person, except of course for Mom, who asked me that almost every time she saw me, which I appreciated though it was annoying. I looked at Mia, really looked at her, and she smiled at me in an understanding way.

"I have a stepfather too, and stepsisters," she explained. "We've all lived together since I was in seventh grade. It's great now, mostly, but getting used to each other took a long time. I understand what you must be feeling right now."

I grinned at her appreciatively. "Thanks for asking." Another bond.

The rest of lunch was spent with them asking me questions,

mainly about what Jackson's favorite things were, and what he liked to do, and who he might want to date, conducting the intense Guy Research that high school girls are famous for. Do they put this much energy into their studies, I wondered? I shook my head inwardly, recognizing that this question was straight from my future forty-year-old self.

Most of their questions I couldn't answer, though, and I realized how little I really did know about Jackson, and James, or even Jefferson. I tended to dismiss Jefferson, because he's just a year older than Riley, and he was so, I don't know- unformed? Like a tadpole who would someday become a frog?

I mean, what was there to know about a ten-year-old boy? Jefferson probably liked bugs, and fishing, and dirt, and stuff like that. He didn't strike me as an opera and crepes kind of dude. Neither did James or Jackson.

But then I remembered my little "Sum Casey Up in 10 Words" quiz, and its shortcomings, and I realized I was being such a hypocrite. I wouldn't make these shallow judgments! *Now is the time to do my own research*, I decided, as I continued to munch my sandwich. Stepbrother research. My cafeteria friends sure were interested, so I might as well make a list of things I needed to know about the J's.

This, this was what I did best! Lists. Organization.

"Okay, ladies," I announced. They all paused in their chatter and looked at me, like I was about to tell them something that would completely alter their universe. "I'll try to get these answers for you, about what Jackson likes, and stuff like that, okay? At least, if he's willing to answer questions. He might just think I'm being nosy, and I don't want to make him mad."

Reese, Mia, Abby, and the others grinned at me, the bell rang, and it was time to go and check my afternoon classes off the list.

"Cute outfit, by the way," Mia told me, as we threw our trash away. I thanked her and smiled, smugly, to myself.

It was just a smiley kind of day.

Dinner that night was spaghetti and meatballs, salad, and lovely toasty, buttery garlic bread, another little happy detail in

my Wednesday. Mom, Ry and I adore carbs, and we believe it's medically necessary to have pasta at least once a week. Mom and I had always cooked dinner together, and we had been doubling everything since moving into the Findley residence, but as we looked at the steaming pasta on the table, waiting on everyone to come to the dining room, we had doubts.

"I don't know, Case, should we have made more?" Mom looked worried.

I was concerned, too. These men ate like... horses? Blue whales? I've read that pygmy shrews (look it up, I bet you don't know what they are) constantly eat and never sleep for more than a few minutes. I couldn't imagine what our grocery bill had to be like, but I didn't pay the bills and had other things to worry about.

Like, would I get more than one small serving of spaghetti tonight?

I shrugged. "It is what it is," I said. "There's plenty of salad, so they can fill up on that."

Mom snorted, but by now everyone was gathering around the table, and it was too late. Blended Family Dinner had begun.

When it was my turn to tell my daily highlight, I cleared my throat. I was about to do a conversational cannonball. "Okay, well, I learned today that the girls I sit with at lunch have crushes on James and Jackson. Especially Jackson." Those same girls would kill me if they heard me saying this about them right now, but I believed in getting right to the point.

James was smirking at me, nodding and looking all interested and "yeah!", but Jackson was frozen, his fork held halfway to his mouth. He stared at me, incredulous. "SAY WHAT?"

"GROSS!", Jefferson and Riley yelled at the same time, then they turned to each other and yelled "SNAP!", high fiving.

"No yelling at the table," Harrison admonished them. But he was smiling. "Well, way to go, ladies' man Jack!"

Jackson recovered, took a bite of food, and to my surprise, he *blushed*, and stared at his spaghetti. He didn't say anything else, and I was starting to feel uneasy. Did I actually embarrass him?

Was he really shy and sensitive under all that loud, cheerful, macho bluster?

Mom noticed, too, and she tried to smooth things over. "I have no doubt all the girls notice Jackson," she said calmly. "He is such a sweetheart, but let's move on to other things. James, what was your highlight of the day?" She shot me a look that clearly said, *what on earth were you thinking?* and I shrank back in my chair and prayed for invisibility. I would apologize to Jackson later.

I punished myself by not taking another helping of pasta, and as we finished the meal I noticed that there was not a single morsel of food, including salad, left on the table. The guys and Riley got up to clear the dishes and load the dishwasher. This had become another family rule, that whoever cooked didn't have to clean up. Harrison got home from work later than Mom, so he planned to cook on weekends, with whoever wanted to help him.

Mom headed upstairs to the big game room, with her papers to grade, but I hung out in the living room until I saw the guys and Ry leave the kitchen. By now I was feeling like the lowest of the low. I caught Jackson's attention, and motioned him to come sit next to me on the couch.

"Jackson, I'm sorry," I said softly. "I guess I embarrassed you."

Jackson looked at me sternly, or at least he tried to, but I noticed the grin lurking just under the surface long before he busted out laughing. "YOU GOT ME!" he roared. "NO WORRIES, DARLIN'!"

"Don't call me 'darlin'", I automatically said. Then I grinned back at him. "Seriously, don't call me sweetheart or darlin', and seriously, I'm sorry."

Jackson lowered his voice a few decibels, to a somewhat normal level, his version of a whisper. "No problem, Case. But I think you owe it to me to tell me who has a crush on me. Spill it."

Now I was the one whose face was turning red. "I don't think I should, because I think they would be embarrassed, and I really shouldn't continue this trend of embarrassing people."

"Fair enough," he shrugged. "Really, don't worry about it. Nobody expects me to be shy around girls, but I am."

I looked at Jackson, assessing. It was true that, even though to me he was just kind of average looking, he did look strong, athletic, and clean-cut, and the guy just exuded confidence, in his voice and his decisive actions. I knew he played football and baseball. And he smiled at everyone, all the time. I could see why the typical girl would be attracted to that. And I could also understand why nobody would ever guess how shy he was, around girls.

"Would you mind if I asked you a few questions, just to get to know you better?" Good grief, I sounded like a news reporter. I'm sure my face was getting even redder, and my happy day was starting to look like just another normal, awkward one. "I mean, we're brother and sister now, sort of, and, it seems like a good thing to do. I want to ask James and Jefferson some questions, too, not just you." My voice trailed off.

"Sure! Right here, right now?" Jackson sounded enthusiastic, but then he always does.

"Actually, I'd like to think more about the questions," I admitted. "I think I need to start thinking more before I open my mouth." How many more times could I say the word "think"? "So maybe this weekend?"

"Sure, dar" - Jackson caught himself - "I mean, CASEY!" He winked at me, stood up and started to leave the living room. "Catcha later!"

"Um, Jackson? I do have one really quick question."

I had been dying to ask, and this probably was a bad time, but suddenly I just had to know, and I wanted to watch Jackson's face as he answered. He seemed to have no filter, and I instinctively knew his first reaction would be sincere.

Jackson stopped and looked back at me, waiting with that still-broad smile on his face. I stood up, watching his face carefully.

"Do you mind that your dad and my mom got married? Do you mind that you had to give up your room, and that your home has been invaded by these females you don't really know?" Okay, that was three questions, but still.

I waited. There was a pause, and I tensed up.

Jackson's face changed, all right.

His smile softened, and his expression changed from good-natured to what I can only call compassionate. He spoke, in the softest tone I had heard yet.

"Casey, your mom is one of the best things that ever happened to my dad. I love your mom. I'm glad you and Ry have your own room. And, we'll all get to know each other better. You're not the only one who can ask questions, ya know. We'll get through the weirdness, don't worry."

Coach Jackson had spoken, and I was speechless. I had tears in my eyes, my shoulders relaxed, and the tension seeped out of my body. *He'll think I never stop crying*, I reflected. I gave him a watery smile.

"ATTA GIRL!", he boomed, giving me a thumbs up, and he left the room.

Sarah:

Good day?

I sighed, and thought of Mia's kind "Are you doing okay?", and Jackson's response to my heavy, awkward questions.

Good,

I texted.

Really good.

I slept better than I had in a month.

Chapter 11

Reactions

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

~ Carl Jung,

founder of Analytical Psychology

“So what would *you* ask them? I need a guy’s perspective.”

Ben and I were munching on the frozen cheese pizza I just heated up. My first tutoring session was over, and we had moved on to what was actually our third snack. We started with healthy apples and grapes, when Ben first arrived at the house, then moved on to Oreos mid-session, taking a break to meet Riley’s and Jefferson’s bus, and then since Ben still seemed hungry, I offered the pizza when we were done. I was beginning to suspect it would have been cheaper to just pay Ben \$20 an hour, rather than clear out our refrigerator each Friday.

I was telling him about my stepbrother research. Ben had seemed as surprised as my lunch crew, when I told him about my new life, and where I lived. He knew the Findley brothers. He and Jackson had greeted each other like old buddies, earlier, though Jackson had long since disappeared upstairs.

Ben seemed to be pondering my question. “I guess you need

the basics, right? Like, do you know their birthdays? Where they were born?"

"That's good, I hadn't even thought about those things," I admitted, texting those questions to myself, on my phone. "I was thinking more along the lines of, what is your favorite band, and where do you want to be in ten years?"

"Those are good," he agreed. He took another bite of pizza and looked at his cell phone. "Another five minutes, and I should be going. Thanks for the pizza and everything." He looked sheepish. "Sorry if I ate too much."

"You didn't," I reassured him. I mean, he did eat a lot, but probably less than the usual amount I had seen the J's put away. "And thank *you*. I learned a lot, today. You're obviously really busy, so I appreciate you helping me."

I realized that I didn't know much about Ben, and here he was, sitting in my kitchen eating pizza.

"So, you said you have a job? Where do you work?"

"I've worked in my uncle's veterinarian clinic for a couple of years now. I'm not a vet tech, but I've learned a lot. I basically do all the stuff that no one else wants to do, like cleaning cages, walking the boarders, janitor stuff, that kind of thing." He shrugged, but he was smiling. "I plan to become a vet, like my uncle. I want to work with large animals, though, not just the small ones."

"You mean, like zoo animals? Or farm animals?" This sounded so cool.

"Yeah. I'm not sure yet, and that part could change, but I definitely plan on vet school."

"Impressive!" A guy who had goals, lofty ones! And who could balance a ruler on his nose! I started to ask him more questions, but he glanced at his phone again, wadded up his napkin, putting it on his paper plate, and looked around for a trash can. I showed him where it was, and then he started to put on his jacket.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" I blurted out.

Where did *that* come from?! Why would I want Ben to stay for dinner? I felt my face start heating up, trying to think of a way to unsay what I had just said.

Feelin' the Chemistry

Ben looked at me, surprised, then shook his head. "That sounds great, but I can't," he said, rather cautiously. "Not tonight."

Got a date? I almost asked the question, in a light-hearted sort of way, but even I, Miss Awkward, had the good sense not to say that out loud. Even though I was just, you know, curious.

Ben was looking at the door, obviously ready to go. "Well, thanks again," he said. "Have a great weekend. Hope you get answers to all your questions, Casey!" He smiled, and walked out the door.

