

Follow the Signs

HIGH SCHOOL 101 - BOOK #3

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FIRST EDITION

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Chapter 1

Caution

*Do not be tricked into thinking that there are no crocodiles
just because the water is still.*

- Malaysian Proverb

“Happy Birthday, dear Ri-leeeeeey....”

My little sister, ten years old today, beamed as we finished the song, basking in all the delightful attention.

“Happy Birthday to YOUUUU!”

“And many morrrre, from channel fourrrr...” continued Harrison, my stepdad, ending the song with a flourish. We all applauded, cheering and whistling for Ry.

“Make a WISH! Make it a GOOD one!” Jackson bellowed good-naturedly. My middle stepbrother has never been good at his “inside voice”.

“Blow out the candles, quick! They’re melting all

over the cake!" Jefferson ordered, his eyes wide. I followed his gaze and saw what he meant. Wax was dripping on the chocolate frosting, and for my youngest stepbrother and I, this was an issue. We take our chocolate very seriously.

"Hurry, Ry!" I seconded urgently, leaning forward in my chair at the dining room table.

"I'm *thinking*," Riley said, continuing to take her time. "Okay, I've got it!" She took a deep breath, and then blew hard at the burning candles.

"Success! You got 'em all!" James congratulated her. My oldest stepbrother, about to graduate from high school in less than two weeks, caught my eye and winked. "Not the most hygienic practice anymore, is it?"

"Right?" I agreed, a little concerned as I thought about all those germs that Riley probably blew right onto that frosting. "I guess we should have thought of that ahead of time. But I still want a big piece of cake," I added, just so everyone understood.

Priorities are priorities.

By now, Mom was cutting the cake into pieces, placing them carefully on festive purple paper plates, and we were passing them around the table. "Kids have been blowing out candles for years and I haven't heard yet of anyone getting sick from a birthday cake," she said calmly. "Unless it's from eating too *much* cake, that is." Mom is a high school English teacher, and she usually takes everything in stride.

Plus, I think she has built up a lot of immunity, working with students who come to school sick, who

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don't cover their noses when they sneeze, who sometimes don't wash their hands after using the loo...

I shuddered. Another good reason to never become a teacher.

I looked at my delectable piece of fudgy devil's food cake with milk chocolate frosting, the birthday girl's request and lovingly created by my mother. Well, by my mom armed with a Betty Crocker mix.

I hesitated. Germs or dessert? Potential head cold or chocolate?

"May I have another piece?" I heard Jefferson ask politely.

What? He was already on his second piece? This entire cake was going to disappear within the next few minutes, with the Findley men at the table.

I took a big bite, closing my eyes in bliss and savoring how absolutely amazing it tasted.

Chocolate wins, always.

And Casey Campbell always gets her cake.

Sarah: Wait you gave ry a flashlight??
Why??

Me: That's what she asked for! She wants to read her books under the covers at night. I guess it's a thing. Tonight was just the fam, but Ry's having a birthday party with her friends at the park this Saturday so maybe she'll get more fun presents then.

I smiled as I brushed my teeth, getting ready for bed and thinking about Sarah's reaction to my birthday present for Riley. Sarah is my best friend from my old hometown, and she is definitely a girly girl. Nothing is too pink or too frilly for Sarah, and in her eyes, giving a flashlight as a gift was like giving someone a can of store-brand lima beans for Christmas.

Sarah: have you asked yet???

Me: Not yet, but I will soon, I promise!!
Everything is so hectic right now!

This was no exaggeration, but Sarah's invitation, which she texted me last night, sounded absolutely, totally, completely irresistible. There was no way Mom would or could say no.

No. Way.

"No way." James' voice was calm, but forceful.

The rest of us were simply in shock. I sat frozen, my fork lifted halfway to my mouth, trying to process what Harrison had just said.

There was silence for a moment, and then Mom spoke hesitantly. "Harry, maybe you and the boys want to

discuss this privately, after all? We're almost through with dinner."

It was Thursday night, a couple of days after Riley's birthday, and we were just finishing up our meal. Everything had been business as usual, going around the table sharing our high points of the day. When it was Harrison's turn, he had only spoken a couple of sentences, very matter-of-factly like it was no big deal, but it had stopped us all in our tracks except for Mom, who I guess had known what was coming.

Harrison ignored James and answered Mom's question. "No, honey, we're a family and we don't have secrets. You and the girls need to be a part of this discussion, at least right now."

"Say it AGAIN," Jackson requested. "To make sure I heard you right."

Harrison took another bite of mashed potatoes, swallowed, and then cleared his throat. "Your mother has been in touch with me recently," he repeated. "She's coming to James' graduation ceremony next weekend, and she has also invited you boys to spend a month with her this summer."

He stopped to let the news sink in again, then continued in a gentle voice. "It's a lot to take in, after so many years of...distance. I know. So think about it, and then you can ask me anything, anything at all. We'll talk. If you want to discuss this privately later, just say so. I'll answer any questions as honestly as I can."

I looked around at the faces of my stepbrothers, each one reflecting a different emotion. James looked angry,

Jackson looked stricken, and Jefferson looked – hopeful? I observed him more closely. He in turn watched his father intently, his dinner clearly forgotten, which was unusual for him.

“May I be excused?” he asked, with no emotion in his voice.

Harrison looked surprised, but nodded. “I’ll be upstairs in a few minutes”, he called after Jefferson, as the ten-year-old picked up his plate and fork, silently carrying them to the kitchen.

“I’m done, too,” James said roughly. He jerked his chair back and stood up. “I’ll be back for kitchen duty, don’t worry,” he added, his voice tight.

“I’ll do it for you, James,” I said to him quickly, and he nodded abruptly before disappearing from the dining room, leaving his dirty dishes on the table. I was willing to do something, anything, to get that look off of James’ face. The last few weeks had been hard enough, with his long-time girlfriend breaking up with him out of the blue, and now this? Spending time with the mother who had abandoned the family years ago, when James was just a young boy, was obviously not on his bucket list.

Jackson was the last brother still seated at the table, and Mom and I tried to pretend like we weren’t watching his every move, which we certainly were. Riley stared at him openly, but she kept eating until she finished her meal.

No one else took a single bite.

“There’s more meatloaf, Jackson! You want some more?” Riley asked brightly, knowing how he liked his

second helpings. She stood up, clearing her place, and took her things to the kitchen without even waiting for an answer. Riley was usually a chatterbox, but tonight even she seemed ready to get away.

Jackson shook his head absently, not even noticing that Riley had left the room. “No, sweetheart,” he said, his voice as quiet as it ever got. “I’m done.” He looked at his dad solemnly, then at Mom, and sighed.

“I’m gonna check on Jeff,” was all he said. He stood up and started to gather the dirty plates and silverware for both him and James.

“I’ll get that!” Mom and I both said at the same time, and Jackson actually smiled at us then.

“Thanks”, he said, putting the stuff back on the table. He walked to the door of the dining room, and then hesitated. He turned around.

“Thanks, MOM,” he said, looking right at her, obviously making a point. “And I love you, Dad.”

Mom looked like she was about to cry.

“Well, I sure know how to clear a room,” was all Harrison had to say.

“Is Ben coming?” Marla asked, as I settled down beside her on the high school stadium bleachers, ready to watch the last varsity baseball game of the season on this balmy Friday night. She was one of the first friends I made at Rayburn High earlier this year, and was also dating Jackson, who had finally gotten the nerve to ask her out recently after crushing on her secretly for years.

It still kind of amazed me. Marla was friendly and nice, but quiet and not the kind of girl the popular or cute guys usually noticed. She herself had told me she often felt overlooked. But she was looking extra nice tonight, though...what was different? I examined her more closely.

“Nice job on your makeup, girl!” I told her, sincerely. “Subtle but classy! Fresh and natural, not overdone”-

“You can stop with the commercial, but thanks,” she interrupted amiably. “Reese has helped me a lot since she did my makeup for prom, and she showed me the best products to use, at least the ones I can afford. I don’t want to look ridiculous, but I don’t think it’s too much. Do *you* think it’s too much?” she asked anxiously, turning her face to me for my inspection.

“Of course not! You look perfect,” I reassured her honestly. “As for Ben, he won’t be here. His FFA club is having some sort of get-together tonight.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot that he’s the FFA president. You’re not going with him?” Marla seemed surprised. “Jackson wouldn’t have minded if you didn’t make it to tonight’s game!” Jackson was on the baseball team, and I had made it to most of the home games this season to cheer him on, usually with my friend Ben by my side.

My *friend*, Ben.

“Why would I go? I *couldn’t* go anyway, because I’m not a member,” I replied reasonably. “And Jackson’s team needs me here. I’m their good-luck charm.”

Marla snorted. “Well, since they’ve lost half their games this season, I would say you need to work on that

good-luck vibe,” she retorted. “Besides that, I happen to know that - well....well, never mind. Look, the game’s already started, so we need to pay attention.” She sat up straighter on the bleacher, her focus now totally on the ball field.

I looked at Marla suspiciously. “You happen to know *what?* What were you going to say?” My feminine I – need-to-know-this-information radar was on full alert.

“Nothing really. Hey, Jackson seemed a little down when I talked to him earlier, is something going on?”

Marla’s diversion tactics were so obvious. “Spill it, Williams, or I won’t get you any snacks tonight.” Marla hated going to the concession stand.

She shrugged one shoulder. “So I’ll ask your little sister to go for me, or Jefferson, no big deal.”

“How bad can this be?” I asked her, starting to feel real concern. “There’s obviously something you think will upset me. What is it?”

The rest of the people on the bleachers stood up and cheered just then, clapping, whistling and giving high fives. Someone on our team must have hit a home run or tagged out a player, but Marla and I were totally oblivious. We remained seated on the bleachers and stared at each other, her expression cautious, and mine a little anxious.

The crowd around us settled back down, still chattering excitedly. Marla sighed.

“I was going to say that I happen to know one of the FFA members, and she told me that tonight isn’t a formal club event. The members are just getting together at

someone's house to hang out, and everyone could bring a date if they wanted. I just assumed that Ben would ask you, that's all. It's really no big deal that he didn't. He probably thought you wouldn't want to miss tonight's game, so he didn't even bring it up."

I relaxed, but only a little. "Ben and I aren't dating, Marla. We're only friends." Friends who held hands once in a while, and friends who felt the sparks fly between them every now and then, but yeah, but we were definitely, positively, just *friends*.

Period.

Marla rolled her eyes but didn't say anything, and we both gazed at the baseball field. The players could have turned bright blue and sprouted antenna, and I still wouldn't have paid them any attention, though. My mind was consumed with what Marla had just told me. Even though we were absolutely just friends, and even though my inner question was irrational, it still hurt.

Why *didn't* Ben invite me?

Chapter 2

Dangerous Curves

*Judge how sharp the curve is. Slow down before you enter
the curve.*

– Driver’s Manual

In a happy turn of events, the Rayburn High Rangers won their last baseball game of the season, though I couldn’t tell you the score or any of the highlights. I was just too distracted with my thoughts, thinking about Ben and our just-friends status, and wondering what James, Jackson and Jefferson were going to decide about their mother’s invitation.

I didn’t share my Ben woes, but I had told Marla about my family’s dinner conversation last night, as we halfheartedly watched the game and munched the last of the popcorn that I had bought from the concession stand.

“Oh my WORD,” she said, looking both shocked and sad. “She wants to spend time with her sons after all these years? Jackson’s only mentioned his real mom once to me, and he said that she lives in, um, Montana? Maryland? When was the last time they saw her?”

“Michigan”, I said. “I don’t know much more than that. Yeah, it’s crazy.”

By now the game was over, the Rayburn fans on our bleachers were cheering, and it was time to gather up our trash and leave.

“Are you going to Ziti’s for the after-party?” I asked Marla. Ziti’s was a popular pizza hangout near our high school, and I knew the team had a private room reserved in the back tonight, to celebrate the end of the season with the players and their families.

“Jackson wants me to come,” Marla answered, blushing just a little. She was still new at this girlfriend stuff. “I don’t really like big crowds, though, and I’m not hungry after all that popcorn.”

“I’m sure Jackson will eat your share,” I told her, leading the way as we followed the crowd, stepping carefully down the bleachers “And my family’s going, but we’re not planning to stay late. If you want to leave before Jackson does, we can give you a ride home.”

“I am SO ready to get my driver’s license,” Marla declared, when we finally reached the parking lot. “Then I won’t have to depend on my parents or anyone else to go places. Are you excited, too? We’re still going to take the same driver’s ed course this summer, right?”

“That’s the plan,” I said, looking around for Mom and Harrison. “I’m kind of excited, but I mainly just want to get it over with. I have other, more interesting plans this summer,” I added mysteriously. “Maybe. Hopefully.”

Marla looked at me expectantly, but just then we both heard her name being called. The entire crowd took note. Jackson would never need a bullhorn or a microphone to make himself heard.

“MARLA! OVER HERE, DARLIN’!”

I rolled my eyes, and Marla smiled. “I’m being paged,” she said, obviously not minding it a bit. “You can tell me your interesting plans later. Right now my *boyfriend* is calling.”

“No, he’s *bellowing*. Yelling. Waking the dead”, I corrected her, but we looked at each other and giggled. Marla and Jackson had only been dating a little over a month – the popular jock and the shy girl. But they were sweet together.

So right.

I smiled as I watched Marla jog across the parking lot towards Jackson, and then I turned the other direction, making my way to Harrison’s car. If Ben were here, he would drive me to Ziti’s in his old truck. We would sit and chat with my family, or maybe we would find a cozy table for two, just for us.

Probably not, though. Ziti’s would be way too crowded tonight for any private conversations. And why would “just friends” need a table for two, anyway? That would be ridiculous.

My smile slipped a little.

Last fall I had been dating Davis, the secret crush of most of the girls at my old high school, also a popular, cute jock. I didn't miss *him*, exactly. Mostly. But I did miss being a girlfriend.

Somebody's girlfriend. I had to admit it. Shallow, but true.

"Just friends" sometimes, occasionally, every now and then....

...it just didn't feel that good.

Apparently being "just friends" didn't bother Ben too much.

Because later that evening, as my family was leaving Ziti's private dining room after eating pepperoni pizza and listening to the head coach's long-winded speech to the baseball families, I made my way to the restrooms, located near the kitchen.

I happened to notice a small table pushed against a wall in the crowded main dining area, the table barely big enough to seat two people.

One of those people was a pretty brunette, talking animatedly to a guy with dark hair, the ends curling just a bit at his collar. I could only see his back.

I took a closer look.

The guy turned his face to glance out at the crowded room, and I noted his familiar profile. It was the one I had seen so often as he sat beside me in our Chemistry class,

or when I talked to him from the passenger side of his truck when we made our spontaneous taco runs.

He did not notice me, a few yards away, and the brunette didn't pay any attention to me, either. I saw her lean back in her chair and laugh, totally absorbed in whatever the guy sitting across from her was saying. They had found what I had wished for- a cozy table for two- and they both seemed to be enjoying it.

I hurried on toward the bathroom, my mind blank. I wasn't mad, I wasn't shocked. I felt perfectly calm, like I had just watched an interesting scene from a television show which had nothing to do with me.

I simply refused to believe what my eyes had seen.

Or more specifically, *who* I had seen.

The calm didn't last long, however. On the drive home in Harrison's car, sandwiched in the back seat between Jefferson and Riley who were hyped up on Ziti's cinnamon bread and in bickering moods, my mental skyline started to get cloudy and overcast. By the time we pulled in our driveway, I furtively wiped a tear from my eye.

"I'm going to sit out front for a few minutes," I informed Mom as we all climbed out of the car. "It's such a nice night, you know." My voice faltered a bit and Mom looked at me closely, but she didn't comment, just nodded her head and hurried the younger kids into the house.

I really just wanted to go straight to my cozy cocoa and cream bedroom, flop down on my bed and either scream at the top of my voice or cry sloppy, hiccupy tears, totally unobserved with no questions asked. But when you share a room with a ten-year-old sister, that just doesn't happen much.

So after everyone was safely in the house, I settled on the front porch steps and looked up at my old friends, the stars.

Privacy at last.

Time to start this pity party.

Just then James pulled up in the driveway, home from his part-time job at a grocery store. He was driving Mom's car, since Jackson was using their shared "bro" car tonight, an old brown Dodge. I groaned. My pity party would have to wait until he went into the house.

To my dismay, James got out of the car, walked over to the front porch, and settled down silently beside me, there on the front steps. He didn't say one word, and neither did I. We just sat there.

And sat there.

Finally, I couldn't stand it. "Aren't you going inside?" I asked politely, but even I could hear the edge of impatience in my voice. "I mean, I bet you're tired, right?"

There was a long pause. "Are you okay?" James asked, a little cautiously. "You need some space?"

His voice was kind, and I immediately felt guilty. James had some *real* problems to deal with. Maybe he needed some time with the stars, too.

“I...I just need to think,” I finally replied. “But you can stay. Please, stay.”

And I meant it.

His quiet presence became kind of comforting, and after a few minutes I started talking. I told him about Ziti’s, about how Ben didn’t invite me to the FFA party, and about seeing him sitting cozily with the pretty brunette. I tried to stick to just the facts, like the reporter I was going to be next fall for our school newspaper, but the hurt in my voice had to be pretty obvious.

When I ran out of words, James didn’t respond right away. He seemed to really ponder what I had just told him. “I’m sorry,” was all he said, finally.

That was it? He wasn’t going to offer to yell at Ben for me like an outraged brother? He wasn’t telling me that I was getting upset for nothing, or that what I saw was probably no big deal?

But then he went on.

“I’m not the best source of advice for relationships right now,” he said dryly. “Not with girlfriends, not with mothers...” His unfinished sentence spoke volumes.

“But you’re a wonderful brother,” I told him firmly. “And Mom loves you like her own son, you know that.”

“I do know that,” James agreed. “I’m not looking for sympathy here, or a pity party...”

I winced, still looking forward to my *own* PP.

“Things are just tough right now.” He stretched his long legs out in front of him, leaning back, his chin down, and we both sat in silence once again.

Do I ask him? I thought. *Is this too personal, or will he*

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get mad? And then - I'm his sister now, of course I'll ask him.

And I did.

“Tell me about your mom,” I asked quietly.

James looked over at me, his gaze thoughtful.

And then he did.

Chapter 3

Road Work Ahead

Roads do not upgrade or maintain themselves. Bridges do not repair themselves or rebuild themselves.

- Martin O'Malley

“She just left one day,” James said simply. “Jackson and I came home from school, and the babysitter was there with Jefferson as usual. He was only two.”

She abandoned her two-year-old with a babysitter, with no warning? I did the math- James would have been about ten years old, and Jackson would have been nine.

“Mom usually didn’t get home from her job until after five anyway. When she was late, our sitter tried to call her and left messages, but Mom never called back. So the sitter called my dad, and he came right home. When he walked into their bedroom, he found the note.”

James continued talking, his voice a monotone and

devoid of any expression, as if he had rehearsed this story repeatedly and was tired of telling it. I sat and listened, as still as a stone.

“I didn’t know about the note for years”, James said. “Dad didn’t want to burden a kid with information I couldn’t understand. But she apparently said she couldn’t handle the expectations in her life anymore, and that our family was better off without her, stuff like that. She said she would stay in touch.”

Harrison did stay in touch with Nicole, begging her to come back home, promising her whatever help she needed. She had struggled with depression for a long time.

“But in the meantime, Dad had three young boys to care for, and he did the best he could. My Grandma Marie, his mother, came and lived with us for three years, until Jeff started kindergarten.” He shook his head, smiling slightly. “Grandma put her own life on hold to help us. She had a boyfriend all that time who was wanting to marry her, but she wouldn’t do it until she was convinced us boys were all settled. Dad had to practically evict her.”

I remembered meeting Grandma Marie and her “new” husband at Mom and Harrison’s wedding last December. She had seemed really nice, but now I had a whole new respect for her.

“She’ll be at your graduation next week, right?” I asked.

“Oh, we’ll have a houseful,” James confirmed with a groan. “My mom’s parents will be here, too. We don’t see

them very often, maybe one weekend a year, and then I have a few aunts, uncles, and cousins you haven't met yet, who are coming. And my *mother*, apparently." For the first time, his tone was faintly bitter.

"When was the last time you saw her?" I asked, cautiously.

This time the acid in his voice was crystal clear. "The last time I've *seen* my mother? I've *watched* her faithfully once a year on my birthday, on video calls. She hasn't had the time or the ability to actually come and *see* any of us, face to face, in about eight years. Eight. Years."

I let my mind absorb that fact. The missed holidays, the bedtime stories, the ordinary routines of a family with young kids and teenagers, just...abandoned.

"And now she decides it's time to invite us back into her life? After all these years, when we needed her so desperately? She doesn't have any *idea* of the hell she caused for my dad. And for me, Jackson, and Jefferson, her *sons*", he spat out. "No. Idea. If she wants to make her grand appearance now, at a *family* event, for the family she bailed on years ago, then fine, she can do whatever she wants. But I won't spend time with her." He paused. "Or maybe I just can't. Not yet. Maybe never."

I looked over at James. It was hard to see his face that well in the dark, though the porch light helped a little. His words were angry, so harsh. But it was the look on his face that tore my heart up.

It was the expression of a little boy's grief, still recognizable on the face of a young man.

“I guess Ben’s at WORK? He’s missin’ all the FUN!”

Riley’s birthday party at the park was in full swing this Saturday morning, and I was already developing a headache. While the kids yelled and laughed on the playground equipment, Jackson and I hauled a huge red cooler full of iced water bottles and drinks to the pavilion that Mom had reserved for the festivities. We set the heavy cooler on the concrete surface with a thud, near one of the picnic tables already covered with a bright purple plastic tablecloth. Another table held several colorfully wrapped birthday presents from Riley’s friends. It was an unusually hot, humid day for May, and I was already “glowing”, shall we say, at only ten in the morning

“Come on, we’ve gotta go back to the car and get the cupcakes before the frosting melts. And no, Ben’s not at work today but he still can’t drop by the party. His family is going out of town for his cousin’s graduation.” *Good thing, too*, I thought silently, since I still hadn’t decided how to bring up the cute brunette situation.

I really, really wished I had just marched over to that cozy table yesterday and found out what was going on right then and there. When I came out of the restroom at Ziti’s, I had planned on doing just that, but by then both Ben and the girl were already gone.

And I *really* wished I had answered Ben’s phone call last night instead of ignoring it, and his voice message too. Did I really *enjoy* tormenting myself, or what?

“You know, we SAW Ben last night at Ziti’s.”

I did, too.

I opened the car trunk, grabbed the sack packed full of boxes of cupcakes and handed Jackson a bag stuffed with napkins, hand wipes and chips. “Oh, really?”

Jackson slammed the trunk shut and we started trudging back toward the pavilion. I spotted Mom and Harrison standing by the huge obstacle course area, supervising the party guests and chatting with a few of the parents who had decided to linger. Mom saw us and gave us a big smile and two thumbs up.

“YEAH, and he was bummed that you had already LEFT. He must have JUST missed you.”

Yeah, right.

“Hmmm, I wonder why he was at Ziti’s?” I remarked in my most casual voice, putting my bag on a table and starting to unload the boxes of chocolate cupcakes. “He was supposed to be at an FFA party.”

Jackson put his own bag down on the table closest to the cooler, and shrugged. “Don’t know anything about THAT,” he replied. “But MARLA was sure asking him questions.”

Good for Marla. I made a mental note to call her as soon as I could. I couldn’t resist just one more question, though.

“Was Ben alone?”

Jackson looked a little surprised. “I GUESS, but I don’t know. It was really CROWDED back in that room.”

I glanced at him sharply. “That’s where you saw him? Ben was back in the reserved dining room for the team? Not in the main dining area?”

“WHY do I feel like this is a police INTERROGATION?” Jackson looked at me shrewdly. “I’m done answering QUESTIONS, Sis. Call the poor guy and give HIM the third degree.”

“Hmmmph”. About that time a few of Riley’s friends ran over to the pavilion, sweating and saying they were thirsty, so Jackson opened the cooler and started handing out cold water bottles.

I’ve been jumping to all kinds of stupid conclusions, I told myself, as I started unpacking the bag of napkins and wipes. That girl might be Ben’s cousin, for all I know. Ben’s not a flirty kind of guy. I’m being ridiculous.