"Bye!" I called after him, in a cheerful voice, though I felt humiliated. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, I moaned to myself, covering my face with my hands, even though I was alone in the kitchen. *Why on earth did I embarrass us both by randomly inviting him to dinner?*

But he was so patient, and sweet. He would make a good friend.

And those amazing brown eyes.

I shook it off.

Me:

I've attached my questions for the J's. Tell me what you think.

Sarah:

Girl you have 50 questions on that thing!!!! Cut it down to 10

Me:

But I want to know all of these answers!

Sarah:

Me:

Which 10?

Sarah:

The first 10 who cares!! Catch you later am going to movie with the crew! Luv u!!

I sighed. Sarah was my opposite- she didn't like to read and she never over-analyzed anything. She was a go-with-the-flow gal, and I had wished a million times that I could be more like her.

Until I saw her punctuation mistakes, that is, and then I cringed and thanked God I was not like her, ha-ha.

I reviewed my 50 questions, lying on my bed again on this lonely Friday evening. Mom, Harrison, Riley and Jefferson were watching a movie upstairs, James had a date tonight with his girlfriend, and Jackson was out playing pool with his guy friends somewhere. And then there was me, staring at my still-undecorated beige walls and agonizing over some stupid dorky questionnaire. I decided to take Sarah's advice, for once, and go with the first ten questions, for better or worse. If all went well, maybe I could ask ten more next weekend.

I copied, pasted, and printed them out. I would give each J the option of either writing his answers in private or letting me interview him.

I wandered upstairs to the game room, looking for some company, some interaction, anything to get rid of the vague gloominess that threatened to take over my evening, even if it meant watching a Disney movie with an nine and ten year old.

As I walked in, I smelled buttery popcorn, heard giggling, and saw how everyone's face lit up when they noticed me, even Jefferson's. "Casey, have you ever seen Air Bud? Come watch!" he yelled, bouncing up and down on the couch, spilling popcorn all over the floor.

Feelin' the Chemistry

A cute dog movie? Popcorn? Companionship?

People who wanted me around, even if two of them thought knock-knock jokes were the height of humor?

I'll take it. I grabbed a handful of popcorn and curled up on a corner of the couch.

Chapter 12

Holding on

"...Test everything. Hold on to what is good." -1 Thessalonians 5:21, The Bible To me, that's the scientific method in a nutshell.

~ Daniel Romo,

Chemistry Professor, Baylor University

"You want to interview ME? Like a real interview on TV?"

The Air Bud movie was over, the popcorn had been vacuumed up, and I had decided to start my Stepbrother Research, right here in the game room, with the three-syllable J. Why not start easy? Jefferson always liked to be on the move, so I was betting that he would lose interest quickly, give me short answers, and move on to whatever he likes to do before bedtime on Friday nights.

This would take five minutes, tops.

"Yes!" I said in my best take-charge voice. "Do you want me to ask you these questions out loud, or would you like to write down your answers and give the paper back to me tomorrow?"

"Right NOW!" Jefferson shouted. "COOL! I'll go comb my hair!"

What?

"Jefferson, it's not that big a deal, you don't"-

"Can you interview me, too?" Ry pleaded. "Please, please?"

"What about me?" Harrison asked in this joking way, and

then he saw me almost roll my eyes. "Just kidding," he added hastily.

"We should record this," Mom said, her eyes dancing. "I'll grab my phone."

And just like that, the game room became a newsroom, lights, camera, action! Jefferson came back, hair wet and neatly combed, and wearing- I groaned- the suit jacket that I guess he wore at the wedding. Ry saw his efforts, and she ran downstairs, yelling, "Don't start without me! I'll be right back!"

She reappeared in three minutes wearing an old pink feather boa that she used to wear when she played dress-up, and...

"Are you wearing my lip gloss?" I demanded sternly.

She gazed at me innocently. "Let's table that discussion for later and get started."

Harrison snorted and Mom tried really hard not to laugh. I rolled my eyes now, big-time. This was getting out of hand, but as the poet Robert Frost reminded me, I had to pick a road now. Get annoyed, or play along and have fun?

For once, I was pretty sure I was choosing the right path.

I quickly realized that a couple of my ten questions were not all that age-appropriate for little kids, but I decided to ask them anyway, since the phone camera was rolling, and who knew? Jefferson or Riley might be famous someday and I could sell this cute video footage to paparazzi and make some bucks.

So here are some video highlights:

Question #3

Me: Jefferson, what would you like to be doing in ten years?

Jefferson: (*Looking very serious, he folded his hands together like he was praying, lowered his head and squeezed his eyes shut. A full minute passed*)

Me: Uh, Jefferson? (*No response. I looked at Harrison, and he just shrugged.*)

Me: Would you like me to repeat the question?

Jefferson: (*opening his eyes, he unclenched his hands, smoothed his jacket and smiled confidently into the camera*) I

heard ya. In ten years, I will be a millionaire and have a cool red Corvette. I will have a house on the beach in Hawaii with about ten dogs. And horses. No cats. And a Gila monster.

Question #5

Me: Jefferson, what is your favorite color?

Jefferson: Red.

Me: And how about you, Riley? What is your favorite color?

Riley: *(tossing her boa over her shoulder with great flair)* Weelll, in the mornings I like yellow because it's sunshiny, but in the afternoons I like green the best because of the grass and plants and Easter, and-

Me: Easter?

Riley: Like that shiny green Easter grass in my Easter basket!

Me: What does that have to do with the afternoons?

Riley: Because... *(twirling one end of her boa around several times, then readjusting it)* What is the question again?

Question #8

Me: If you could invite anyone to dinner tomorrow night, who would it be? Riley, let's start with you.

Riley: Can it be someone famous?

Me: Yes, it doesn't have to be anyone you know.

Riley: Why would I invite someone I don't know?

Me: Then, just invite someone you do know!!

Riley: Can it be someone who died? And what are we having for dinner tomorrow night?

Me: Let's see what Jefferson has to say. Jefferson, if you could invite anyone to dinner tomorrow night, who would it be?

Jefferson: *(after another pause)* I can invite anyone, and she has to come? No excuses?

Me: Yes.

Jefferson: My mom. My real mom. *(He looked down at the ground and walked quickly to the door, shrugged off his jacket*

Feelin' the Chemistry

and flung it on the floor, running out of the game room. We heard him clomp heavily down the stairs.)

No one called out to him to come pick up the jacket.

Interview. Over.

I interviewed Jefferson tonight.

My finger hovered over the SEND icon, but then I back-spaced slowly, erasing the message one letter at a time.

Then I typed it again.

I interviewed Jefferson tonight. I'll send you the video if you want. Some of it's pretty funny.

I pondered some more. Ben and I exchanged phone numbers when we set up our tutoring arrangement, but would he really want to get a text from me, that had nothing to do with tutoring? Did we have the beginning of a real friendship? Or was I just someone he was helping out and would never think about otherwise?

I started to delete the text again, then decided to not over-analyze this. It was just a text. Just giving Ben information. He didn't have to answer if he wasn't interested. It wasn't like...

I hit SEND.

Ben:

Sure, send me the video!

A few minutes later-

Ben:

He and Riley should do a show together, they're a hoot. So, where is J's mom?

Me:

All I know is she lives in Michigan and the boys don't hear from her much.

Ben:

That's tough.

Tough was not a strong enough word. I obviously didn't get to see my dad, but he died, for Pete's sake. It wasn't like he was still alive and just chose not to be with me. Why would a mother choose that? How would I feel if my mother left me and Ry to be with someone else?

My mind swirled with questions I couldn't answer, and I felt helpless with sadness for Jefferson. He was just a little kid. He deserved better.

You can do something.

I knew that voice.

I don't say His name often. I used to, when I was Riley's age. I would sing "Jesus loves me, this I know" with the little kids' choir at church, and I believed every word, feeling loved and protected, with no big hurts or doubts to complicate things.

And then I went to middle school, where it wasn't cool to talk about Jesus, and where my friends were asking big-time questions about dating, sex, and boyfriends, giggling nervously, acting bold and yet feeling so very insecure inside. We tested everything, questioned the "rules", and allowed new information to roll around in our brains, whether it was true or not.

And some of us just didn't hold on to what was good.

By then Dad had died, Mom was struggling to make ends meet, we were dealing with the deep, dark hole of grief, and we just, I don't know... existed. So yeah, that name hadn't come up much lately.

But now, the yearning grew within me, the desire to say His name again.

I wanted to say that name again.

I texted Ben a see-ya-later, and then knelt down beside my bed, careful not to make too much noise, since Ry was already asleep in the twin bed across the dark room.

"Jesus," I whispered. I wanted to say so much, and yet I didn't know *what* to say. How could I have so many thoughts inside me, and yet not have a clue how to start this conversation? A tear rolled down my cheek, a tear I didn't even know had been waiting.

Help this little boy, I thought. *Help this whole family. Help me. Help us all.*

My phone, charging on my bedside table, buzzed briefly, signaling that I had received a text. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, whispered a quick *thank you* because that just seemed like the polite thing to do, then crawled into bed and grabbed my phone, expecting a movie review from Sarah. And then I froze. The text was not from Sarah.

It was from Davis.

Can you talk?

Chapter 13

First love

How on earth are you ever going to explain in terms of chemistry and physics so important a biological phenomenon as first love?

~ Albert Einstein,
physicist

“Sure, I’ve got time to talk,” James told me, at breakfast the next morning. We were the late risers, and the only ones left in the kitchen. “That is, if you don’t mind waiting until later. I’ve got to be at work by eleven. And then, I’m going over to Lauren’s for dinner, so, well...maybe tomorrow afternoon, after church?”

I remembered that James bagged groceries on Saturdays, at a supermarket nearby. Did Jackson have a job too, I wondered? Did everyone but me have some purpose in life besides making up quizzes and questionnaires, being tutored and watching younger siblings after school?

“Tomorrow is fine,” I reassured him. “It’s no big deal, I just thought I should get to know you guys better.”

“It is a big deal, and you are absolutely right,” James said thoughtfully, reaching for another bagel. “We need to be intentional, and make time for each other in our new family. My days at home are numbered, you know,” he said ruefully, getting up to put the bagel in the toaster. “I’ll be leaving in August for college.”

"Wow," I say slowly. August seemed like a long time from now, but I knew the time would go by quickly. "Are you excited? Where will you be going?"

"I haven't decided yet," James said, leaning against the kitchen counter. "I'm hoping to get a basketball scholarship. I have some decent prospects, so yeah, I'm pretty pumped." His face clouded. "Though it will be hard to leave Lauren."

"How long have you two been dating?"

"We started going out when we were both sophomores, so it's right at two years, now." The bagel popped out of the toaster, and James grabbed it and came back to the table.

"Will you two stay together, even when you go to college?" I thought about Davis. *We're too young to have a long-distance relationship*, he said, when he broke up with me. But we were two years younger than James and Lauren.

James looked pensive. "As long as Lauren is willing, I am, too," he said, slathering cream cheese on his bagel. "We have such a great connection. Lauren is going to University of Texas in Austin, and I know I won't get a scholarship there, but we can make our relationship work, I'm sure of it."

"That's what my mom and your dad thought, when they were dating and they both went away to different colleges," I said, and then I immediately realized I shouldn't have said *that*. Mom and Harrison obviously broke up!

James stopped chewing and looked at me, surprised. "What? They dated in high school? Seriously?"