So, seeing that all the party stuff was unpacked and arranged thanks to Jackson and *moi*, I decided to de-stress, try to get rid of my headache and have a little fun, ten-year-old style.

I headed straight for the swings, on a mission. I was unashamed and fully prepared to pout until one of the little kids got off and let me have a turn.

Fortunately, the swings area was fairly empty except for a couple of toddlers being gently pushed by their young moms. I smiled at them and they smiled back and nodded, but otherwise they just kept chatting to each other, ignoring me, and I chose a swing as far away from the toddlers as I could.

Settling into the flexible black seat, I pushed off. The air was very still on this overly-warm spring day, so creating my own breeze, and feeling it lift my hair, felt sooo good.

Up. Ben has never been dishonest with me.

Follow the Signs

Down. *But he was with another girl. A pretty girl.*

Up. *He came to Ziti's and was looking for me!*

Down. *I can just call and ask him about the girl.*

Up. *But I don't want to be that jealous twit who obsesses over a guy's every move.*

Down. *I could just let it go. I could trust him.*

I slowed down, allowing the swing to gently, eventually come to a stop.

You can trust Ben. The gentle thought stayed with me, and it felt right. I still wanted some answers, but approaching Ben with suspicious, annoyed questions just wasn't fair.

And not that attractive either.

Getting off the swing, I lifted an elbow and took a quick sniff under my armpit, wrinkling my nose. Something else wasn't attractive, but nothing that a nice, luxurious shower couldn't fix.

Hot on the outside, but my temper cooled on the inside, I returned to the pavilion.

Chapter 4

Signals

Signs are always there, we just choose to ignore them.

– Kabelo Mabona

Reese: Marla and I will pick you up in twenty.

I saw the text after stepping out of the shower, feeling fresh and feminine again after spending the morning helping corral the sugar-hyped party guests. The text had been sent ten minutes ago, I noted, and I felt alarmed.

Me: Wait what? Why??

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Reese: Shopping, girl! Marla needs to find a dress for graduation and we're going to help.

You now have ten.

Me: I just got out of the shower! Twenty!

Reese: Fifteen.

I smiled, happy to even get five extra minutes out of the goal-oriented Reese. My gorgeous, determined friend had been helping Marla make some key make-up and hair style changes, so now I guessed they were moving on to mall strategies.

I dressed quickly, pulling on some denim shorts and a soft pink t-shirt. I dabbed mascara on my lashes, and spritzed on some floral scented body spray my aunt had given me for Christmas. You never knew who you might meet at the mall, after all.

I could trust Ben, but could he trust me? *I have to look nice for my friends*, I told myself in the mirror self-righteously, and then I grinned at my reflection.

I needed to look nice for *myself*, and that was okay.

Knowing my hair would dry quickly, I ran a comb through it, checked in with Mom, and was on my front porch waiting for Reese's car, in fourteen.

“Marla, you know you don’t have to wear a dress to graduation, right? You can wear nice pants. Oooh, that one’s perfect on you, Reese!”

Whether Reese needed a new dress or not, she had already found about four different choices, all of which looked fantastic with her wavy auburn hair, hazel eyes and perfect figure, Marla, on the other hand, was struggling to find anything that, number one, she really liked, and number two, that Reese approved of.

“Yeah, maybe I should just give up. We’ve been to five stores now and it’s not working out,” Marla replied, looking discouraged as she gazed at her reflection in the dressing room mirror. “Shopping for a prom dress was easier than this!”

“Maybe we should go back to that consignment store!” I suggested. “The clerk who worked there seemed to know exactly what would look good on you!”

“Don’t give up so easily, ladies! Try *this* one,” Reese demanded, handing Marla a dress that Reese herself had modeled, though she handed Marla a smaller size. It was a fit and flare with a bold turquoise and white pattern, and it didn’t look like something Marla would wear.

“I don’t know...” Marla said dubiously. “It looked great on you, but”-

“Just try it and see! Ah think it’s the *one*,” Reese insisted. “Then we’ll go get a drink at the food court, because ah’m *parched*.”

Marla rolled her eyes behind Reese’s back, but she obediently took the dress and disappeared behind the dressing room curtain.

“Am ah *right?*” Reese exclaimed when Marla stepped out a moment later, still struggling with the back zipper. “Tell me that isn’t just *darlin’!*”

I helped Marla finish zipping up the dress, and stepped back to evaluate. The dress fit petite Marla perfectly in all the right places, and the bright turquoise enhanced her fair skin and brown hair. She did indeed look *darlin’*.

“I like it,” Marla agreed, smiling. “You’re right, this is the one.”

“Is it in your budget?” I asked her quietly, hoping the price tag wouldn’t be an obstacle now that she had finally found a dress.

“I already checked,” said the ever-practical Marla. “I would never have tried it on if it was too expensive.”

“Let’s go pay and then get over to the food court,” Reese said, clearly satisfied. “Casey, aren’t you going to buy *anything?* Ah know you said you already have a dress for James’s graduation, but some of the ones you tried on were awfully *cute*.”

“No, I’m good,” I replied. “I’m saving my money- or actually Mom’s money- for a new swimsuit.”

“SUMMER VACATION!” Reese sighed dreamily, as we waited in the store check-out line. “Ah can’t *wait!* Do ya’ll have exciting *plans?*”

“Driver’s Ed”, Marla and I both replied at the same time, and we looked at each other and grinned

“I might have a trip to plan, though it’s probably not exciting to anyone but me,” I added.

“Oh, yeah, those mysterious plans you still haven’t

told me about,” Marla chided. “You can tell us everything in a few minutes.”

And then, as Reese took her turn at the check-out counter to pay for the new dress and purse she had finally decided on, Marla lowered her voice, making sure no one else could hear.

“I have some things to tell *you*, too.”

Marla and I grabbed a table in the busy food court, while Reese volunteered to go buy our drinks.

“Large Dr. Pepper, extra ice,” I instructed, handing her some money.

“Girl, you’re goin’ to be *diabetic* one day,” Reese sighed, shaking her head.

“Same for me,” Marla added mischievously, and Reese shook her head again, walking off.

“Well, that worked out perfectly,” Marla said, arranging the shopping bags under our table. “I don’t know if you want Reese to hear my Ben info from last night, or not. I’ll talk fast.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” I said serenely, settling into a plastic chair. “I know Ben showed up at Ziti’s. No big deal.”

Marla looked at me and narrowed her eyes, but she didn’t argue. “Well, okay,” she replied, and she took out her phone to check for messages.

I watched Marla read a text, smile, and apparently send a reply, and then she put her phone back in her

purse, glanced at me, and started looking around, sitting contentedly.

The silence grew.

I looked over at Reese, who was almost at the counter of a fast food place, ready to order.

Marla did not say one word.

I gritted my teeth. I could do this.

Trust, I reminded myself. *Trust the force.*

Marla leaned closer and grinned knowingly. “You ready for me to tell you?”

I caved in like a cheap tent. “Make it fast, Reese is coming”, I hissed.

“Ben came in our private dining room right after you and your family left last night and said he left his FFA party early and was hoping to catch you there at Ziti’s. He had gotten there earlier but he saw that the coach was giving a speech and he didn’t want to interrupt, so he waited out in the main dining room for awhile. He was really surprised that he had missed seeing you or your family. That is odd, actually.” Marla said this all in a rush, but by the time she finished the last sentence, Reese was at the table, handing us our drinks.

“What’s odd?” Reese asked. “What am ah missin’?”

I shrugged and decided there was really no point in keeping anything from Reese. “Ben is odd,” I told her, and then explained about the FFA party, and what Marla had just told me.

“*All* boys are odd,” Reese drawled. “But it doesn’t sound like that big of a *deal*.”

“That’s because you haven’t heard about the cute

brunette,” I informed them glumly, and I told my friends about my trip-to-the-restroom incident. We all pondered silently for a minute, sipping our drinks.

“Ben’s a good guy,” Marla finally said. “He’s not a cheat and he isn’t known for hanging out with cute girls. No offense,” she said hastily to me. “I mean, he obviously likes *you* and you’re a cute girl!”

“We’re just friends,” I told her for the thousandth time, avoiding her eyes. “And I agree with you one hundred percent that there’s probably a simple explanation. I’m not going to obsess over this. I really mean that.” And I did.

Reese looked unconvinced. “Well, in *mah* world, you just can’t ignore the *signs*,” she commented. “Ah *hope* Ben’s not a two-timin’ *rattlesnake*.”

“We’re just friends,” I repeated automatically, and then I had to snicker. “Seriously Reese, a ‘two-timin’ rattlesnake’?”

Marla giggled too, and Reese gave us a wry smile. “Ah’ve heard that all *mah life*, when *mah* mother talks about *mah father*. Now, tell us about those summer plans, Casey,” she said, changing the subject smoothly.

Hmmm.

Reese’s family history would have to be a conversation for another time.

Chapter 5

One Way

Drivers encountering a one way sign must travel in the direction that the sign is pointing.

- Driver's Education Manual

My own step-family's history just kept unfolding.

The sticky, hot humidity of Saturday had built to some thunderstorms overnight, and once the rain cleared out during church, we were left with a cooler yet sunshiny Sunday without a cloud in the sky. "Let's eat lunch outside on the patio," Mom suggested. "We'll just fill our plates in the kitchen and head out there!"

So that's what we did, loading our plates with the delicious roast beef and veggies that Harrison almost always prepared for Sunday lunch, putting it in the oven early to let it cook slowly during church. "Can't forget the

salad,” he reminded us, pulling a large bowl out of the fridge and setting it on the counter.

Bonita, our newly adopted puppy, pranced at our feet as we assembled around the long, rectangular patio table. I’m sure she was ecstatic about all the food smells. “Don’t give her table food,” Mom warned Riley and Jefferson, who were known to do just that.

“MOM used to do that,” Jackson blurted out, and we all paused and looked at him, surprised. He looked sheepish. “I just remembered that. Do YOU remember, James? How she would feed Peppy from the table? She would make him do a trick first. It was FUNNY.”

James, sitting across from me, did not look amused. “I remember,” he said shortly.

“I remember you talking about Peppy!” Jefferson chimed in. “He *died*.”

There was a pause. “I’ll ask the blessing,” Harrison said quietly, and after he did, we all dug into our food, a bit relieved to leave the subject behind.

Except for Riley.

“What kind of dog was Peppy? How did he die? What tricks did he know, and who taught him, huh?”

“He was black and white,” Jefferson said proudly. “Dad says he helped me learn to walk ‘cause I would hold on to him. We have pictures!”

“He was a MUTT. He knew how to BEG, and play DEAD, and roll OVER,” Jackson said, smiling. “Mom taught him.”

He started telling funny stories about the amazing Peppy, and Jefferson and Riley hung on to every single

word. Harrison added some details every now and then, and it was the very first conversation that I remembered having in the last six months, since Mom had married Harrison, where the boys had talked about Nicole at all.

Well, only two of the boys were talking. James just kept eating, appearing to listen politely but not contributing any of his own memories.

When the Peppy tales were exhausted, Mom spoke up. "Hey, we really need to talk about all of the things going on this week. Next Saturday at two o'clock is the graduation ceremony," she reminded us, looking at James proudly, "and right after that, lots of relatives and friends are coming over to the house for our family celebration. So we have a long list of things to do in the next few days."

We all groaned, but Mom was no wimp. "Suck it up, troops! I've got a list, and we're all going to tackle it. Once we finish up lunch here, I need ten minutes of everyone's time before we all scatter. And don't worry, it's going to be FUN!" she said brightly, but her voice had that undertone of steel in it, developed over many years of dealing with under-enthused students who were expected to complete assignments.

Mom is a compulsive list maker, just like me, so it was no surprise to see her open a red folder with the title "GRADUATION WEEK" neatly printed on the front, as we were finishing up with dessert. I was sitting next to her at the patio table, so I leaned over to get a glimpse of the list.

I gasped.

There were, like, a thousand and three things on that list! All divided into categories and subcategories! I noticed the staple in the left top corner of the page. There was more than one *page*?

I leaned back in both dread and awe. I was in the presence of a planning Jedi. I put down my fork in reverence.

“Let’s get started,” Mom said briskly. “If we all pitch in and help, next weekend will be relaxing for us all, and a great celebration in honor of James!”

As relaxing as a hurricane, I thought glumly, but was smart enough to keep my mouth shut.

Mom went on. “We’ll all have some extra chores to do this week around the house, to get ready for our weekend guests. We have three sets of grandparents coming who will stay at our house on Friday and Saturday nights, and then we have lots of other relatives coming. Most will come to the party after graduation, but some can only stay for the ceremony itself. Let’s start by dividing up those extra chores.”

As it turned out, Mom’s list really wasn’t that bad. Between the seven of us, nobody would be burdened too much, and James gallantly offered to do all of the grocery shopping and other errands during the week. “I don’t have to be at school anyway, except for Friday when we rehearse the ceremony,” he shrugged. “Seniors finished up our finals last week.”

We discussed who would sleep where next weekend, what our jobs would be during the actual party, and stuff like that.

“And we get to do all of this again next year for Jackson, yay!” I said sarcastically.

“And the year after that for YOU, Sis!” Jackson shot right back, winking at me.

“Is Mom coming to the party?” Jefferson asked eagerly.

Oh, yeah. I couldn’t believe I had forgotten already about Nicole.

“I don’t know her plans, actually,” Harrison replied. “But she’s invited. I’m going to contact her tonight to give her the details. And speaking of your mother...” he paused. “We still need to talk about the invitation to visit her this summer, in Michigan.”

“Count me out,” James said firmly, his tone inviting no discussion.

Jefferson looked at his oldest brother, his eyes anxious. “I think I wanna go, but not if you guys don’t,” he said, his voice a bit wobbly.

The stoniness in James’ expression softened as he looked at his little brother, but he didn’t respond.

“I’LL go with you, buddy,” Jackson told Jefferson, his voice serious. “If you want to go, I’ll go with you.”

“Before we discuss this anymore, I need to let you know a decision I’ve made,” Harrison interjected. “I’ve asked your mother to make sure that her parents are there during the visit, since you’re all comfortable around them. Also, you were invited to spend a month, but I feel that’s too long a visit, at least for you,” he said, nodding at Jefferson. “Two weeks at the most. As a start.”

“A start for what, exactly?” James asked, his voice

tight.

“A start for getting to know each other again,” Harrison replied calmly, looking in turn at each of his sons. “We’ve all been through a tough time, and both your mother and I made mistakes. I’m not making any excuses for her, but I don’t want you boys to just write her off.”

James looked angry and started to say something, but glancing at Jefferson, he clamped his mouth shut. I could almost feel the physical energy it cost him, to swallow his bitter words.

That’s love. Right there. James is furious but he chose not to hurt Jefferson with his words.

That realization touched me, along with the fact that Jackson had volunteered to support his little brother by going with him to visit their mom, no matter how he felt about it personally. I didn’t remember all the details from the sermon this morning at church, though I had really tried to concentrate.

But what Jackson said, and what James didn’t say, were as powerful as any sermon.

Ben: Just got back home. You okay?
Haven’t heard from you. Scary.

I checked the time. Seven o’clock on Sunday night, and I was just finishing up my Spanish homework.

Follow the Signs

Me: I scare you? Smart guy.

Ben: You terrify me. No joke.

I wrinkled my nose, but decided to take this as some sort of odd guy compliment.

Ben: Sorry I missed you at Zitis on Friday. I have homework so I can't come over tonight, but I'll see you tomorrow okay?

Me: Okay.

Ben: Missed you this weekend.

I let a few minutes go by, wrestling with all kinds of things I could text. Sarcastic, negative, whiny things. I finally decided to take the high road and just stick to what I knew to be absolutely, honestly accurate.

Me: I missed you, too.

I guess I remembered more of the sermon this morning than I thought, because as I got ready for bed that night, one of the verses our pastor talked about kept coming to my mind. Riley was already in her bed and half asleep by the time I pulled back my own covers, so I turned off the lamp on my bedside table, reached for my phone, and snuggled under the fluffy white comforter.

I had some googling to do.

I typed in “love is patient” in the search bar, and the passage I was looking for popped up first thing. I clicked on the link and read the full verse, recognizing some of the phrases that had stuck in my mind.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Love is not easily angered? It keeps no record of wrongs?

But what about the Nicoles of this world, who hurt their children? What about two-timin’ rattlesnakes, like Reese’s father?

And what about the driver of the truck that had hit my father’s car years ago, killing him in an instant? I didn’t dwell on it much anymore, and I knew it had been an accident, but I still didn’t think I could be kind to that driver.

Did God expect that of me?

Follow the Signs

I sighed, climbed out of bed again, and slipped to my knees.

I'll be honest with You. I don't know if I can do this, I told Jesus. I was coming to realize that there was no point in being anything but honest with Him. I mean, who can really love like that? Except for You. I know You love me like that, and You love Nicole, and the rattlesnakes of this world.

I paused.

Please help me to even want to love like that.

Chapter 6

Accelerate

If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

The week flew by in a flurry of homework, extra chores, and growing excitement, as Rayburn High School prepared for the senior class's finish line and our family prepared for a major invasion of relatives.

"Invasion isn't the right word," I mused to Ben on Friday morning. "That sounds so negative. I love my family, but *my* relatives don't know the Findley relatives, and they don't know mine. I'll have to sleep on a couch for two nights, and it's all so much *work*. And then there's the whole Nicole situation."

Ben sat beside me at the table we shared in Chemistry, leaning back in his chair and doodling lazily as usual in his notebook. Class was almost over and everyone was just sitting around talking, waiting for the bell to ring. Final exams were next week for the non-seniors, so our classes right now were all about finishing up projects and reviewing for those exams.

I had filled Ben in throughout the week about Nicole, Riley's birthday party, and our graduation plans, and was pretty proud of myself because I had not mentioned the cute brunette even once. He in turn had regaled me with stories about his family's trip to his cousin's graduation, who lived somewhere in west Texas. Most of his mother's family lived out there, apparently.

And he had not mentioned the cute brunette even once, either.

"I think the word 'invasion' is accurate," he said now. "When my army of relatives travel here to my graduation in a couple of years, we'll have to reserve an entire hotel to have enough beds. Or maybe a big campground. It'll be a riot. By the way," he added a little hesitantly. "I don't remember if I told you this yet or not, but I always spend my summers there."

I looked at him, confused. "You spend your summers at a campground?"

He chuckled. "No, in west Texas. Near Abilene, at my grandpa's ranch."

I looked at him, my mouth hanging open for a few seconds until I remembered to shut it.

Follow the Signs

The bell rang, and Ben jumped up and grabbed his backpack, slinging it over one shoulder. “Come on. I’ll tell you everything later,” he promised, holding a hand out to me.

I stood up more slowly, picking up my backpack as well, and took his hand a little shyly. He smiled at me and I let myself savor the moment, realizing that this was the first time Ben had ever held my hand publicly, at school. He squeezed it, pulling me along toward the classroom door, and I really wanted to enjoy this significant progress in our hand-holding history.

But all I could think of was... what?

Abilene??

The invasion started at six sharp that evening, with the arrival of Grandma Marie and her husband, Mike. “You are just radiant, Karen,” she exclaimed, hugging my mom, who actually looked tired already after a long day at school. “And the house is spotless. I just don’t know how you manage!”

“We manage with a once-a-week cleaning lady, and lots of chore lists,” Mom said, grinning. “Come in and make yourself at home.”

“Oh, we’re here to help, so just put us to work if there’s anything you need us to do, honey,” Grandma Marie said cheerfully. She started giving hugs, as we gathered in the living room to greet her and Mike. When it was my turn, she took me by the shoulders gently,

standing back to give me a good once-over. “Why, Casey, you’re even prettier than you were when I last saw you,” she said. “You and I are going to have a nice long chat if we can manage it, and I want you to tell me how these Findley fellows have been treating you and Riley. If you have any problems at all, I’m just a phone call away, you remember that!”

James, standing next to me, overheard her remark and chuckled. “What would you do, Grandma? Come down and kick our butts? I know, I *know*, you really would,” he added hastily, when Grandma Marie gave him the evil eye.

Mike had overheard, too, and he laughed, giving me a firm handshake. “Now, Marie, I bet this young gal is tougher than any of these boys,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. “Beautiful and spunky, just like you.”

I smiled, a little embarrassed, but I loved how both Grandma Marie and Mike accepted me, treating me like a beloved granddaughter and not someone they had just met six months ago.

Memaw and Papa, Mom’s parents, were the next to arrive, about ten minutes later. They had barely gotten in the door when Memaw spotted Grandma Marie, and she squealed with excitement. “Marie! So glad to see you again!”

Memaw and Marie had known each other ever since *their* children, my mom and Harrison, went to the same high school and church youth group together. Karen and Harrison had even dated as teenagers, breaking up after

they both went to college, and eventually marrying other people.

There was another round of hugs, and then we started the process of bringing in luggage and directing everyone to the right bedrooms. We all chatted excitedly, comfortable with each other and in very good spirits. Two huge foil pans of lasagna were already baking in the oven, the spicy aroma making everyone sniff appreciatively, anticipating a nice big family meal.

But I could still feel the tension, and see the anxiety in everyone's eyes, including the unfailingly cheerful Grandma Marie, as we waited for that last car to pull up in the driveway.

The car that Nicole and her parents were renting, to drive here from the airport that was about an hour away.

Nicole was staying at a nearby hotel, but her parents had accepted Harrison's invitation to stay at our house for the weekend. Harrison thought it best for Nicole to see her sons again- for the first time in years- tonight instead of at the graduation ceremony tomorrow afternoon.

The lasagna only had ten more minutes to bake when the doorbell finally rang. We were all in the kitchen and living room, spilling out onto the patio, talking and laughing, but when we heard the sound, everyone froze.

Riley and I were mixing up a huge salad in the kitchen, and we looked at each other. I knew what she was thinking – *I can't wait to check out this person!* I had the exact same thought, but I wanted to show some respect for my step-brothers, who had to be feeling pretty nervous right now.

“Let’s give them some space, Ry”, I whispered, as Harrison left the kitchen to answer the door. Jefferson ran after him, and Jackson started to follow more slowly, until he noticed James standing by the door to the patio, not moving a muscle, his face impassive.

Jackson stopped and looked at James. “Come on, bro,” he said quietly. “I need you.”

James looked at him steadily for a moment. Then he walked over to Jackson, and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Let’s do this.”

And they walked out of the room to meet their mother.

When we all settled around the patio table about twenty minutes later, however, one guest was missing.

Nicole had decided not to join us for dinner, after all.

“Everyone, meet Rose and Nick Raines,” Harrison had announced, as he brought the couple into the kitchen, the three J’s trailing behind them. “Nicole’s parents. Nicole is feeling unwell after her long flight, and decided to rest at the hotel.”

I looked at my stepbrothers. Jefferson looked dejected, Jackson seemed anxious, and I think it was obvious to all that James was trying hard not to break something.

There was a brief silence as we all digested what Harrison said. Then Mom seemed to snap out of it, and walked over to Rose and Nick with a big smile. “I’m

Karen," she said graciously. "We're so glad that you could come."

And with that, things started moving along, and here we were, eating dinner and talking about how lovely the backyard looked, James's future plans, movies we had seen, and anything anyone could think of to keep the conversation lighthearted and casual. Bonnie was a safe topic, and Riley and Jefferson entertained all the grandparents with some of the naughty stuff she had done. Bonnie had been banished to her crate during dinner, though, since she had learned all too well how to beg for tidbits, with those soulful eyes.

As we finished our meals, however, Nick appeared to make a decision. He cleared his throat, pushing his plate away. "I think we need to discuss some things," he said, as his wife looked at him, warily.

"Nicole should have come tonight," he said bluntly. "I apologize on her behalf, and"-

"Darling," Rose interrupted. "This is not a good time to"-

"Please, let me finish," Nick told her, firmly. "There is no *good* time. Nicole has caused a lot of hurt to many of the people sitting right here at this table, and the time to take responsibility for that pain has long passed."

"Nicole hasn't been well," Rose said defensively. "She was in pain herself, and"- she glanced over at Jefferson, who was listening intently to every word.

Her voice softened. "She does want to see you all again, very, very much," she continued, looking around at

each of her grandsons, her voice pleading. “She really does.”

“Yes, she does,” Nick agreed quietly. “She’s made a lot of progress in the last few years, and she’s ready. She just let fear get the best of her tonight.” He sighed and looked over at Harrison grimly. “But it won’t be any easier tomorrow.”