"You didn't know that?" I was just as surprised as James. "Your dad didn't tell you?"

James started to grin. "No, all he said was that he used to date your mom before he dated *my* mom. Well, I'll be!" He shook his head and chuckled. I guess my comparing Mom's and Harrison's failed high school relationship to his relationship with Lauren didn't bother him. Or else he just hadn't connected those dots yet.

"Gotta go," he said, wolfing down the rest of his bagel. "Catcha later. And hey, whatever you ask *me* tomorrow, I'm going to ask *you*, so be prepared!"

"Deal!", I said, happily. I'll admit, I was a lot like Ry in that

way- I liked talking about myself and answering questions! Well, *most* questions, anyway, easy ones like “what’s your favorite color” and “what will you name your first child”. I had thought these things through carefully.

Some questions were just harder to answer, though and I avoided them. Like the one last night from Davis.

Can you talk?

I hadn’t answered that one yet.

I looked around for Jackson and found him as he was heading for the back door. I waved my question page at him, and called out “Wait! Jackson, I have my questions! Can we talk soon?”

“SURE!” he boomed. “Come with me to the gym, sweet-um, sweetly! Come SWEETLY!” Jackson cackled at his very lame recovery, and it was really not that funny, but I had to grin anyway because his good humor was just so contagious.

I shook my head. “I’ve never been to a gym outside of school, and I’m not going to start now. I’ll just talk to you later.”

“Come ON,” he wheedled. “It’s AWESOME, and you don’t have to do anything. I’m not staying long!”

I considered it. What else did I have to do today, besides study chemistry, write an essay for English, and review for a Spanish test next Tuesday? Oh yeah, I needed to decorate my blank bedroom walls. I needed to help clean the bathroom I shared with Riley. I needed to check my social media and see what my old friends who I no longer hung out with were doing.

“Okay, I’ll go, but I don’t like to sweat,” I warned him. “I’ll ask questions while you walk on the treadmill or whatever you do.” I grabbed my jacket.

As it turned out, Jackson mainly lifted weights. “Getting ready for BASEBALL season!” he explained as gave me a brief tour of the gym, coming to the weights area last. There were a couple of other people already lifting weights in the room, and I realized it would be quite awkward if I just stood around watching and asking questions.

“I’m going to look around,” I told Jackson, backing out of

the room. "Take your time, don't worry about me." *I shouldn't have come, I shouldn't have come*, I was thinking. How would I occupy? I would just find a quiet corner and play a game on my phone, I decided. I started getting it out of my crossbody purse, and of course I was distracted and not paying enough attention to where I was going, because as I turned a corner I literally ran into Marla, colliding with her hard enough that I dropped the phone.

"Oh no, sorry- did your screen crack?" Marla asked, concerned, though she was rubbing her forehead. I had bumped her pretty hard.

"No, it's fine," I reassured her. "I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine too!", Marla said. Her eyes were sparkling. "Did you join the gym? I'm so glad! Maybe we can take a class together!" Marla's hair was pulled back in a messy pony tail, and I noticed that she definitely had a glow, otherwise known as perspiration, on her face, and no makeup. She wore leggings and a loose t-shirt that said- I squinted and leaned forward- *"If you can read this, you're standing too close"*.

I took a step back.

"I'm not a member, technically," I told her. "They let me in today as a guest. I'm with my stepbrother, and he's a member."

"Where is he?" Marla asked, looking around.

"He's in the weight room. I'm just killing time until he's done."

"Well then, come with me!" Marla insisted, pulling gently on my sweatshirt. "I'll show you my favorite things!"

Why not? I trailed after Marla, not too excited. I was a little surprised that Marla was here, since she didn't strike me as much of an athlete, she was not a bit overweight, and she sure couldn't shoot a basket, this I knew. But she made me try out some different equipment, one by one, for maybe five minutes at a time, and it started to become the tiniest bit fun.

By the time she showed me the indoor pool, and the outdoor tennis courts, I was almost hooked. "I love to swim," I admitted. "And I've never played tennis, but I like the cute tennis skirts."

Marla laughed, and I grinned, and we went to my most

favorite area yet, the snack bar, to finish waiting for Jackson. We were sipping smoothies and chatting like we had known each other forever, when he appeared.

"Well, THERE you are!" he said with great delight, attracting everyone's attention as usual with his volume. "I've been LOOKING-"

He stopped abruptly, and I glanced over at him. He was staring at Marla. I looked at Marla. She was staring at Jackson. It was like a scene in a movie, where the guy and the girl meet in a crowded room, and they can't take their eyes off of each other.

Well, well! I kept sipping my smoothie and wondered how long they would keep up the staring. Marla recovered first. She turned slowly to me, swallowed hard, and whispered, "*He's your stepbrother?*"

I stood up. "Marla, this is my stepbrother, Jackson. Jackson, meet Marla, my friend from school."

Jackson was like three shades of red. "We know each other," he mumbled, never taking his eyes off of Marla. I could barely hear him, but he was smiling. Good grief, here was my ordinary-looking, sweaty friend, in her not-that-cute workout clothes – and this boy was smitten.

Good thing he now had a SISTER.

"Marla, can we give you a ride home?" I asked helpfully. Marla had already mentioned that her mother would pick her up, when Marla was ready. "It would save your mom a trip. We insist, don't we, Jackson?"

"Y-yes," he stuttered

. "Well, okay," Marla said primly. "Thank you."

I got them both to Mom's car, which Jackson had to borrow since James took their shared Dodge to work, and I made sure that Marla was sitting in the front next to Jackson, while I climbed in the back seat. I met Jackson's eyes as he looked in the rearview mirror, and I could tell he was panicked.

"Start the car," I gently reminded him. He did so, and met my eyes in the mirror again, silently begging me for further instructions. I turned my head and looked out the window, ignoring his silent plea. *You've got to talk to her, buddy.*

"Um, where do you live?," I heard him ask Marla.

"I live, um, close. On 26th street," she replied in an almost-whisper.

The ride to her house was completely silent, except for a few instructions from Marla like "turn here" and "third house down". I considered suggesting that we stop and get lunch on the way, but decided against it. Too much, too soon. They both seemed rather overwhelmed, and besides that, there was a certain aroma in the car, which was not pleasant. Jackson was, how should I say it? Ripe? Whatever deodorant he put on this morning was no longer there.

Jackson pulled in Marla's driveway, she thanked us, and then she got out of the car, turning around to shut the door.

"WAIT!" Jackson's commanding voice was back, and Marla peeked in the car, alarmed. "You forgot this," he said more softly, and handed her the small gym bag she left on her seat. He smiled at her again, so very sweetly, his heart in his eyes. Marla gulped, took the bag, whispered "thanks" again, shut the car door and literally ran to her front porch. She unlocked the door, turned to give us a little wave, and disappeared inside.

Jackson backed out of the driveway before I could hop out and get in the front seat. The ride home was again silent, no comments, no radio, *nada*.

When we pulled up in our driveway, Jackson turned off the car and sighed. He looked back at me. No words. He was miserable.

I giggled, and got out of the car.

This would be fun.

Chapter 14

Doing things

Let us have the courage to do things differently.

~ Dr. Kallam Anji Reddy,
Chemical Engineer

This would not be fun.

Why was I dreading this so much? Going to a new church had to be easier than going to a new school - no tests, no who-do-I-sit-by-at-lunch dilemmas, no chemistry classes (although since God created the elements, He was truly the ultimate chem expert, yes?)

I liked my old church in our old home town, though Mom, Riley and I had drifted off in our attendance. It was a small church, and there were elderly ladies there who had known me since I was a baby, who still oohed and ahhhed over me, and who made me feel very cherished. My little youth group was small, but the kids were nice and though we weren't that close, I knew they were friends I could count on.

"One of the things I admire about Harrison," Mom confided to me, when they first got engaged, "is his faith. Through all the years after his ex-wife left him, and basically abandoned him and the boys, he never stopped trusting Jesus."

Tears filled her eyes, and she reached over and hugged me. "I still trust Him, too, but I haven't been listening to Him very

much," she admitted, still holding me in a gentle hug. "I want that to change. I want all of us, you and me, Riley, Harrison, the boys, ALL of us, to learn to know His voice."

I do know His voice, I thought at the time, a little annoyed. *I don't need to do anything more. I've got this.*

However, going to Harrison's church together, every week, as a freshly blended family, was a commitment that Harrison and Mom made, together. No arguments.

So, here we were, sitting all in a row near the middle of the sanctuary, some of us, meaning Harrison, Mom, Riley and the J's, looking expectant, hopeful, and smiling. As for me, I was... nervous. Waiting, though for what I didn't know. Cautious. Uncomfortable.

People came up to us before the service started, and shook our hands, introducing themselves to Mom, Riley, and I. They were friendly, kind, interested. I saw Mia a few rows ahead of us, sitting with a bunch of other kids, but she didn't look back or notice me yet.

As the service proceeded, I started to relax. Some of the songs I knew, some I didn't, but it was no big deal. And when the pastor started his sermon, it was more like a talk with a friend, than any kind of lecture.

Later, as we sat in our dining room eating Harrison's roast beef, potatoes, and carrots for lunch, I didn't remember a word that the pastor said. But I did remember how I felt, listening to his words. It was the same feeling I had when I whispered the name of Jesus the other night, in my sadness for Jefferson, and the same feeling I had when I looked up at the night sky, after we all met for the Star Wars movie, months ago.

That feeling of peace. Of being heard.

"Let's do it this way," James suggested to me, reaching for a roll. "Jackson and I will take you for the best tacos in town tonight, and we'll all interview there. Do you mind if Lauren comes, too?"

It was rather sad how quickly my mouth started to water and my eyes lit up, and here I was currently stuffing myself with tender, delicious roast beef. But few Texas girls are going to turn

down tacos. It was right there next to pasta on my list of weekly requirements. I nodded emphatically, my mouth full of food.

I would definitely need to join that gym.

"I'M IN!" Jackson roared happily. "HOO-WEEE, that sounds GOOD! You payin', James?"

Riley frowned, swallowed her food and opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Harrison noticed and spoke first.

"What's your favorite ice cream, Riley?" he asked. "Since it's such a warmish day, for January, I was thinking about taking you and Jefferson over to the park, and throwing the Frisbee around a bit, just the three of us, and then we'll stop at the grocery store on the way home and pick up a couple of gallons of ice cream for all of us to share. You can each choose a flavor."

Harrison had Riley as soon as he said the words "ice cream". He must have done his own research, I realized, and I smiled at him gratefully. I love Ry, but tonight would be a big kids event. Ry started chattering excitedly as we all finished eating. Everyone except Harrison collected dishes and trooped into the kitchen to clean up, as Harrison leaned back in his chair with a contented sigh. He was up at 7 a.m. this morning, prepping for this meal, and he deserved the break.

We're figuring it out, I thought. Elements. Routines. Bonds. It's slow, it's awkward, but we're figuring some things out.

One thing I learned about Jackson, as we sat around later, munching chips, salsa, and tacos, was that even though he was incredibly shy around girls, he was not at all shy about sharing his personal thoughts. He did use a quieter, more indoor voice to do so, to my relief.

"I'm crazy about Marla", he confided as we sat around eating chips and salsa at the taco stand. "Have been ever since I was in sixth grade, and she was in fifth".

I stared at him. "Seriously? And she still doesn't know this?"