We listened to the crickets chirping their evening song for a few seconds, and then Jackson pushed out his chair and stood up. “Come ON, Jeff and Ry,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s be the wait staff tonight and clear out these DISHES, and then we’ll bring out DESSERT, how about it?”

The little kids popped right up and started noisily collecting everyone’s plates, disappearing after a few minutes into the house with Jackson. The tense moment passed, and everyone seemed relieved. Mike told a joke, we laughed, and our casual chatter returned. “Anyone need more iced tea?” Mom called out, during a break in the conversations. “And maybe more ice cubes for your glasses?”

“I’ll take care of it, Mom,” I told her, ready for an excuse to get up and stretch. “I’ll be right back with the pitcher.”

Memaw and Grandma Marie wanted more ice, so I collected their glasses and started heading inside. Before I could get to the door, though, Jackson opened it, allowing someone to come outside ahead of him. Riley and Jefferson trailed behind the person, their eyes wide.

Follow the Signs

All conversation stopped, as everyone turned to see the new arrival.

It was dusky by now, but even in the dim light I noted the deep blue eyes of the woman, slim and fashionably dressed, standing in front of me.

James, Jackson, and Jefferson had those same deep blue eyes.

Nicole had arrived, after all.

Chapter 7

Scenic Drive

Stop worrying about the potholes in the road and enjoy the journey.

- Babs Hoffman

It was Saturday morning and we were all having a lazy, serve-yourself brunch, when Harrison walked over to James, told him to hold out his hand, and dropped a key into his palm.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, go out front and see for yourself,” was Harrison’s response, a wide grin on his face.

James jumped up and walked quickly to the front door, and the rest of us - the Findleys, Campbells, and all the grands- dropped everything, got up and followed him. Nicole was back at her hotel.

James opened the door, stood completely still for a

second, and then started jogging toward the driveway. There, with a big red bow on the top, was a shiny silver pick-up truck.

“AI-RIGHT!!” James yelled, circling the truck for a quick inspection, and then he opened the driver’s side door and got in. “YESSS!”

“She’s not new,” Harrison told him, pacing around the truck himself and looking quite pleased. “But I had everything checked out, and she’s in great condition.”

They started talking excitedly about truck stuff, and all the grandpas went over and joined them. “We’ve had it hidden in a neighbor’s garage for a week,” Mom told the rest of us, grinning. “We got a great deal on it!”

Jackson looked at me, and I looked at him. “Are *you* thinking what *I’m* thinking?” I asked him.

“I’m gettin’ a TRUCK next year!” Jackson yelled, and we high fived gleefully. Driver’s Ed was looking more appealing all the time, I thought.

Make mine a convertible!

We all high fived again as James walked across the temporary stage that afternoon, built just for this event on Rayburn High’s football field. He shook hands with the principal, then took his diploma and lifted it high, like a trophy. We cheered and clapped, and kept on applauding for the many other graduates that we knew, including James’s ex-girlfriend, Lauren.

Jackson, sitting next to Nicole during the ceremony,

pointed her out. “That’s his EX,” he told her. “Nice girl. Broke his HEART.”

“And that guy after Lauren was on his basketball team,” Jefferson said, bouncing up and down on his seat in excitement. He was sitting on Nicole’s other side.

Nicole nodded and smiled, sitting on the bleacher very stiffly and looking a little overwhelmed. She was being given a lot of information all at once, this was true.

Or maybe looking overwhelmed was just her default expression.

The day was growing quite warm, and I was glad the outdoor ceremony was almost over.

Marla and I were sitting on the bleacher in front of Jackson and down a little, giving us a perfect vantage point for watching Nicole without being too obvious about it. We honestly didn’t plan it that way, but it was nice how it all worked out, right?

Marla looked cute in her turquoise and white print dress, her hair curled just a little, her makeup flawless. I had worn my own sleeveless sundress many times, but it was in one of my favorite colors, a lilac that deepened my blue eyes, or so I had been told. We all cleaned up pretty well, I thought proudly, looking around at my family, a few related by blood, but most by marriage. Several out-of-town Findley aunts, uncles, and cousins had shown up for the ceremony, and James’s own personal cheering squad was taking up a lot of space on these bleachers.

“How did it go last night?” Marla whispered, while we waited for the last of the graduates to cross the stage. I

hadn't had a single opportunity to call her or *anyone* last night, much less any privacy.

"Awkward, but about as well as you could expect," I whispered back. "Nicole just sat there on the patio and didn't say much, and we all tried to keep a conversation going."

"She's really pretty," Marla admitted, whispering more loudly now so I could hear her over a cheering family nearby. "But she looks like...like she's made of glass or something. Fragile."

"Yeah". I had noticed that, too. When she had made her surprise appearance on the patio last night, Nicole had looked scared to death. But she *came*, and I had to begrudgingly respect that.

I didn't think there was any way I could ever *like* her, though.

Our backyard looked magical.

Several large pots, filled with vibrant pink and purple flowers in full bloom, lined our large covered patio. Strands of clear twinkle lights crisscrossed overhead, with more lights wrapped around the two massive oak trees in the yard, ready to be switched on as soon as it started to get dark. We had borrowed lots of lawn chairs from our neighbors so everyone would have a place to sit, and our long patio table was covered with trays of delicious-smelling brisket, ribs and smoked turkey, along with containers of potato salad, barbecue beans and coleslaw, all catered by the Findley's favorite BBQ joint. A speaker

was set up outside, set at just the right volume so as not to overly annoy the neighbors.

So far, Mom's meticulous list-making was paying off.

The living room and backyard were filling quickly with the Findley aunts, uncles, and cousins, neighbors, friends, and a few of James's fellow graduates who either didn't have their own celebrations to attend or were just party-hopping. All three sets of grandparents had shoed the rest of us away from the kitchen and buffet table as various guests began to arrive, insisting that they would take over the grunt work at this point.

"Go party with James and his guests," Memaw told us, and the others nodded emphatically. "You've done all this planning and hard work, and you deserve to enjoy the evening. Now beat it, ya'll!"

Mom, Harrison, and the rest of us didn't need to be told twice, and we did exactly that, giving them heartfelt thank-yous.

"Quite the shindig", Ben remarked later on, bringing me an ice-cold Dr. Pepper. I had saved him a seat next to me, Marla and a couple of teenage Findley cousins. "Is that Garth I hear?" He looked at me teasingly, knowing country music wasn't my fave, and I wrinkled my nose.

"It's James's party, his playlist. But it's hard not to like this song!" I started singing along, and then we all did, in our loudest voices, some adults around us even joining in. "*I've got friends in loooow places...*"

We finished the song, laughing. "Is that Jefferson's mom that he's standing next to?" Ben asked me in a low

voice, as the others started talking. I looked across the yard and nodded.

“Yep, that’s Nicole. Jefferson has stuck to her like glue, ever since this afternoon I’m glad they’re getting along so well. I guess.”

Ben heard the hesitancy in my voice, and reached over and squeezed my hand. “I’m going to go introduce myself to her. She looks kind of lonely. You don’t have to get up - I’ll be right back with a big piece of chocolate cake, just for you,” he promised, grinning.

After he got up and walked over to Nicole, one of the cousins leaned over and got my attention. “Is that your boyfriend?” she asked curiously. “He’s *cute*, and so nice!”

I could see Marla smirk out of the corner of my eye. “We’re just friends,” I replied cheerfully. I had seen the other grandparents eyeing Ben and me, too, and I figured I was going to keep saying those three words a lot, this weekend.

“Wish I had a *friend* like that,” the other cousin replied with an envious sigh.

We all slept in the next morning, skipping church, tired to the bone. Thirteen people sharing three bathrooms made our getting-up-and-at-‘em routines way more challenging, too. All the grandparents were leaving today, and it would be wonderful to move back in my own bedroom, snug under my own covers, instead of camping out in the game room upstairs with my sister and the boys.

Not to *mention* the fact that Jackson snored like a freight train. I absolutely pitied his future wife.

So I wasn't in the best of moods when Grandma Marie hunted me down, coming upstairs for a chat as I sat curled up on one of the couches, still in my pajamas and bleary-eyed. At least she brought me a cup of coffee.

"James claims you like it black," she said, handing it to me.

I accepted the mug gratefully and took a sip. James was the one who had introduced me to this strong brew, and I was learning to appreciate it.

"We don't have a lot of time, but I just want you to know that my son and grandsons think very highly of you, Casey," she said, settling onto the couch beside me "I can only imagine how hard it was for you to change high schools mid-year, and move into a bachelor pad." She chuckled. "I've been praying for you ever since I met you at the wedding, and it seems to me that you're just flourishing! And making some good *friends*," she added, looking at me slyly. "I talked to Ben a good bit last night."

I had seen Ben and Grandma Marie huddled together in deep conversation, during the party last night, and I would love to know what they had talked about for so long, but Grandma Marie continued. "Anyway, I'm incredibly pleased to have acquired two such beautiful and smart granddaughters, and I hope you and I, over time, will become the best of friends."

Her words wrapped around me like a warm blanket on a cold day.

We chatted about the party last night, and our

summer plans, and I finally felt comfortable enough to ask Grandma Marie a rather personal question.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking...”

“I don’t,” she responded cheerfully. “Ask away.”

“Well, it’s about Nicole.” I chose my words carefully. “James told me how you came and stayed with Harrison and the boys eight years ago, and helped take care of them after Nicole left. Weren’t you just furious with her for hurting your family? How could you ever really forgive her? I mean, I saw how nice you were to her this weekend, and I really admire that, but...are you just pretending? Are you really not angry anymore?”

Grandma Marie took her time responding, sipping her coffee. “There’s not a simple answer to that, Casey. Of course I was angry and hurt, and I still feel that way sometimes when I witness the damage her actions caused. But when Nicole and Harrison got married years ago, I decided to love her as my own daughter. Just like I love your mother, too,” she added gently. “When you love someone, you don’t just stop loving them because they make mistakes, even terrible mistakes.”

Love is patient, love is kind.

On a whole different level.

“Nicole struggled with depression, and none of us recognized it for a long time,” she went on. “It got worse after Jefferson was born. Now, I’m not making excuses for her, mind you. Deciding to just run away from her responsibilities, much less with another woman’s husband, was a rotten idea, but”-

“Wait, what?” I interrupted, shocked. “She ran away with a *married man*?”

Grandma Marie looked at me, surprised. “I thought you knew that! Oops!”

She looked so stricken that I had to smile, and I reached over and squeezed her hand. “Well, that’s a major plot twist, but you don’t have to tell me anything else, really. I don’t even *want* to know anything else right now. But I do have a favor to ask.”

“Anything,” she said. “As long as you promise not to tell my son that I’m spilling all the family secrets. Which I’m perfectly willing to do, mind you, but just don’t *tell* him I’m the source, got it?”

I giggled. “Pinky swear. And on my end, well, please just keep on praying for me. I have my own issues. Maybe not as dramatic as Nicole’s, but....”

“Don’t we all, child, don’t we all,” was all she said.

We each finished our coffee, held out our hands, and pinky swore.

Chapter 8

Intersections

Life happens at intersections.
- Jack Dorsey

Studying.

Final exams.

Then finally, it was Thursday, the last day of my sophomore year.

After lunch, the tradition at Rayburn High was to distribute yearbooks and then students could either go on home or hang out in the cafeteria and courtyard area for a couple of hours, getting friends and teachers to sign them. Mom had made sure that I had a yearbook, even though I wasn't that enthusiastic about it. As a new kid, I hadn't joined a single club yet, and didn't play a sport. My picture wouldn't even be...

Wait.

“I’m in the yearbook!” I squealed, jumping up and down. “Look, Reese, I’m right here in the C’s!”

“Well, that’s how it *works*, darlin’,” Reese drawled, standing next to me at one of the cafeteria tables, digging in her purse for a pen. “It’s *alphabetical*.”

“They must have gotten my school picture from my old high school!” I went on, thrilled to have at least one picture of me as a sophomore, on record for everyone to see.

“The magic of *technology*. Come on, girl, let’s walk *around*. Got a pen?”

We started mingling, and I soon lost Reese as we split up, spotting people we knew from our different classes. I met up with Daniel Dixon from my English class—“*Remember the gummies, Campbell*”, and then Colton from my chemistry class—“*Loved having some chemistry with you*”.

I looked at Colton narrowly when I read that, but he looked perfectly innocent, though he did give me a wistful smile. He had asked me out on a date earlier this year, and had seemed disappointed when I turned him down. He was now dating someone else, but I still kind of wondered...

He was a player, I guess, but an awfully cute one.

The rogue.

Looking around the cafeteria for anyone else I knew, I spotted Ben. And then I saw her, standing next to him, laughing and leaning in way too close.

HER.

The cute brunette who was with him at Ziti’s.

Now's the chance to clear this all up, I told myself, and made my way across the cafeteria. "Hey Ben," I said brightly, smiling at both him and the girl.

Ben grinned back, looking up from where he was evidently signing the girl's yearbook. "Hey," he responded. "I was looking for you. Need a ride home, or are you riding with Jackson?"

Before I could even open my mouth to respond, the girl chimed in. "Oh, Ben, would it be possible for you to give *me* a ride home? Otherwise I'll have to wait here the whole time for the *bus*," she said, like it was the most awful scenario she could imagine.

"Sure," Ben agreed cheerfully.

That settled it for me.

"I'd love a ride home! Whenever you're ready." Who cared about getting or writing any more yearbook messages? I was not going to let that brunette sit in a truck alone with my *friend*. I took great care to smile at her in a nice way, though.

She assessed me coolly, making me grateful that I had picked out a nice outfit today. With her deep brown eyes and toasty brown skin, she looked like a model, the type who strikes a beautiful but sullen pose in those glamor magazines. When Ben turned to her, however, her expression changed immediately to a sunny smile.

"I'll find you when we're ready," he told the girl, and her smile dimmed just a tad. If I was keeping score, which I was *not*, I would have said that I won a point here, since Ben clearly implied that he was going to hang out with me right now.

“Of course. Thank you,” she told him, and then she turned to me, her manners flawless. “I don’t think we’ve met? I’m Miranda. I’m in FFA with Ben.”

“I’m Casey. Nice to meet you.” I kept smiling, but I didn’t add anything more, and Ben took my elbow, hurrying me along.

“There’s a bunch of people from our geometry class over there if you’re interested. But freedom is calling from the other side,” he moaned, motioning to the doors, clearly ready to get out of the building and start the summer.

I smiled. “This is supposed to be *fun*, you know. And the end of the school year is always actually kind of sad.”

Ben groaned and shook his head, but he didn’t let go of my arm as we walked away from Miranda. I resisted looking back at her.

Two points.

Miranda’s house was farther away from school than mine, but Ben took her home first, and I silently awarded myself yet another point. I also sat in the middle of the seat next to Ben, while Miranda rode shotgun by the window.

Point four.

When Miranda got out of Ben’s truck, she thanked him, completely ignoring me, and made sure to add “See you in a few weeks at the FFA convention! We’ll have a blast, just like we did last year, won’t we? I can’t wait!”

Ben had told me about the FFA state convention that

was held every summer in Fort Worth, and most members from Rayburn High's chapter attended every year. It didn't sound like much of a "blast" to me, but what did I know? I begrudgingly gave Miranda a point, for having this great memory with Ben.

But still. *If* I was keeping score, the odds were in my favor. All the signs were good.

"So when do you leave for Abilene again?" I asked Ben as he pulled out of Miranda's driveway and started heading over to my house. I knew exactly when he was leaving, and he knew that I knew, but he humored me.

"A week from tomorrow." Over the last week, I had heard a lot about his grandpa's ranch. Ben had spent his summers there since he was eight years old, helping out with chores and hanging out with what seemed like a dozen cousins who lived close by. This summer he was going to shadow the local vet who worked with several ranchers in the Abilene area.

"Dr. Walker can't pay me anything," Ben had told me, "but it doesn't matter. It's a great opportunity to learn a lot and get some experience." I heard the excitement and passion in his voice, and I was happy for Ben.

And sad for me. I had met Ben only five months ago, and now I couldn't imagine going even a week without seeing him, much less the next two months.

We made the rest of the drive in silence, both lost in our own thoughts.

"I forgot to tell you that Jackson and Jefferson are leaving for Michigan next Monday, to visit Nicole", I told Ben as he pulled into my driveway, parking behind

James's new truck. "The same day I start driver's ed. They'll be gone for two weeks, and then Jackson has to be back for his summer job." I smiled. "Jackson is taking over James's old job at the grocery store, and James is moving on to better things. He'll be an intern in Harrison's accounting firm."

"Whoa, that sounds impressive," Ben remarked, turning off the engine "Is that what James wants to do? Become an accountant like his dad?"

"He said he doesn't know, but it's a good way to find out if he likes it or not. Although he won't be doing any real accounting, and he won't get paid that much."

Ben got out of the truck and came around to my side, opening the door for me. He always did that, and it melted my heart a little every single time. "I wouldn't want to be cooped up in an office all day," he remarked as I got out. "Although I'll admit the air conditioning is a plus. So, James isn't going to Michigan?" He lowered his voice as he asked the question, although nobody else was around.

I grabbed my backpack and we started walking to the front door. "No. The whole time Nicole was here, James barely said ten words to her. He wasn't rude or anything, but he just didn't...talk. And neither did Nicole, really. It was painful. But, hey, come on in and we'll find a snack before the little kids get home."

"Nah, I've gotta run," Ben said regretfully. "I have to be at work in another hour, and I still need to go home and change clothes."

"I forgot to have you sign my yearbook!" I remem-

bered suddenly. “Do you have time to do that before you go?”

Ben sighed, then took my hand, holding it gently as I stood on the steps to my front door. “I will, but let me think about it,” he promised. “I never know what to write. I mean, you probably don’t want ‘roses are red, violets are blue, you look like a monkey’”-

“-and you smell like one too,” I finished along with him. “Um, no thanks. Extra time granted.”

“See you tomorrow night for a taco run?” When I nodded, he lifted my hand that he was still holding, and pressed it against his heart.

“Until tomorrow, Campbell.”

And with that, he let go of my hand, turned around and jogged back towards his truck.

I still hadn’t asked him about Miranda, and I was completely okay with that, as I watched my friend drive away, my own heart beating about a hundred miles an hour.

Chapter 9

Under Construction

We must do the best we can with what we have.

- Edward Rowland Sill

Friday morning, first day of summer vacation.

Ten o'clock and I was still in bed.

I Love. Summer.

Sarah: third week in June?

Me: Driver's ed. Fourth week?

Sarah: nope, family vacay, how about first week of July??? Wouldn't that be perfect?

Me: My birthday is July 5th.

Melissa Knight

Sarah: I know!! So we could have a big party with all the gang!!! Pool party!!

Me: Let me check.

I had finally talked to Mom about Sarah's invitation for me to spend a week at her house this summer, in my old home town two hundred miles away. Mom had enthusiastically approved, as I figured she would, and now Sarah and I were trying to set some dates.

Reese: I'm having a slumber party next weekend. Can you come?

Me: Sounds fun! Just don't freeze my bra.

Reese: What are you talking about?

Me: NVM, I'll be there!

Reese had never heard of that prank before? I shook my head. Rookie.

Mia: Our youth group is invited to hang out Sunday afternoon after church at Tyler's house bc his family has a pool. Can you come?

Me: Sure!

Mia: Yay yay yay! Tell James and Jackson, and bring your own towels!

Have I mentioned how much I love summer vacation?

I rolled over in bed, trying to decide how to spend what was left of this sunny, luxurious morning. The thought of having the entire rest of the day ahead of me, with absolutely no commitments at all, was heavenly. No papers to write, no tests to study for, no classes to attend.

I could enjoy this nirvana until Monday at least, when I started driver's ed. But even those classes only lasted a few hours each weekday, with the afternoons free. Okay well, free except when I had driving sessions scheduled with an instructor. But those would be fun, right?

And super easy! A piece of cake.

That piece of cake idea stayed on my mind, because after lunch I decided to make one. Why not? I had the time! I would make a yummy cake for the whole fam to enjoy, and Ben and I could have a piece after our taco run tonight.

Perfect!

I wandered into the kitchen and opened the pantry door, in search of a boxed cake mix on the shelf Mom had designated for baking supplies. I moved boxes and packages around, but found nothing, not even a brownie mix.

Bonnie trotted into the kitchen, wagging her tail and

coming to sit down politely at my feet. She was learning that anytime she heard someone in the kitchen, it was the best place in the world for her to be, too. I gave up my search for a cake mix and knelt down to rub her ears.

“You pretty girl,” I crooned. “You and I will just look on Pinterest for a yummy cake recipe.”

I had never baked a cake from scratch before, but why not? I had time! I found a dog biscuit for Bonnie first, and she gulped it down in about two seconds.

Grabbing my phone, I sat at the kitchen table and scrolled through recipes. Strawberry shortcake? Lemon cake with raspberry filling? Ding Dong cake? I didn’t think we had the right ingredients for any of these, except maybe the classic vanilla cake. Glancing at the recipe, I went to check our pantry one more time. We didn’t even have a bag of flour!

Baking a cake meant a trip to the grocery store, requiring a driver. It would also take money, preferably not my own. It would require effort and energy, on this perfect first day of summer.

I smiled, and clicked off of the recipe.

So not going to happen

Bonnie waited, looking at me hopefully, and I gave her another dog biscuit. “Come on, baby girl, you and I are going to go snuggle upstairs, with a good alien movie!”

I. Love. Summer.

“So let’s stop by the grocery store,” Ben suggested.

What? “The *grocery* store?”

Ben and I had made our taco run, hanging out with several other friends from school who we happened to see

at everyone's favorite taco place, and were on the way back to my house. I had just told him about my failed cake-making attempt.

"Yeah, you know the place where they sell flour? Strawberries? Food? We could get what you need to make a cake. That sounds really good."

"Ben, it's too late, nooooo," I objected. "We just ate our weight in tacos and you want to make a *cake*?"

"You were going to make one earlier," he said reasonably. "And you knew then that we would be stuffing ourselves with tacos. What's the difference?"

"I'm out of the *moood*. I don't *wannnt* to. I'm too *laaaazy*", I moaned in my whiniest voice, but Ben pulled into the parking lot of a grocery store anyway.

"Be right back," he said, ignoring my protests completely, and he disappeared into the store. I texted him right away.

Get a mix. Chocolate or you die.

The boy came back with not only a chocolate fudge cake mix, but canned frosting, eggs, and vegetable oil. "I didn't know if you had any of this stuff at your house already," he explained as we unpacked the bags in our kitchen. "And the frosting was on sale!" He sounded so excited, it was hilarious.

Jefferson and Riley came running in the kitchen at

that point, cheering when they saw all the baking stuff. Did our lives in this household really revolve around the constant consumption of food? Or at least the kind loaded with calories?

“Can I help?” Riley implored. “I’m really good at this! I help Casey make cookies all the time and I know what to do except I’m not allowed to use the oven yet. But I’m ten now, so isn’t that old enough to use the oven? I can go ask Mom, she’s upstairs watching TV, so”-

“I’ll handle the oven part if you do everything else, Ry”, Ben interrupted cheerfully. “I’ve never done this before, so you can be in charge. Just don’t involve your sister, because she’s not in the *mood*, she doesn’t *feel* like it, and she’s....what was the other thing?”

“Rhymes with ‘hazy’”, I prompted him, leaning on the kitchen counter.

“Crazy?” Jefferson suggested helpfully.

Ben snickered, and I gave Jefferson a little poke. Jackson and Marla came in the kitchen about that time, and while Riley started getting out the mixing bowl and baking pan, the rest of us started talking, sitting around the kitchen table and thinking up things we could do while the night was still young. We eventually decided to learn to play Texas Hold ‘Em, including Jefferson, because well, why not? Not to *gamble*, just to play.

“I can teach ya,” Jackson shrugged. “It’s not EASY, though. James is BETTER than me.”

“Then let’s call James and make him come home from wherever he is,” I decided. “What could possibly be

more important on a Friday night than teaching us how to play a card game?”

“He’s on a date,” Riley informed us calmly, now stirring the ingredients in the mixing bowl.

You could have heard a pin drop.

“How come I didn’t know this?” I finally said. “I saw him this afternoon and he didn’t say a word about having a date tonight.”