"Yeah, how come you didn't take her to the Homecoming Dance last October?" Lauren asked. "You went with that cheerleader, Darcy what's-her-name. Do you like Darcy, too? Are you two dating?"

"Darcy and I are just friends," Jackson explained. "And I *didn't* ask her to the dance. Her best friend dates another guy on the football team, and they set us up. It was okay." He shrugged.

"But how come you didn't ask Marla?" I felt frustrated. "And how come you're not all shy around me, or Lauren?"

"I don't know," he said in a voice just as frustrated as mine, and he hung his head, despondent. It was kind of cute. "I guess I can talk to you and Lauren because I don't *like* you, you know, romantically. You're *family*. As for girls that come on to *me*, they just make me plain nervous. And Marla..." He sighed.

I stared at him, as the simple truth dawned on me. I think it dawned on Lauren at the same time, and we nodded at each other knowingly across the table.

"It's called FEAR," James stated the obvious, casually. He had been eating chips at a constant pace, and got the waiter's attention to bring more to our table. "This big, bad boy is afraid that Marla will turn him down. Simple." He eyed both Lauren and me. "And, before you two get any ideas, there's nothing you can do to *help*." He wagged his fingers, making imaginary quotation marks as he said the word "help". "Guys have to figure these things out on their own."

"But"- Lauren and I both said at the same time.

"No buts", James interrupted firmly. The waiter brought more chips just then, and James reached for another one with a contented sigh. "So, what's your favorite color, Case?"

And that was that, or so *he* thought. Lauren and I raised our eyebrows at each other, and we nodded, slightly. We would talk later.

Ben:

So are you an expert on James and Jackson by now?

I saw the text after I got out of the shower that night, and it made me smile. Ben texted *me*!

Me:

Yep, we hung out tonight, along with James' girlfriend. The funny thing is, I had my questions with me, and then I never even looked at them. We just talked like normal people, LOL. And we're friends now. Real friends, even Lauren.

Ben:

Cool. Ok, see you tomorrow.

Me:

Bright and early! Aaaaaghhh!!!

But I was smiling as I hit SEND. I felt more ready than ever for Chemistry tomorrow. Must be that good tutoring, giving me confidence. I would wear my favorite lavender t-shirt that Sarah told me brought out my blue eyes. Maybe Colton would notice?

I finished getting ready for bed, crawled in quietly, punched my pillow, and leaned over to plug my phone in the charger. As I did, I couldn't resist looking at Ben's text again, and I allowed myself to acknowledge that little warm happy feeling I was starting to get when I thought about him. It was not that excited, breathless, I'm-falling-for-him feeling that I had around Davis, not even close. But it was a nice, comfortable feeling.

If guys like Davis and Colton were over the top gourmet filet mignon dinners, then Ben was a... taco. Not glamorous, but a good, reliable staple of life.

Yes. I really did just compare Ben to a taco.

Chapter 15

Atom by atom, drop by drop

*One bucket full of water contains more atoms than there are
buckets of water in the Atlantic Ocean.*

~ cool chemistry fact

Well, I just thought I was going to sleep. My phone had other ideas, buzzing like a mosquito.

Sarah:

Davis asks about you all the time and he's not dating anyone else. He told me he texted and you haven't responded and I think he really misses you and he knows he was an imbecile!!!!

Sarah:

You like that word imbecile? LOL!!!

I didn't want to feel happy about this. I didn't want to feel anything – not anger, hurt, interest, nothing. I had put a lot of energy in trying to forget Davis.

Last week, it was easier because of school, homework, Cute Colton on my radar (or at least in my chemistry class), and my

budding friendships with Ben, Marla, and the others. But even at school, the memory of Davis shadowed me, and I caught glimpses of him randomly in my heart now and then.

There was so much to miss.

I missed who I *was* with Davis, feeling excited and valued. I missed how we sat together at lunch, and how he seemed proud of me in front of his friends. I missed how he would walk me to class, holding hands. I missed his tender kiss at the end of our dates, never demanding more, just enough to leave me breathless. I missed being part of a couple, having a status that most of my friends envied.

But Davis had dropped me like a hot potato, I reminded myself sternly. That still stung. Being tossed aside, and then him moving on like he always had his eye on someone else! Going from Girlfriend to No Big Deal in the time it took to text me!

Me:

What is there to say? I don't see any point in talking to him.

It was true. I didn't see any point. But... still. What if Davis did miss me and realized we were perfect together? What if he had acted in a moment of despair, wanting to take the pain of a breakup all at once instead of gradually growing apart, like ripping off a band aid quickly, instead of slowly?

What if we should give ourselves another chance?

There was a small flicker of hope, down in my heart. I didn't know whether to shelter it or try to blow it out.

Me:

And yes, Sarah, your vocabulary is impressive, LOL.

Me:

I wish I could talk to him in person.

Sarah:

Skype!!! Facetime!!!

Me:

NO.FACE TO FACE.Gnite, luv u.

Sarah:

sigh sigh luv u2

Face to face, those were my terms. That flicker of hope could stay for now, but I bet that even just a tiny amount of dew would put it out.

January went by, atom by atom, day by day, class by class, a steady trudge with a few stumbles here and there, adjusting, trying, bonding, failing, releasing, trying again, at home, at school, and at church, until the newness started to fade, friendships got stronger, and I didn't cry five out of seven days a week.

Now I was down to only three out of seven.

Here are some January Highlights:

Highlight #1

I got a C on my first chemistry test. I was okay with that, but determined to do better. Mr. Voss handed me my test paper, and he did not smile. Ben made an A+, but Mr. Voss didn't smile when he handed Ben his test, either.

Highlight #2

Colton was talking to me more on Wednesdays during Chemistry, when we did our experiments and were free to move

around the room and talk. He told me my hair looked nice. And he came over to my lunch table to chat almost every day. Okay, he mainly talked to Reese, but he flirted outrageously with all of us. So lame, but we didn't care. He was adorable.

Highlight #3

Marla and I were becoming pretty good friends, though we hadn't had the Jackson Talk yet. We met at the gym on Saturday mornings (Harrison put me on his family membership plan) and she started sitting with me and my lunch crew at school.

Marla made sure to leave the gym on Saturdays before Jackson and I did, however, always insisting that she didn't need a ride home. Lauren and I talked whenever she came over to hang out with James, and we were confused. Maybe Marla wasn't really interested in Jackson?

We agreed to bide our time.

Highlight #4

Jefferson showed signs of bonding with Mom. He let her help him with his homework, and he would snuggle up to her on the couch at night, when Mom read out loud to him and Riley before bedtime. They were reading through the Magic Treehouse series, and they all seemed to love them, even though Jefferson hated to read on his own and struggled in his classes. He still called Mom "Miss Karen" though, like a polite little Texas boy. I didn't blame him. I could never call Harrison "Dad", but maybe Riley would, someday. It would make him so happy, and I thought it would make Riley happy, too.

Highlight #5

I started going to our church's youth group meetings on Wednesday nights, with James, Lauren and Jackson. I would usually sit by Mia, and was getting to know the other kids better. I liked the short talks that Kevin, the youth minister, gave, though sometimes my mind was a million miles away, thinking about homework, or Davis, or how chipped my nail polish was.

I wasn't really close friends with anyone at church yet. I had this feeling that if I were friends with someone who really loved Jesus, it would be a different kind of friendship...stronger, more

real, *better* somehow. So maybe I was cautious about making that kind of friendship, not because I didn't want it, but because I was afraid of being let down. Silly, unrealistic? Probably.

But I held back.

Highlight #6

Ben continued to tutor me on Fridays, and he sometimes stayed for dinner afterwards, on nights when James didn't have a home basketball game. On those nights, he sometimes went with us to the game, and we would all go for pizza afterwards.

Mom and Harrison liked Ben because he was polite and seemed to enjoy talking to them, and Riley and Jefferson liked him because he joked around with them and played with us in some mean UNO tournaments. James, Lauren, and Jackson already knew him and had plenty of things to talk about.

I liked him because we discussed pretty much anything. He knew about Davis now, and Sarah and my old life, and he knew about Jackson's crush on Marla. He knew the color-code system for my notebooks, and I knew that he did not like snakes, though he admitted he would have to treat them as patients one day, as a vet.

"I should treat *you* to pizza next week," he said, as he was getting ready to leave, the last Friday night of January. "You've been feeding me all this great food and I owe you."

"You mean, treat my whole family? That's a lot of pizza to buy," I warned him jokingly, nervously.

He zipped up his jacket slowly, keeping his chin down. "Actually, I meant just you and me," he said slowly. "Have you tried Ziti's pizza, near the school?"

I hesitated. My heart was actually skipping a beat, two beats, and I felt flustered. I thought of Highlight #2 (Colton) and my small flicker of hope (Davis). Was Ben asking me on a date, and did I really want him to ask me on a date? What if this endangered our tutor-pupil relationship? Would it complicate our comfortable friendship? What if-

"We could actually get a group together and go, if you want," Ben suggested, looking up. His expression was friendly, but guarded. "Let's ask some friends from school. Ziti's is a big hang-out around here."

My heart stopped skipping, and I now felt like a deflated balloon. Ben did not just ask me on a date. He was my friend, offering me a meal. I didn't have to feel all this anxiety over endangering our relationship. That was such a good thing. What a relief.

I was slightly, unexpectedly, disappointed.

"Sure!" I managed to sound cheerful. "That sounds great!"

It did sound good to hang out with a group of friends. That was best. That was why I considered this incident, technically, a January highlight.

Though clearly, it was not an emotional one.

Chapter 16

Secrets

Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough.

~ George Washington Carver,
American agricultural chemist

“Marla, do you even *like* Jackson?” I’ve had limited success with cannonball questions, but as we sipped our smoothies at the gym snack bar, this first Saturday of February, the question just ran out of my mouth and headed for the conversational pool. I decided I was done biding my time on this issue.

“Define *like*.”

Ohhh-kay, we would start at the simplest level. “Do you *mind* being around him?” I asked patiently.

“Well, of course I don’t *mind*! Jackson is always so nice!” Marla said brightly.

“Then do you like him, as in having a *crush* on him?” I continued, insistently.

“Why are you asking me this?” Marla responded, her voice changing instantly from pleasant to irritable.

Ahh, answering a question with a question, a great evasion tactic that I was familiar with. Hmmm.

I leaned forward, facing her across our table. “What would you say if I told you that Jackson has secretly loved you for years?”

Marla choked on her smoothie, which wasn't pretty. She wiped some strawberry foam from her chin and used a napkin to dab at the liquid that got on her shirt. "That's ridiculous, Casey. Why would you say something like that?" Her response was angry, and I detected an edge of hurt in her voice.

"I'm not teasing you, Marla, I wouldn't do that," I said gently, at the same time remembering that James specifically told me not to interfere. Well, at least Jackson didn't give me any warnings.

Marla stared at me, the pain showing in her eyes. "Guys like Jackson don't notice girls like me," she said flatly. "We can be their friends, but not their girlfriends."

"Like how you're friends with Colton?" I asked, recalling her long-term friendship with him. "And what do you mean, girls like you?"

"Like with Colton, yeah. And you know exactly what I mean by girls like me. Ordinary, plain, not popular. We get overlooked." Marla's words were bitter, but her tone was not. She just sounded tired. "I wish I was strong enough not to care about my looks. I do. I try to be, but more often I just wish I was prettier."