“Do you know who he’s with, Ry?” Marla asked curiously.

Riley looked up and realized that all of our attention was totally focused on her. She stopped what she was doing. “*Well,*” she said, enjoying the moment, “I heard him talking on his phone before he left and he said he was going to pick her up in twenty minutes.”

“Pick *who* up?” I asked. “Did he say a name?”

“I’m getting to that,” Riley replied importantly. “No, he didn’t say a name, but right after he hung up he put his phone down and went out of the room. So I ran over really fast and picked up his phone and looked at the last call he made and it was”-

“**HOLD** it right there!” Jackson interrupted sternly. “**RY**, that was none of your **BUSINESS!**”

I agreed, since I wouldn’t want anyone checking *my* phone like that, but at the same time I had to hand it to the kid. James Bond would have done the same thing.

There was silence for a minute, while we all kind of looked at each other. Who would be the one to approve of Riley’s actions by asking her what she had learned? Jackson had already gotten mad at me, not that long ago,

when I had poked around in *his* business. And he was standing right here.

Awkward.

Marla took it for the team. “Well, you shouldn’t have done it, but since you already did, then come on, who was he talking to, Ry?”

“Lauren,” Riley responded excitedly, not looking at all ashamed.

“He called *Lauren!*”

Chapter 10

Keep Right

Always do right- this will gratify some and astonish the rest.

- Mark Twain

Our cards night was fun, though Jackson wasn't a great teacher and none of us really got the hang of it. But the pool party, after church on Sunday afternoon, was a blast. I had asked Ben if he wanted to come, since he had attended our youth group meetings on Wednesday evenings a couple of times recently, but he declined, not offering any explanation. I knew he wasn't working on Sunday afternoons anymore, at the vet office.

We're not dating, and I don't own his time, I told myself resolutely, sitting on the edge of the pool, moving my feet in the cool water. I just hoped that SHE wasn't involved in his afternoon, in any way, shape or form. I

reminded myself of the cake he had gone out of his way to make Friday night, just for me.

Well, not just for me, and actually Riley had made the cake. But still!

I stood up, dove into the deep end and pushed all the pesky boy issues right out of my thoughts.

I love to swim. I'm not the girl who sits on the lounge chair by the side of the pool, working on my tan and sipping a drink. I mean, I do enjoy that too, and had already hung out with Mia and my other youth group friends, doing just that. Most of the time, though, I was *in* the pool, swimming silently back and forth underwater, doing handstands, working on the perfect dive, and generally splashing around like a kid. Mom used to call me her little fish when I was younger, and my blonde hair was usually tinged with green by the end of the summer from all that chlorine at the YMCA pool.

I smiled, remembering that beloved outdoor pool, back in my old hometown. I would have to go back there when I visited Sarah, I decided, floating on my back lazily. I started making a mental list of everything I wanted to do while I was there, and everyone I wanted to see.

My thoughts went immediately to Davis, my ex-boyfriend, but then I banished him from my thoughts, too, along with Ben. *Today it's just me and the pool*, I reminded myself, staring up at the blue, cloudless sky.

The water and me. No boys allowed, except for the boys in our youth group, but I was ignoring them right now as well.

It felt great.

“Time to GO, let’s MOVE!” Jackson yelled, as I finished brushing my teeth in the bathroom I shared with Riley, the next morning. Mom was already waiting in the car, ready to drop me off at my first Drivers Ed class, and then she was taking Jackson and Jefferson to the airport so they could catch their flight to Michigan. Riley was tagging along, and James was already at work, interning at Harrison’s office.

“Coming!” Hurrying out of the bathroom, I grabbed my purse from my dresser, checking one more time to make sure that the envelope I had prepared last night was in there.

When I got to the car, Mom was going down her checklist with the boys. “You packed your toothbrushes? Jackson, did you grab your phone charger?”

“GOT IT!” he told her with a grin, settling next to her in the front passenger seat. “Jeff and I are good to GO!”

I leaned across Riley, who was sitting in the middle of the back seat, and handed Jefferson the envelope from my purse. “Open this when you get to your mom’s house,” I told him mysteriously. “Not a minute before!”

Jefferson grinned at me, more excited than I had ever seen him. “Okay!” he said. “I promise I’ll wait! You’ll look out for Bonnie, right?” he asked, some anxiety creeping into his voice.

“Ry and I will treat her like a doggo princess,” I

promised, just like I had done yesterday and the day before that.

The rest of the short trip to the driver's academy was fairly quiet, and then it was time for goodbyes. I climbed out of the car, and then Jackson did too, giving me a quick hug.

"Have fun, bro! Be nice to those Yankees up north!"

"I WILL, Sis! You BEHAVE yourself while we're gone!"

"And don't crash into anyone on the road, Casey!" Jefferson yelled from the back seat. I gave him a sour look, and he and Riley both cackled. I waved until the car pulled out of the parking lot, and then I walked into the building for my first day of driving lessons.

Dinner that night seemed awfully quiet without Jackson and Jefferson. "They had a smooth flight, and are going out to dinner tonight. Then they'll leave tomorrow with Nicole and her parents, to take a trip to the Upper Peninsula there in Michigan," Harrison informed us as we all helped ourselves to chicken and rice. "They're renting a cabin at one of the state parks, and Grandpa Nick will take them hiking and fishing. Sounds like a great time."

I stole a glance at James, who seemed kind of tired after the first day at his new job, but he showed zero interest in his father's words. Instead, he changed the subject.

"How was driver's ed, Case?" he asked. "Do any driving today?"

“Not today. Tomorrow afternoon is my first drive with an instructor,” I replied, reaching for a roll. “I’m not worried. Mom lets me drive sometimes, so I’ve had practice.”

“She lets you drive in *parking lots*,” Riley said, giggling. “And she used to let you drive on those roads by Memaw and Papa’s house where nobody ever goes. They live waaay out in the country and hardly anyone ever drives around there but there are lots of cows and horses. I wish we could have a horse someday. I really want to learn to ride a horse but-“

“More chicken, Ry?” Mom interrupted gently. “And Casey, you’ll do fine. I remember being so nervous when I learned to drive. I was terrified that I would wreck my parents’ car, or back into a pole, or hit a pedestrian, or-“

“Way to encourage me, Mom,” I congratulated her sarcastically. “I really appreciate you planting all those little images in my brain.”

Everyone laughed, even Mom, though she gave me an apologetic look, and Harrison started talking about something else. But Mom’s comments didn’t bother me. I wasn’t the least bit concerned about my driving lesson tomorrow. This morning’s class had been easy peasy, covering stuff I already knew. It was just the first session, of course, but millions of people had been passing their drivers tests for hundreds of years, so how hard could this be?

Okay, so not hundreds of years. Decades.
Whatever.

Melissa Knight

Marla: Has James mentioned Lauren yet?

Marla already asked me this question during our driver's ed class this morning, and my answer was still the same.

Me: Not a word. I can't ask him if he's dating her again without seeming nosy.

Marla: You ARE nosy.

Me: I'll text Lauren! We're friends and she'll just tell me. I don't know why I didn't think of this before!

I had lunch with Lauren after she and James broke up a few weeks ago, and Lauren had told me she wanted us to stay friends, so it was perfectly natural for me to contact her. This was not nosy. This was friendship!

Me: Hey, girl!

Lauren: Hey!

Follow the Signs

Me: So, how's your summer going??

Lauren: Great! You?

Me: Great! Any big plans?

Lauren: Nope.

I sighed. She wasn't volunteering anything. And really, did I *need* to know if James and Lauren were back together? It did not affect my life in any way, shape or form. It was their business, after all.

Marla was right. I was nosy.

It was time for bed, so I would just wrap this conversation up.

Me: Okay, just checking on you!

I took a shower, brushed my teeth and climbed into my bed. I was scrolling through social media on my phone, when I got another text.

Lauren: So did James tell you that we're back together?

Score!

And I hadn't even asked her for the info, which made

Melissa Knight

getting it even better! I congratulated myself smugly, and then texted Lauren back a whole string of hearts and happy faces, which seemed like the perfect response.

I mean, it was great that they were back together!
Wasn't it?

Chapter 11

Defensive Driving

Be aware of what other drivers around you are doing, and expect the unexpected.

- advice on internet

The “How Did Casey Do On Her Very First Driving Lesson?” Quiz

A. I remembered to buckle my seat belt.

B. I forgot to check my side mirror when I backed up.

C. I braked so hard at a stop sign that I about gave myself whiplash.

D. I drove so slow that my instructor, Ms. Cordova, told me to speed up four separate times.

E. I didn't signal when I turned into the driveway of the student whose lesson was after mine.

F. When that student drove me to my house at the beginning of his own lesson, he did everything right. *Everything*. Ms. Cordova smiled at him.

G. Ms. Cordova did not smile at me even once.

H. All. Of. The. Above.

I plopped down on the living room couch as soon as I came in the house after my lesson, almost in tears. Mom came and sat on the couch beside me, ready to listen sympathetically.

"It was a disaster," I moaned. "I never expected to be that nervous. It's like I got behind the wheel and just... just froze! I couldn't think! And Mrs. Cordova *hates* me, I know it." I covered my face with my hands and groaned. Yeah, I was a little dramatic.

Didn't care.

“She doesn’t hate you,” Mom said soothingly. “She just has to act intimidating, I’m sure. I mean, imagine being responsible for training brand new teenage drivers on the road. It must be such a scary, tense job, and so many, many things could go wrong, you know?” She shuddered. “Like...”

Mom finally seemed to realize that her words were not helping. Maybe my exasperated glare clued her in.

“What I’m trying to say is, maybe it’s a good thing to be nervous! It’s better than being overconfident, right? You want to be super careful because you’re putting your life and the lives of others at great risk if you make mistakes, and so—”

“MOM!” I wailed. “Please stop talking!” I still felt like crying, but at the same time I sensed a little gurgle of laughter bubbling up. Did Mom actually consider this a pep talk?

Mom’s concerns were at least partly a result of the way my dad had died, in a car accident, and we had already promised each other to try to not let those memories control us. I guess it was harder for Mom than it was for me.

“Sorry,” Mom said, putting her hand on my arm and rubbing it gently. “I guess I let my own fears take over. I mean, everything I just said is true, and I want you to be super careful, but I also don’t want you to be a nervous wreck.” Her face was the picture of concern.

I looked at Mom and sighed. “Poor, poor choice of words, Mom. Nervous *wreck*?”

Mom looked stricken. “That wasn’t on purpose!” she

sputtered, obviously trying not to smile, but just like her pep talk, she failed at that, too.

She grinned, and then I did, too, and then we both started to chuckle. “Just so you know, Mom, I’m not coming to you for any driving advice,” I warned her.

“That’s probably best,” she agreed, her worried expression returning.

“Jefferson wants to talk to you,” Harrison said later that night, handing me his cell phone. “The connection isn’t great, since he and the others are at the state park.”

“Cool!” I said. I had just walked in the door after a couple of rounds of mini golf with Ben, Marla, Mia, and Tyler, the guy who hosted the pool party for our youth group on Sunday. They all trailed in behind me.

“Go on to the kitchen,” I told the others. “We have chips, and there might be some cake left.”

“If not, Riley can just make us another one,” Ben said, nodding at my little sister, who had appeared when she heard us come in.

“I can do that!” she said excitedly. “But hurry, Case, I want to talk to Jefferson when you’re done. Don’t hang up, okay? I need to tell him about Bonnie.”

“I’ll hurry,” I promised, finally holding the phone to my ear. I knew if I put it on speaker that Riley would take over the conversation. “Hey Jefferson, what’s up?”

“Thank you for the money,” he said immediately. “Dad gave me some too, and James gave me some, and

then Miss Karen gave me some more at the airport. I'm loaded! Hey, is Bonnie doing okay?"

"She misses you, but she's fine. Riley will give you a report in a minute. And you're welcome," I added. I had enclosed a ten dollar bill in the envelope I gave Jefferson yesterday. Memaw always used to do that when I was little, calling it "mad money" to spend on whatever I wanted. I guess Mom, Harrison and James had the same idea.

"Michigan is awesome!" Jefferson went on. "It's so different up here, and not as hot as Texas. Can I talk to Ry now?"

"Sure. And hey, I miss you!"