That word again, "overlooked". I never thought much about that word, but now it was one of the loneliest, saddest words I had ever heard.

"Marla." I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to lecture her on how she should be happy exactly the way she is and how truly beautiful she is and how cute guys can be so shallow. I then had the good sense to shut my mouth. Because even though all those things were true, my friend did not need a lecture.

I fervently wished I could undo my cannonball and erase the last few moments of our conversation, but I could not. And then, I felt a flutter of alarm.

"Marla, you said once that you don't have a crush on Colton. But, *do* you? I mean, do you wish *he* would notice you as a potential girlfriend?"

Marla didn't answer right away, and my alarm grew. What

if Marla liked Colton, and not Jackson? Jackson was crazy about this girl!

Marla finally answered, slowly. "I've always had a little crush on Colton, probably. But honestly, it would be really weird if he asked me out, because we're more like brother and sister. Not that I would tell him no," she said with a little smile. "And you know what? He always tells me I look nice. He always notices when I'm around, just not in a girlfriend kind of way. He's really a nice guy, even though he's such a flirt." Her smile got bigger. "Sorry I freaked out on you there. But seriously, why did you say that about Jackson?"

I copied Marla by using her evasion technique, answering a question with a question. "If Jackson was to ask you out, would you say yes?"

Marla narrowed her eyes at me and checked her cell phone. "It's time for me to leave. My mom is in the parking lot." She took one last slurp of her smoothie and stood up.

"Marla, please, just one more minute," I begged her, trying to keep my voice down so nobody else could hear what I was about to say. "I'm sorry I handled this conversation so badly, but I'm not playing around with you at all. Jackson really likes you, and he's afraid to ask you out. It's the truth, honest. He doesn't know I'm telling you all this, but he's liked you for years."

I thought I would be like Santa Claus delivering a big fancy present to this girl, but instead Marla looked like the Grinch had just spooked her.

At least she sat down again, though.

"Is this some kind of joke?" she whispered angrily. "Because I was just very transparent with you and it would really hurt if you're messing with me."

Okay, fine, this girl needed a lecture after all.

"Marla, Marla, Marla." I didn't intend to go all Brady Bunch, but, there it was. "I am telling you the *truth*. I haven't known Jackson as long as you have, but I can tell you he's the real deal, an honest, nice guy. He looks at you like you're the most beautiful girl on this planet. And you ARE beautiful, by the way. Who decides what beautiful is, anyway? TV? Magazines? High school boys?" I didn't really know where I was

going with this, so I took a deep breath and tried to collect my thoughts.

And then I noticed that Marla didn't appear to be listening to me anyway. She was looking past me, her eyes soft. I turned around to see who she was looking at, hoping it was Jackson, but there was no one there, just a wall.

But whatever, or whoever, she saw, at least in her mind, was making her smile. Her cell phone buzzed, and she snapped out of her trance, glancing at her phone. "That's my mom," she said, and stood up again. "What you just said... thanks. I've got to go."

I felt defeated, and slumped in my chair. I didn't know whether I had helped Jackson's cause, or hurt it.

Then Marla hesitated. "Next Saturday maybe I could-maybe you could..." She stopped, ducked her head, and blushed.

I saw the blush, and sat up straighter, encouraged. "Would I- Jackson and I- give you a ride home from the gym and maybe stop for lunch on the way? Is that what you're asking?"

Marla looked at me, alarmed, and started shaking her head no, but then she stopped and smiled, ruefully. She nodded, slowly, up and down, and I nodded back at her and gave her two thumbs up, and then we both giggled like the silly junior high girls we still were, on the inside.

And I had to admit that Marla, standing in front of me with no makeup, messy hair, a pimple starting to develop on her chin, and wearing sweaty work-out clothes, actually looked very pretty as she giggled, certainly not a girl to be overlooked. What happened? Did she change in the last few minutes, or was I seeing her differently?

Maybe knowing that someone loves you makes you feel beautiful. No, maybe it actually just *makes* you beautiful.

So. Deep.

"You've never told us about the things Jackson likes," Reese complained, jiggling the corner of my chips bag good-naturedly, at lunch the next Tuesday. "You've had plenty of time to find out, come onnnn, Casey!"

I had been putting off my lunch crew for weeks now, hoping

they would forget about my promise of a Jackson Report. It was true that I never really interviewed Jackson with my fifty carefully thought-out questions, but I certainly knew a lot more about him than Reese, Mia, and the others realized. Since Marla had been eating lunch with us at our table, though, I had dodged the subject.

"What do you mean, the things that Jackson likes?" Marla asked quietly, taking a sip from her water bottle. No one knew about our gym conversation last Saturday, but Marla still had that pretty glow, in my opinion, and I didn't want to mess that up.

"It's nothing," I reassured her hastily. "I was going to interview my stepbrothers to find out some basic information and"-

"You mean you're going to let us know what kind of *girls* Jackson likes!" Abby interrupted, playfully. "Yeah, come on, Casey, tell us what you know!"

I almost snickered then, because if I told them the truth, that Jackson was in love with Marla of all people, they would probably all faint. And I wanted to protect Marla's shaky confidence in herself. So I looked at Marla, smiled, and shrugged. "Well, I know he likes girls who are... *real*. He doesn't like girls who come on too strong."

Reese, Abby, and Mia looked kind of blank. "What do you mean exactly, by *real*?", Reese asked. They all looked at me expectantly, except for Marla, who seemed completely focused on eating lunch.

"I mean, you know, *real*. Like, not afraid to be themselves, not too worried about make-up and wearing the latest fashions and stuff." Ouch, I hoped I did not just insult Marla. I gave her a quick glance, but she continued munching calmly on her sandwich.

"Ah'm not afraid to be myself," Reese said defensively. "Ah mean, ah do like make-up and nice clothes, but ah don't think there's anything *wrong* with that."

"Me too!" Abby chimed in.

"I think what Casey means is that he's more interested in a girl's character, right? What a girl is like on the inside, not just

the outside.” Mia sighed dreamily and sat back in her chair. “What a sweetheart.”

“You’re right,” Reese said thoughtfully. “Jackson’s not a partier or a player, we all know that. Wouldn’t it be amazing to be his Juliet?” She pretended to swoon, holding her hand to her forehead, and everyone laughed, including me, but I was a little nervous. Marla was not exactly smiling.

“The Sadie Hawkins Dance is a week from Friday,” Reese announced suddenly. “Maybe one of us should invite Jackson to the dance! Does he already have a date?” she asked me, sounding excited.

I gulped. “Um, I don’t think so... I don’t know for sure.” I was actually 99.9 percent positive that Jackson did not have a date. We used to have a Sadie Hawkins dance at my old school, and I knew it was a dance where girls invited the guys, instead of the other way around.

“Ah’m going to ask him!” Reese declared, and everyone squealed, except for me and Marla. We just stared at Reese, shocked.

And then Reese did it. She flipped her long, beautiful auburn hair over her shoulder, slowly and dramatically. “Why not?” she said gleefully. “Ah can be as real as anyone! By the end of the week, ladies!”, and she raised her water bottle, like she was proposing a toast. Mia and Abby raised their water bottles with her, though not that enthusiastically, and then the bell rang.

I stole another glance at Marla as we all collected our trash to throw away, a little worried. She saw my glance, sighed, and then she did the best thing ever.

She flipped her own hair over her shoulder, not nearly as dramatically as Reese just did, but enough to send a silent signal to me. My admiration for Marla, *The Overlooked*, grew.

It was *on*.

“Let’s ask people we both know. Like how about Marla and Jackson?”

It was Wednesday chemistry lab, our best day to talk in

class, and Ben just asked again about getting a group together to go out for pizza on Friday night. I was standing in front of our table, my back to the front of the room, holding a couple of empty test tubes. Ben was also standing, on the other side of our table, facing me and checking his lab notes before we proceeded.

Ben looked up from his notes, and wagged a finger at me. "Planning a little matchmaking?" he teased. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, but what do I know? So who else do we both know? You're always talking to Reese, want to ask her too?"

"Uhhh.. ." I was about to tell Ben that Reese planned to invite Jackson to the Sadie Hawkins Dance, and I didn't want to give her an opportunity, so no, I could not ask Reese. "Actually"-

"Did ah hear my name?" Reese asked innocently from behind me, and I jumped about a foot in the air, clinking the test tubes together.

"Sorry, sorry," Reese laughed, grabbing my arm to steady me. "We just had a question about this experiment that we thought Ben could help us with. So are ya'll talking about me, hmmm?"

We?

I realized that Marla and Colton were right behind Reese. Colton had become Reese and Marla's third lab partner, since no one else had filled the empty seat beside him so far this semester.

"Casey and I are getting a group together to go to Ziti's on Friday night," Ben explained. "Want to come?"

"All of us?" Colton asked, like he was actually interested.

"Sure, if you want," Ben replied. "And"-

Stop right there, stop right there, don't say it, don't say it. I was hoping my Jedi mind-trick skills had improved and I could send Ben a clear, silent message.

"Casey might invite her stepbrother Jackson, too."

He said it. I was a Jedi fail. I closed my eyes and sighed.

"Ooh, that sounds great!" Reese immediately said in a happy voice. "Ah'm in!"

"I might be free, too," Colton said hesitantly. "I'll let you

know, okay?" He probably has a hot date already, I thought, although he did spend an awful lot of time talking to Reese.

So, Marla? I turned around and caught her eye. "Come with us, Marla!" I said urgently. "You *have* to!" I sounded rather commanding, so I tried to tone it down. "It'll be fun," I added weakly.

"She'll come," Colton said, surprisingly, putting his arm around Marla. "And I'll come too, actually. I think my strenuous social calendar is free."

"You can't answer for me, you goon," Marla retorted, shrugging off Colton's arm, but she was smiling. "I guess I'll go, too, but it's *my* decision."

"Maybe we should plan for a week from Friday, instead", I suggested hurriedly. Mr. Voss was starting to make his way to our table, noticing our little cluster huddled together, obviously seriously discussing the chem experiment. At least I hoped that's what he thought.

"Why?" Reese responded in a whisper. She had noticed Mr. Voss too, getting closer. "Besides, a week from Friday is the Sadie Hawkins Dance." She raised her voice several notches. "Thanks so much for your help, guys, we've got this! Hey, Mr. Voss!"

Mr. Voss paused by our table, looked pointedly at the classroom clock, then back at us. No words necessary. Reese, Colton, and Marla returned meekly to their table.

"Revealing a few chemistry secrets, Miss Campbell?", he inquired mildly.

"You have no idea, Mr. Voss." I sighed heavily. "No idea."

Me:

Maybe I SHOULD reveal some chemistry secrets. Maybe I need to tell Reese that Jackson likes Marla, so Reese won't invite Jackson to the dance.

Sarah:

Do it!!!

Me:

But I noticed that Colton seems to look out for Marla, and Marla admitted she might have a thing for Colton.

Sarah:

So marla likes colton??

Me:

Yes and no. The thing is though, when Reese said she was going to invite Jackson to the dance, Marla flipped her hair.

Sarah:

She flipped her hair??

Me:

YES. Which I thought meant that she is planning to fight for Jackson.

Sarah:

Wait go back I don't get the hair flip thing

Me:

NVM I just don't know what to do now. This pizza night could be a fiasco.

Sarah:

I wish I could sit at a table next to your group and just spy on you guys haha!!!

Me:

Yeah, it's all haha when you're not part of the group.

I had to smile, though. I got Sarah's point - this did sound like a ridiculous teen movie plot, and not even that exciting. I was probably making a big deal out of nothing. What will be, will be. I couldn't control everyone's decisions, or manipulate things into happening, or not happening, in people's lives. Good grief, I couldn't even manage my own life that successfully.

Ben:

So you really want to change our Ziti's night to a week from Friday?

Me:

No, it's okay, this Friday is fine.

Ben:

Good. Is Jackson coming?

Me:

I haven't asked him yet. He might already have plans. I bet he has plans!!

Ben:

He won't be too busy when he knows Marla's coming.

I thought about Colton's arm around Marla, and Reese's plan to ask Jackson to the dance, and I reversed my minutes-ago decision to not manipulate.

Of *course* I was going to manipulate.

Me:

I'll make sure he's busy. Will explain all later, goodnight.

Ben:

I will never understand the female mind.

* * *

Me:

You've got to invite Jackson to the SH dance before Reese does on Friday. He'll say yes to her because he's too shy and too nice to say no and he has no idea you would go out with him.

Marla:

I don't like dances. I don't really want to go anyway.

Me:

But you flipped your hair!! I know that you know what I'm talking about! Don't let Reese take your guy!

Marla:

LOL, my hair flip was a statement, I guess. And Jackson's not my guy.

Me:

You're right, he's not YET. But YOU can make it happen!

Marla was giving me a headache. I had done my part to build her confidence and make the path to a romance with Jackson as clear as day, and she resisted me all the way. Oy vey!

I shrugged it off, put my phone down, and checked to make sure Ry was asleep in her bed across the room before I climbed out of bed and knelt beside it. I didn't think I actually had to kneel before I pray, but it helped me focus. Lying in bed, I always had about 22.8 zillion things racing around in my brain, but when I knelt it was only about 1 zillion. So I had started praying regularly about a few of those zillion things that floated to the top, each night.

Hey, Jesus, thanks for being with me today and for the friends I've made at school. Help things to work out between Jackson and Marla.

I thought about it.

Or between Marla and Colton. And if that's the case, please help Jackson to not have his heart broken! That would stink!

I thought some more.

And help my own heart, when I think about Davis. And Jefferson's heart, when he thinks about his mom. And James' heart, when he thinks about going away to college without his girlfriend. Good grief, we're all just a mess.

I ended the prayer the way I had been taught, all my life.

May Your will be done. Amen.

I climbed back into bed, snuggled under the covers, and thought about it. What was God's will anyway? For all His kids to be happy? Protected? To never have problems? Or to be martyrs and die horrible deaths, like some of the heroes in the Bible?

I shuddered. Did I really want God's will to be done? Wouldn't my own will be safer? Thinking about this would drive me crazy. So, I gave up and focused on the one sure thing I did know. Actually, two things.

I can trust God with my secrets.

And I was pretty sure he already knew every single one of my 22.8 zillion thoughts.

Chapter 17

Asking

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.

~ Marie Curie,

Polish-French physicist and chemist

Mr. Voss had this quote written on the board this morning as our bell-ringer, with the instruction to copy it and think about it. Our big test was on Friday, tomorrow, so I'm sure his intention was to get our study vibe on, and not fear the test.

I was nervous about it, yeah, but also pretty confident. My last test score was a solid, middle-of-the road B thanks to Ben, and I was aiming for an A tomorrow. I was caught up now, I feared chemistry less, and my need for a tutor was over, though neither Ben nor I had mentioned that yet. I enjoyed our study sessions/Friday night dinners/Uno tournaments and I had to admit I was not ready for them to end. I was sure Ben could think of a hundred things he'd rather do on a Friday night, though. Maybe he was just being polite and supportive, and was waiting for me to end our student-tutor relationship.

Although, no one was forcing him to hang out with us after tutoring, I reminded myself.

I glanced furtively at Ben, sitting next to me. He was

leaning back in his chair again, arms crossed, eyes closed. Did the guy not get enough sleep? Ever?

I finished writing the quote and forced myself to “think” about it, twiddling my pen with my fingers, and of course my thoughts started spinning around in several directions. They finally settled on what bothered me the most this morning- my private ponderings from last night.

Nothing in life is to be feared...

So what did I fear this morning? I feared God’s will.

Was it God’s will for my dad to die and leave behind his wife and two young daughters, who needed him so badly?

For the J’s mother to leave them on purpose, and break up their family, and their hearts?

And for me to move away from my hometown, and my best friend, and my boyfriend?

...it is only to be understood.

But how could I possibly understand God’s will? Did anybody really know from day to day what God wanted them to do? Or how to plan for the next ten years? The next ten days? Or how about the next ten minutes??

I mean, I was talking to God a lot more now, and He wasn’t talking back very clearly, if you know what I mean. Shouldn’t He be making this a lot easier?

I felt indignant with God, right now, and a little guilty. Would He zap me with lightning for being so fresh? I didn’t really believe that, but still, I stole a nervous glance out the classroom window. The skies were clear.

The questions bothered me all morning, and I didn’t expect easy answers. So I was shocked when it was Reese who said something at lunch, out of the blue, that got my attention and made me sit up straight in my chair.

“Ah want to thank you for telling us about how Jackson likes girls who are real,” she said earnestly to me, her hazel eyes sparkling. “Ah’ve really wanted to understand him better, to know what he likes and stuff. The things he’s *looking* for.”

The things he’s looking for.

Those were the words that stopped me from chewing my

sandwich, the words with the power to still my hand as it reached for the chips.

How do you *ever* know what someone's will is? What they're looking for or what they want? By worrying and wondering and being afraid to find out?

Of course not. You research! You ask! You get to know the person. You spend time with that person. Just like I did with the J's. Just like a high school girl researches a crush!

I sneaked another peek out the window, and the sky was still sunny, like it was in first period. I smiled this time, though, and I'm pretty sure God was smiling right back at me, hopefully not saying "Well, *duh*, Casey."

So I was sitting there, smiling at the window, having a moment with Jesus, when finally I became aware that Reese was still talking. Actually, she was questioning me very impatiently. So much for my listening skills.

"Casey, have you heard me at all?? Ah asked Jackson to the dance and he said YES!"

I turned my attention back to my lunch crew, slowly. Everyone was looking at me, puzzled. I guess I missed all their reactions to Reese's news, probably squealing and congratulations, or maybe jealous looks? I searched Marla's face, and it was perfectly expressionless, though she was pale, and her glow had taken a hit.

"I'm... sorry, I was thinking about something else," I stammered. I was genuinely shocked. "I thought... when did you have a chance to ask him? I thought you were going to ask him on Friday?"

Reese sighed deeply in a long-suffering way, rolled her eyes and started re-explaining everything to me. "So, ah got to school a little early and made sure to find Jackson before the bell rang. Ah know where he usually hangs out, with all the jocks. Ah told him ah had something personal to talk about, and his buddies all nudged him and laughed and all that crap, but he was so sweet and he walked over with me to somewhere private and he, like, never said a WORD! He is just so adorably SHY! So, ah just kept it simple and asked him if he would please go the dance with me, and at first he said he

couldn't miss James' basketball game that night, but ah reminded him that there IS no game that night! Ah had already checked!"

Reese drew a deep breath and kept going, rapid-fire, forgetting all about eating, apparently. "Ah was getting embarrassed, because he wasn't saying YES right away, and ah think he noticed that ah was getting sad because he finally DID! He said YES!"

She did a cute, happy, sitting-in-her-chair dance, twirling her arms and rocking back and forth sideways. The rest of us just sat there, not hearing the music. I searched for the right words that wouldn't hurt anyone.

"That's great news for you, Reese," I offered sincerely, putting on my best fake smile. "You really made things happen."

"Oh YEAH, oh YEAH," Reese said in a singsong voice, still chair-dancing. "So anyway, thanks again! And by the way, he didn't know anything about our pizza outing on Friday, so I told him you'll tell him all about it."

Oh yeah, the pizza outing, which now sounded so appealing with the current cast of characters. I betcha a hundred bucks that Jackson would definitely make sure he was busy.

"Ah hope with all my heart that this will be just the first of many dates with Jackson! And by the way, ah told him ah would never have found the *nerve* to invite him to the dance, if it wasn't for *you*, Casey. Thanks again, so much!" Reese put her hand over mine and gave it a little thank-you squeeze. There was actually a tear in her eye.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. She told him *that*?

Marla hardly said two words to me during P.E., and when Jackson was totally quiet and unsmiling on the drive home from school, I didn't dare mention Reese's name.

At dinner, he was noticeably less cheerful. When it was my turn to say something about my day, I decided to hope for the best, extend a verbal olive branch and send a subtle message just to him. "My highlight of the day was, I'm glad I've made friends and have plans with them tomorrow night! And... I'm so glad that my friends like my new brothers and... want to include them!"

James looked at me questioningly, but didn't comment. Jackson was stone-faced.

His turn was next, and he cleared his throat. "I'm going to see James play BASKETBALL tomorrow night," he stated in a very firm voice.

"Cool, bro! But you know it's an away game, right?" James asked.

"Oh, I remember all right. It's PERFECT," Jackson said calmly, his voice rising even louder. He looked coldly at me, and I cringed. I had never seen Jackson this mad. In fact I had never seen him angry at *all*. Mom, Harrison and James looked from Jackson to me, sensing the tension, but they didn't comment.

I guess if anyone could screw things up and make the biggest teddy bear in the world angry, obviously it was me, Casey Campbell. To be fair, I didn't think I deserved the blame for Jackson's Sadie Hawkins' date. The boy had to learn to disappoint a pretty girl with puppy-dog eyes. I actually started to feel annoyed with *him*, now that I was thinking this through. Didn't he have a backbone? Why was he mad at *me*?

I sullenly finished my meal, getting more and more worked up. I would confront Jackson the first chance I got, I decided self-righteously, right after dinner clean-up!

Then, uninvited, another thought came to me, calm and clear.

Maybe you need to do a little listening before you do any more talking.

Now, I *knew* that thought was not my own. I would never tell myself that! So God was talking to me *now*?

Please.

Okay, calm down, I told myself reluctantly. I'll wait. And I'll even start my God's Will Research this weekend. I promise, I'll start listening. But I can't listen tonight, since I have to study for my chemistry test, and the pizza outing is tomorrow night, and-

Now.

I thought of Jackson's anger, and Marla's disappointment, and Reese's hopefulness for a romance that wouldn't happen.

And I felt the beginning of a headache.

Okay, *fine*. Five minutes, no more. Who knew? Maybe a five-minute investment into learning more about what God wanted, tonight, would save me from more gloom and doom tomorrow.

But, how on earth would I start?

I found Mom after clean-up, in the game room grading papers as usual. Harrison was there, too, helping Jefferson and Ry with homework.

"Mmmm-hmmmm?" Mom said absent-mindedly, her reading glasses on, writing a comment on somebody's essay. I hoped it was positive.

"Mom, I need to understand the will of God. I've got about five minutes, tops, so can you point me in the right direction?"

Harrison snickered. Mom looked over at him and frowned. "That was a serious question, Harry," she said reprovingly, but there was a smile in her voice. I rolled my eyes. Hey, if God could create the entire world in six days, surely He could let one person have a glimpse of His will in six minutes. Possibly five for a desperate seeker?

Harrison was still chuckling, and Riley and Jefferson were smiling, too, though I doubt they got the joke. "Sorry, Case," he said apologetically, sobering up. "It's just that most of us spend our whole lives thinking about that question, and you're going to figure it out in five minutes?" He shook his head wryly. "If anyone can, though, I'm betting on you."

"It's a journey, all right," Mom added, "but God wants us to know Him. He doesn't make things hard."

"I agree," Harrison said. "It's us, people, who complicate things. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He never changes."

"I know that verse!" I said, excited. "I don't know where it is in the Bible, but I've heard it."

"Well, that's where to start," Mom said. "There's your five-minute start. Read God's love letter to us, where He tells us what He's like, and what He wants. Read the Bible."

"I suggest you start with the book of John, Casey," Harrison said, looking thoughtful. "Read, or listen at your own pace. You

don't have to read a whole chapter at once. Just read, and think, and talk to God about it."

I forgave Harrison for his previous laughter. I probably did sound kind of arrogant. "Thanks, guys, as you were. I'll give it a shot." I saluted them playfully, and went to my room, determined to dust off my old Bible that I was given in fourth grade.

I found it on a shelf in the large walk-in closet I shared with Ry, and then I hesitated. I remembered all the "thees" and "thous" that were hard to get through, which is why this book was so dusty in the first place, and I wished I had a more easy to read version.

That's what the internet is all about, Casey, I reminded myself triumphantly, and in seconds I had the book of John pulled up on my phone, with lots of translations to choose from. I tried the first version that popped up.

Five minutes and no more, I have to study, I promised myself. I skimmed over the first few verses of the first chapter, and then read it again more carefully. I didn't understand it all, but the beauty of the words drew me in.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Light. Seeing clearly.

Darkness. Not knowing where to go or what to do.

So the light wins, every time? It was a lot to think about.

I grabbed my chemistry book and gathered my notes, leaving the room to go study in the kitchen, so Riley could go to bed pretty soon.

Please, shine some floodlights into my brain tonight, I prayed on the way, with a rueful sigh. *And in all the dark places in my life, where I'm not sure what to do. Which is, actually, a whole lot of places.*

It was a start.

Chapter 18

Hopeful

Jimmy: There's a 95 percent chance it'll work

Cindy Vortex: And the other 5 percent?

Jimmy: We all get blown up.

From the movie "Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius"

The Friday night pizza outing was a hit.

We were an unlikely group - Reese the gorgeous, Marla the overlooked, Colton the ladies' man, Ben the chemistry whiz and wanna-be vet, and me, the new girl. But there I went again, summing people up. I was done with that.

And honestly, I no longer felt so "new", anyway. I guess getting involved in everyone's business took care of that, yep.

But, I was not stressed tonight, like I predicted. Instead, I was learning that Colton hated scary movies and can scream like a girl (or so Marla said) and that Marla can gargle the national anthem (or so Colton said). I was seeing that Reese had some "mom" traits ("did everyone get enough napkins? Need any refills?"). I was affirming that Colton flirted as naturally as breathing, and made all three of us girls feel special.

And I was learning that every time I glanced Ben's way- and I did that frequently- he was glancing my way, too. He smiled, and I would get this warm feeling in my stomach. He didn't flirt, and he talked to everyone, and I chatted with everyone, too, and

didn't pay him any special attention, but it was still like we were... bonded, somehow.

Good friends.

Colton's question took me by surprise. "So, ladies, who have you invited to the Sadie Hawkins' Dance, hmmm? Not you, Reese, I know you've snagged Mr. Dreamboat," he said, rolling his eyes. "You've mentioned it about a thousand times already." He didn't seem at all bothered, however. Reese giggled and shrugged daintily.

Marla and I looked at each other, and Marla's expression turned a bit bleak. She seemed fine today during school, not mad at Reese or me, and she seemed to be enjoying herself tonight, but she had a lot of experience in hiding her feelings. I did, too.

I answered Colton's question for both of us and tried to toss the conversational ball somewhere else. "Oh, we're not going," I said casually. "Hey, who was Sadie Hawkins anyway? I wonder if she ever realized all the torture she would put generations of high school girls through?"

"But it's not torture, Casey," Reese said, aghast. "It's so much *fun*! You should go! You, too, Marla!"

Colton snorted. "You think high school girls have it bad? Try being a guy, having to ask out girls and face rejection all the time, not just for one dance."

"Oh, please, when's the last time a girl turned down a date with you, Mr. Big Guy on Campus?", Marla asked. "And try being the girl who's waiting forever on a guy to do the asking!" I winced, sure that she was referring to Jackson.

We all started arguing about who had it worse in the dating scene, the guys or the girls, and whether it was silly for a girl to wait for a guy to do the asking out, and I was relieved, thinking that Colton would forget his original question.

Maybe he did. But Reese did not.

"Have ya'll been asked to the dance?" Reese asked, looking at Ben and Colton. "Because if you have *not*, then *ladies*, here are two somewhat decent men just *waiting* to be asked."

Ouch. Incredibly. Awkward.

"Somewhat decent?" Colton repeated, pretending to be

hurt. "Hey, I've been asked by a couple of girls I've been out with before. I told them I already had a date."

"But you don't?" Reese was askance.

"I will," Colton said nonchalantly. "No big deal."

While Colton was sharing his deceitfulness, I thought about Reese's suggestion. And, I admitted to myself that I actually *would* like to ask-

"Let's all go together. The four of us. Or the six of us, if Reese and Dreamboat want to join us. We can all go as friends, and just have fun. No pressure."

The others looked at Ben, and started nodding at his suggestion. Well, not Reese, who was shaking her head. "Not me!" she said firmly. "No offense, but Jackson probably doesn't want to go to a dance in a group with his sister." I was sure Reese didn't want to be in a group with his sister, either, but I didn't blame her. She had put forth some effort into getting her date.

"You in?" Ben asked me, softly.

I hesitated, looking at Marla for guidance. She nodded and smiled, then flipped her hair, ever so slightly.

Good girl.

I looked at Ben, and our gazes connected again. I melted.

Just friends. No pressure.

"I'm in," I replied.

I sat on the steps of our front porch, later that night, looking up at the stars, waiting for Jackson to get home from the away game. A car drove up, Jackson got out, called out see-ya-laters to his friends inside the car, and walked up to the house.

He stopped when he saw me, sighed, then sat down beside me on the steps, stretching out his legs, hands behind him, propping him up while he looked up at the stars with me. We just sat there awhile, with no words.

"I have a lot to tell you, Jackson," I said, finally breaking the silence. "I've thought about this, and I just want to get it all out and say it and be honest. If we're going to be real friends, much less family, we have to do that." I took a deep breath, and looked up again at the stars.

Keep focused on the light, Case.

"I'm sorry for interfering in your love life. You trusted me with your feelings about Marla and I- I admit I didn't keep it to myself, and that's awful. In fact, it's horrible."

I paused, waiting for Jackson to say something, but he didn't. I swallowed and kept going. "I never told Reese to ask you on a date. I knew she wanted to, but I had no idea and, well, I don't think that was my fault. And you didn't have to say you would go, you know. You could have said no, even though it had to be awkward. You're just too nice, sometimes, Jack, and it doesn't"-

"Don't call me Jack," he interrupted, in a growly voice.

"Sorry! Jackson! And"-

"HOLD the phone a sec, back up. WHO did you talk to about MARLA?"

I closed my eyes. I had to tell him, I knew. Get everything into the light. But I was sure the light was going to burn me on this one.

"Marla," I said faintly. "I told Marla you like her."

There was absolute silence for what felt like a whole five minutes, even though I knew it was really only about ten seconds. I braced myself, because I wasn't done.

"I told her that you've liked her for years," I continued.

"WHAT?"

"And she had a hard time believing that. She doesn't have a lot of self-confidence. But she's interested in you, Jackson! She wants to go to lunch with us tomorrow when we leave the gym!"

"WHAT?"

"And just because you're taking Reese to the dance next Friday doesn't mean you're committed to her beyond that, you know! It's just one date, and you never have to date her again! You can ask out Marla tomorrow! You could even take her a single red rose, or something, and give it to her at the gym." My mind was racing with possibilities.

Jackson had changed position and was now hunched over, knees drawn up, his head down, arms crossed, and he started shaking. Good grief, was he that angry? Or *crying*? Or was he having a seizure or something? I looked over at him uncertainly. "Jackson?" I touched his arm.

Jackson looked up, and I noted the big grin on his face. The boy was *laughing*.

I was relieved, and puzzled, and tried to figure out how I got Jackson to laugh. Whatever I did, I needed to remember it.

Jackson chuckled openly now, shaking his head. "HOOO-WEE, Case, you are a HOT MESS."

Ohh- kay. If being a hot mess is what got Jackson to laugh, I would have him in stitches the rest of our lives.

"Next thing you're gonna say is, everything you did, you did for ME. Am I RIGHT?" He looked at me, and I nodded, chagrined. He nodded back at me, not smiling quite so much now, though it wasn't easy to see in the dark, but at least he didn't seem as mad.

"Listen, Case. I FORGIVE you. And you're RIGHT, no one forced me to say yes to Reese, I own that. But you-YOU are going to stay out of my business. Ya got that, SIS?"

I nodded, repentant, and anxious to have this conversation over with.

"As for tomorrow, let me tell you how THAT'S going to go down."

And he did. He told me, quite clearly, how our Saturday morning was going to go down. It took about two minutes. I agreed meekly, and we shook hands.

The second he was done, I hopped up, more than ready to go inside and text Sarah. Before I opened the front door, however, I paused and turned around.

"Jackson, you can call me 'Sis'. I like that."

Jackson stood up, too, and stretched languidly. "Well, YOU can call me Jack if ya want. I don't really care, I was just messing with ya. All my friends call me Jack. It's just FAMILY that calls me Jackson."

I considered this, and opened the front door.

"Ok, well, goodnight then- *Jackson*."

I almost danced all the way to my room.

Chapter 19

Predicting

Research is so unpredictable. There are periods when nothing works and all your experiments are a disaster and all your hypotheses are wrong."

~ Francis Collins,
American physician-geneticist

Time for a predict-what-happened pop quiz, students! Answers are at the end of the chapter, this time.

The “I’m Dying To Know What Happened” Quiz

Question #1-What went down at the gym on Saturday morning?

A. Jackson went to the gym on Saturday, without me, and ignored Marla.

B. Jackson went to the gym on Saturday, with me tagging along, and we met up with Marla and went together for tacos before giving her a ride home. It was casual, and fun, and not romantic. Marla and I did most

of the talking, but Jackson did make eye contact and manage to smile and speak a few words.

C. Jackson went to the gym, with me tagging along. Then he took me back home a bit early and returned to the gym, where he found Marla and asked if he could take her to lunch. He and Marla had a great time, and he let her know that he hoped they would become more than just friends.

Question #2.What happened at the Sadie Hawkins Dance?

A. Marla let me curl her hair in these soft, pretty waves, and she wore a little bit more make-up than usual. Some guys were checking her out, I noticed.

B. Colton kept us laughing all night, and I think he boogied with every single chick at the dance. Some of their dates weren't too thrilled, but the girls were delighted.

C. Jackson treated Reese like a queen. He didn't dance with anyone else, and he gave her this sweet wrist corsage. Nobody else was wearing corsages, but Reese was thrilled.

D. Ben is a terrible dancer. And I didn't feel like dancing with anyone but him.(Though of course I danced with Colton a couple of times, trying to follow his wacked-out moves, laughing all the time.)

E. All of the above.

Question #3-Who will Jackson wind up with, then?

A. Reese.

B. Marla.

C. I don't know, and I don't care.

D. I don't know, and I will not interfere.I will not.
Nope.

I made a 93 on my Chemistry test, by the way. I didn't scream with excitement or jump up and down like some girls do, when I got my test paper back in class. I've done that before, but no, this time I just stared at that big red A, letting it sink in. I allowed the warm, private feeling of pride, and accomplishment, to take over my heart. I worked so hard for that A. Well, Ben and I did, but mostly me, haha.

I slid my paper over to show my tutor, sitting next to me. Ben grinned, and we fist-bumped.

And then, I reached for the always-available post-its.

"Chem is still not my favorite subject, but I don't loathe it anymore. Thank you for encouraging me to stick with honors chem. And, for letting me be the one to decide."

When the bell rang, I walked to Mr. Voss's desk, handed him the post-it, and walked to the door. I wasn't planning on watching him read it, because that seemed awkward, but I did let all the other students pass in front of me, then allowed myself a quick peek backwards, before I walked through the door myself.

Mr. Voss was looking out the window, my bright green post-it in his hand, as he waited for his next class to start arriving. Nothing unusual there. But there was something a little different, that I had not seen before.

Mr. Voss was smiling.

Answers:

1. **B**
2. **E**
3. **D**

Chapter 20

Potential

*But I think my mistakes became the chemistry for my miracles. I
think that my tests became my testimonies.*

~ T.D. Jakes

Me:

Two most beautiful words in the English
language? Spring break.

Ben:

Summer vacation

Me:

Friday afternoon

Ben:

snow day

Me:

As if we have snow days in Texas! And all of these have something to do with school, lol.

Ben:

blueberry pie

Me:

Check enclosed. I confess I read that somewhere.

Ben:

chocolate cake

Me:

Baby dogs!

Ben:

As in puppies? Lame.

I laughed, still lying in bed on this beautiful spring Saturday morning in March, the first day of Spring Break. Ry had not discovered the joys of sleeping in yet, poor girl, and she was long gone, playing with Jefferson maybe, or watching cartoons upstairs.

I didn't care, as long as she wasn't bothering me.

I checked the time, realizing that I only had half an hour before Jackson and I left for the gym. I rolled over in bed, and headed for the bathroom. All I needed to do was put on some shorts and a t-shirt, and brush this bedhead hair into a ponytail. I had plenty of time to grab some toast or cereal. Marla and I

were planning to swim today, and maybe try to snag a tennis court. Then we had talked about trying the new burger place that just opened, for lunch, if it was okay with Jackson...

I heard the doorbell ring while I was in the bathroom, and a few minutes later, Riley was banging on the bathroom door, calling my name.

"What?" I yelled back, irritated. "Seriously, Ry? Go away!" I started brushing my teeth.

"You've got company, Case!" she said excitedly. "You'll never guess who!"

"Just tell me, Ry.", I said as best I could with a toothbrush in my mouth. Who would be here to see me on a Saturday morning, without texting or calling first?

"I'm not going to tell you, you have to come and see!" She sounded happy, giddy with her secret. I rinsed out my mouth, opened the bathroom door and glared at her.

Riley's expression changed from gleeful to concerned. "Wow, Case, you might want to put on some makeup!"

"I will after I get back from the gym. It would be stupid to put some on now," I replied, brushing past her to look in our closet for my gym bag.

Riley trailed behind me. "Well, okay, but you need to go see him—"

Him?

"CASEY!" I heard Jackson bellow. "SOMEONE TO SEE YOU!"

I sighed. "Come on, who is it, Ry?" I hissed as I hurriedly got dressed and walked out the bedroom door. She just danced behind me happily.

I walked in the living room, and... ..there he was.

Not Ben. Not Colton. Not my grandpa, or uncle, or any other male who I wouldn't mind seeing in this makeup-less, non-glamorous moment.

Instead, it was the one guy I had been half-yearning to see, and yet never wanted to see again.

"Davis?" I squeaked.

"Casey," he said softly, meeting my eyes and looking at me in that way that used to make my knees get wobbly.

My knees were wobbly, all right, but not because of any sparks flying between us. I was beyond shocked.

Davis held out his arms, as if to offer me a hug, and then dropped them awkwardly as he realized that I was not moving toward him. "I thought I would surprise you," he said.

"W-well, you succeeded," I stammered. I couldn't smile. Behind me, Riley giggled.

I would kill her later.

"So, you two are FRIENDS?" Jackson asked, and I jumped a little. I forgot he was still in the room.

"Uh, yeah, I was Casey's boyfriend, before she moved here," Davis replied politely. "I'm Davis. And you are-?"

"I'm her BROTHER." Jackson crossed his arms and looked very forbidding. He knew my ex-boyfriend story, and had obviously decided to be my protector. Anyone who didn't know him would think he looked intimidating, ready for a fight.

Even in my shock, I felt grateful.

"And I'm her other brother," Jefferson informed Davis solemnly, holding out his hand. I had no idea when Jefferson came in on the scene.

"Nice to meet you both," Davis replied, shaking Jefferson's hand, and then we just stood around awkwardly. I had a million questions to ask Davis, privately, and yet I was nervous about being alone with him. And then Mom came in the room.

"Davis! Well, what a surprise!" she exclaimed. She didn't have any problem in giving him a little hug, and she took over the awkward situation expertly. "Have you had breakfast? Or is it almost time for lunch? Anyway, are you hungry? Want something to drink? No? Well, come, sit down and tell us all the news!"

We all sat down and chatted awhile- well, Mom and Davis chatted. Jackson sat resolutely in a chair, arms still crossed and staring Davis down, and Jefferson and Riley stared at him, too, like he was a t-rex skeleton in a museum exhibit. Mom finally put Davis, and me, out of our misery.

"You're going to be late for the gym, Jackson, go!" Mom instructed him. "And Jefferson and Ry, shoo! Give Davis and

your sister some privacy so they can talk! So glad to see you again," she said to him kindly.

"Same to you, Ms. Campbell- I mean, Mrs., umm, I'm sorry, what is your new last name again?"

"FINDLEY", Jackson interrupted, loud and clear. "She's Mrs. FINDLEY."

I covered my mouth to hide my smile, and I noticed Mom doing the same. Jackson looked at me, as if making sure I was okay with him leaving, and I gave him a slight nod. I would survive.

Probably.

When the room cleared, there was silence for a moment. Where do you begin, when someone you have cared so deeply about now seems like a stranger?

Davis spoke first.

"I'm sorry, Casey." He leaned forward on the sofa, elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together. "First of all, I'm sorry if I'm wrecking your Saturday, but I was afraid if I told you I was coming, you would say no. And, I had to see you."

He explained how he got my new address from Sarah, and swore her to secrecy, and how she told him that I might be willing to talk with him face-to-face, and that I wasn't travelling anywhere over my spring break. He told me how he got permission from his parents to make the 200 mile drive, and how he had to promise to drive back home before dark. He told me how much he missed me, and how much he cared about me when we were dating, and how sorry he was that he acted like such a loser, breaking up with me in a text.

"And you asked Sarah out," I reminded him, my voice expressionless, making sure he remembered all of his sins.

"That was stupid, too." He raked his hand through his light brown hair, shaking his head. "I screwed everything up. I was a jerk. Will you forgive me?"

I hesitated. "Do you want to get back together? Is that why you drove all this way?" There I went again, blurting out what was on my mind without thinking it through first.

But, he owed me a true answer.

He had to spell things out.

His shoulders slumped, and he looked at me, the emotions in his eyes mirroring mine. Longing, doubt, confusion, regret, vulnerability.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I still want you in my life. I do know *that*."

When I was dating Davis, I would have summed him up in these ten words or less:

Davis is my cute, fun, popular, athletic boyfriend.

And, after he broke up with me:

Davis is heartless, rude, and never really cared about me.

But, waving to Davis an hour later, as he backed out of my driveway, on his way back to the place I used to call home, I understood him better than I ever did when we were together.

Davis was a seventeen-year-old guy who was just trying to figure things out, like me. He was handsome, and insecure. Self-assured on the outside, and confused a lot on the inside. He was popular and smart, and vulnerable. He made impulsive decisions, some good, some bad. And he wished he lived in the days when you could date different girls without "going" with them, or getting too serious. Without committing to being someone's boyfriend.

"I know a guy who's your soul brother," I told him wryly at that point, thinking of Colton. "Did a time like that ever even exist?"

"Research it," Davis replied, and we managed to grin at each other, like old friends.

Just friends?

I felt sadness when I hugged him goodbye, my head on his shoulder, leaning into him like I used to. He held me carefully, tenderly, and a little too long. "I wish we could go back to the way things were," he whispered into my hair, so softly I almost didn't hear him.

I thought about my mom and Harrison's journey apart, then back together. I thought of Marla, and Reese, and Jackson, and their growing friendships, and all they would have to figure out. I thought about Ben's glances my way, and his quiet friendship,

and my yearning for a little more. Would I go back to the way things were?

I sensed, deep in my heart, that our story, the tale of Davis and me, was not over. But I didn't reply to his whisper. I pretended I didn't hear him, protecting myself.

After all, there was so much potential hurt there.

Yet, so many possibilities.

Sarah:

How are you spending your spring break girl???
Too bad our spring breaks aren't at the same time so you could come see all your exes in east Texas

Me:

LOL, you goon. You will always be my BFF, never an ex.

Sarah:

So you're really not heading for a beach?? Or doing anything fun????

Me:

Oh, I'll have fun.

I was planning to:

1. Decorate my bedroom, finally, and make it feel like home. And yeah, it was Riley's bedroom, too, but I was betting I could get her to go along with my ideas.

Melissa Knight

2. Sleep late, listen to music, hang out with Reese, Marla, and Mia, and go get tacos with James, Lauren, and Jackson.
3. Read more in God's love letter, start a just-for-fun novel, and watch sci-fi movies on Netflix.
4. Try to be cheerful when I helped babysit Riley and Jefferson next Friday and Saturday, when Mom and Harrison went on a newlywed getaway to this sweet little bed and breakfast near the coast.

I had a bit of homework to do for my English class, but that would be no problemo. And, I saved the best for last, although technically, it was first...

...tonight I was going to a youth group party at my church. With Ben. Just the two of us.

Okay, fine, it would be just the two of us for about a five minute stretch on the way to and from the party, in Ben's truck. He was picking up Marla, too, after he picked me up first. James, Lauren, Jackson and Mia were going, and there would be at least fifty other people hanging out, the whole evening. It wasn't a *date*.

But it had potential.

Overall, it looked to me like this would be a pretty good day. A good week.

A good life?

Decent chemistry.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this first book in the **High School 101 Series**! Be sure to keep up with Casey's life in Book Two, *Just The Facts*.

Also, if you will leave a review for *Feelin' the Chemistry* on [Amazon](#) I will greatly appreciate it! Those reviews mean a lot.

One last thing- I am praying for you, that you will get to know the Creator of the stars. Take some time to talk to Him, and never doubt that you are loved.

Books By Melissa Knight

High School 101 Series

#1 Feelin' the Chemistry

#2 Just the Facts

#3 Follow the Signs