"I miss you, too." Jefferson's voice actually sounded a little wobbly with those words, so I hurried to give Riley the phone. A Bonnie report would cheer him up.

Or it would make him homesick. Was it selfish to hope he was at least a *little* homesick?

I really did miss that kid.

"Cordova is awesome," Tyler said, almost inhaling half a box of cheese crackers, because of *course* there was no cake left, not in this household.

"Yeah, I liked her," Mia agreed. "When I took driver's ed last fall, she really helped to calm my nerves."

I continued eating my chips a little glumly. Ben looked at me and winked. He was the only person at this kitchen table who knew about my disastrous first driving lesson this afternoon.

“Want to watch a movie?” I suggested, in an attempt to change the subject. Why had I even brought up driver’s ed? “We can go upstairs to the game room.”

“Naw, I’ve gotta go,” Tyler said regretfully. “I’ve got work in the morning, breakfast shift. But hey, do ya’ll want to come over on Friday night and swim?”

“That’s a great idea!” Mia exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. I had noticed her brown eyes sparkling an awful lot lately when she looked at Tyler. I couldn’t really tell yet if he was interested in her as more than a friend, though. I didn’t know Tyler all that well.

“Can’t. I’m leaving on Friday morning,” Ben said, and then he had to go on and explain his summer plans to Mia and Tyler.

“That is so cool!” Tyler said enviously. “Man, I bet you have a blast on that ranch.”

Ben just smiled. “Ranching is hard work,” he said. “Work that never ends. But yeah, I like it, and I’m looking forward to interning with Dr. Walker.”

Mia started asking Ben more questions, and as the others chatted I just sat and listened, watching Ben quietly. I was proud of him, I realized. He knew what he wanted – a career as a veterinarian- and he was already making progress toward that goal. He was such a hard worker.

And so dang cute!

“So how about Thursday night?” Tyler suggested. “We can make it a sort of going-away party for Ben. My parents won’t care as long as everyone brings their own snacks and stuff.”

“Will that work for you, Ben?” Mia asked.

There was a short pause while Ben thought it over. “Sure, that would be great, I appreciate it,” he said slowly. “But I might have to leave a little early.”

He looked directly at me, and the warmth in those chocolatey brown eyes made me catch my breath. “Casey and I will have to leave a little early, I mean. We have some plans.”

We do?

But I nodded anyway, agreeing one hundred percent to whatever plans he wanted to make. He smiled at me, and I smiled back.

Is it possible to be so happy, and yet to feel so sad, at exactly the same time?

Trust me-
Yes.

I was not happy right now, though.

“Seriously, Mom? It’s just a sleepover! I’ve been to sleepovers since I was *twelve*! Why is it such a big deal *now*?”

It was Thursday morning, and we were in traffic, headed to the driver’s academy. I happened to mention that I needed to take a snack for the pool party at Tyler’s house tonight, and maybe for Reese’s sleepover tomorrow night. I forgot that I had not yet told Mom about the slumber party. Her frown was unexpected.

“The difference is that I knew all the parents of your friends, back in our old home town. I don’t know Reese’s

parents or what they will allow at her party.” Mom’s voice was calm, but I felt irritated.

“Mom, I’m going to be *seventeen* in another month. In another year I’ll be considered an *adult*. Don’t you trust me to make good decisions, even if my friends do stupid things? Even though they won’t,” I added hastily. “It’s just a good, old-fashioned slumber party.”

I think.

Mom turned into the parking lot of the driving academy and brought the car to a stop in a parking space. “I do trust you,” she answered, turning toward me. “But I don’t automatically trust others, no. Not with my daughter.” She glanced at Riley in the backseat, who was listening to every word. “Either daughter. Or my sons. So, maybe you can ask Reese to have her mother call me? Or I can call her mom, whatever she prefers.”

I glared at Mom, and she looked steadily back at me. I could tell she was not going to give an inch. “Fine,” I muttered, still annoyed. I opened the passenger door and started getting out.

“Study hard so you won’t mess up your driving lesson again this afternoon!” Riley yelled, and I came *thissssss* close to slamming that car door.

“She’s just being a good mom,” Marla said reasonably. “I don’t see what you’re so upset about. My mom would act the same way if she didn’t already know Reese’s mom. We’ve known each other since kindergarten, not that we ever really hung out together until now.”

Our class was taking a fifteen-minute break, and Marla and I were in the restroom, washing our hands and brushing our hair.

“I don’t know why Reese even invited me to her slumber party,” Marla mused, drying her hands. “I mean, we’ve been friends for a long time, but not *close* friends. She never asked me over to her house before even when we were little, like for birthday parties and stuff. When she offered to do my hair and makeup for prom this year, well, that was the first time I had ever been to her home.”

“You mean when she *commanded* you to let her do your hair and makeup,” I corrected her, and we both smiled, meeting each other’s eyes in the mirror.

“She’s been so nice to me this year, especially when... since...” Marla hesitated.

“You mean since you stole her man?” I teased her.

“I did not!” Marla objected, shocked.

“Come on, let’s go get a drink,” I told her, leading the way out of the restroom. “I’m just kidding. Your man was never interested in Reese to begin with.”

“I know, but...why is Reese including me in her life all of a sudden, when she never did before? I mean, we were chemistry lab partners last year, but inviting me to a slumber party is a whole different level. Why would she want me around, when I’m dating the guy she likes? Or *used* to like. Do you think she’s still interested in Jackson? Should I even go to the slumber party? Maybe I’m setting myself up...”

“And maybe you’re making a big deal out of nothing,” I said, shrugging, as I put some coins in the vending

machine in the academy lobby. “Did it ever occur to you that Reese probably just *likes* you? I bet she thinks that ‘hey, here’s this really nice person who I want to get to know better, so I think I’ll just invite her over for some Truth or Dare.’”

Marla froze. “Truth or Dare?” I could almost see her anxiety level rising, like a limp balloon being blown up to full capacity.

I laughed wickedly and handed her a can of Dr. Pepper. “Drink up, girl, because we’d better get back to class. And don’t worry about Truth or Dare, that’s *nothing!* Let’s see, maybe we’ll get arrested when we go toilet papering, or we can steal everyone’s underwear. Oh, that reminds me... keep an eye on your bra.”

“Stealing *underwear*? And I’m supposed to watch my *bra*?” Marla looked truly puzzled.

I sighed and shook my head. Would anyone at this party be aware of the traditional slumber party pranks?

I had to acknowledge, though, as I slipped back into my seat in the classroom, that I was no longer mad at Mom.

Chapter 12

No Passing Zone

*No passing zones are based on how far a driver can see
ahead.*

- driver's guide

“Great pool party,” Ben said, finally.

“Yep! And our taco run was perfect! Our last one for a while,” I replied, trying not to sound too depressed.

We had left Tyler’s pool party around nine o’clock, and Ben had driven straight to our favorite taco place, where we ate outside at one of the picnic tables. I told him about my driving lesson today, which went only slightly better, and we talked and laughed, having a great time as usual.

So here we were, back at my driveway, sitting in the cab of his truck, with the windows rolled down. My curfew was eleven, and it was already ten thirty. In just a

few hours Ben was leaving, to spend most of the summer in a town hundreds of miles away.

This was it. Our last few moments together, and I couldn't think of anything to say.

And from his lack of conversation ever since we left the taco place, neither could Ben.

"So," I said, breaking the silence. "So I hope you have a great time in Abilene! Text me every day, okay? Send me pictures of all the cows and horses and stuff, and your cousins. Everything!" I was determined to be positive.

"I will." Ben turned to face me, and seemed to study me, there in the dark. "You do the same. That is, don't send me pictures of cows, yeah, but..."

I smiled.

"When I get back, Casey, you and I...well, we're going to reevaluate."

I wished there was a little more moonlight tonight, so I could see Ben's face better. "Reevaluate?"

"Our friendship. Our, um, status."

"Status?" I echoed.

"Yeah, our friendship status. You know, like we talked about before? The possibilities?"

"Possibilities?"

Honestly, was I really going to just sit here and keep speaking one-word questions? My emotions were on full, high alert, and yet it's like my brain couldn't function.

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?" Ben groaned, but I could tell he was smiling. He reached over and took my hand, rubbing the back of it with his

thumb. I felt myself losing even more of my ability to think.

“When I get back from Abilene...well, I know you told me before that you want us to stay good friends...and we will, but...”

“But?” One-word question number four. I was a mess.

“Well, maybe we can talk and see if you feel...differently. More than friends.”

More than friends.

I was thrilled to hear those words, and they seemed to be the key that unlocked my brain just a little, because I was now quite ready and able to speak.

“Ben, you know...” I was still a little hesitant, but I kept going before I lost my nerve. “We...I...don’t have to wait until the end of summer. We can talk right now because I ...think I’m ready to have that conversation.”

“I’m ready, too, Casey.” His voice was confident and strong, have mercy. I was just about to scoot a little closer to him, when he went on. “But we’re going to wait. We’ll wait until the end of summer, to see if we still feel the same way. I mean, I know I will, but I want us to be sure.”

I frowned. “I’m sure right now, Ben.”

He sighed. “Casey, we’re not going to see each other for two whole months. I don’t want to start something new and then say good-bye right away. I don’t think that’s a good idea. And it’s not fair.”

“Not fair? Not fair to who? And why?”

“It’s not fair to you, for one thing. You’re gonna be

visiting your old home town soon, and you'll see your ex-boyfriend, that David guy—

“Davis.”

“Yeah, him. And you might still have feelings for him, and you should be free to, you know, act on those feelings if that's what you want.”

“What do you mean, act on those feelings?” I asked Ben, irritated. His hand still covered mine, but I curled mine up into a fist. “What exactly do you think I would do, throw myself into his arms and beg him to take me back? And you know, Ben, it's not like we're getting engaged or anything,” I went on, my voice rising. “Good grief, we're only talking about starting to date. At least I think that's what we're talking about. Is that what we're talking about?” By now my voice was dripping with sarcasm, and I knew I needed to dial it back, big time.

We sat there for a moment, my mind reeling with a mixture of annoyance and disappointment. Ben pulled his hand away from mine and turned to face the front, staring out the windshield. The moon was covered by clouds, and the darkness was deepening. We listened to the cicadas whirring, and the crickets chirping, on this hot June evening.

“Yeah, that's what we're talking about,” Ben finally answered. “And I actually happen to take dating pretty seriously.”

“And I guess you want to leave yourself open, too,” I said in a low voice. “After all, you'll be seeing *Miranda* at the FFA convention.”

The minute I said the words, I wished I could snatch them back.

“Miranda?” Ben questioned, looking at me once again. “What does Miranda have to do with anything?”

“She likes you, that’s all,” I said miserably. “It’s obvious. And you might decide you like her too, this summer.”

“Oh, Campbell,” Ben groaned, but his voice sounded suspiciously teasing. “Are you *jealous*?”

“I think we just need to end this evening,” I replied, close to tears. “Thanks for the tacos and, and...” I reached for the door handle.

“Not so fast,” Ben said gently, putting his hand on mine again. “Wait.” He released my hand and opened his own door, getting out and walking around to mine.

That’s all I do, I grumbled silently. But I waited for him to open my door.

He did, and when I got out, none too gracefully because I was upset and in a hurry, he stopped me with an unexpected move.

Wrapping his arms around me in a hug, he held me close, standing there beside his truck. I think he kissed the top of my head, but I know for sure that he kissed my forehead tenderly, and then he held me apart from him, just a little, so I could see his face.

“When I start dating, I’m taking it seriously,” he told me quietly. “I have way too much respect for you, and for us, to treat it any other way. I know it’s not that big a deal to some guys, and dating is not a lifelong commitment by

any means, but this is the way it's got to be. For me, anyway."

He pulled me closer again, and I leaned against his chest. I felt his heart beating, slow and steady.

Slow and steady, just like Ben.

My eyes filled with tears again, but this time it was the happy, relieved kind. I could wait until the end of summer for this guy.

Of course I would.

I gently released myself from his hug. "I'll miss you every day," I whispered, and then I stood on my tiptoes, reaching up to give him a kiss on his cheek, almost on his lips, but not quite.

Ben stood there for a long time after I went inside the house.

I know, because I peeked out the window.

Chapter 13

GPS

I wisely started with a map.

- J.R.R. Tolkien

Mom not only called Reese's mom, but met her for coffee Friday morning, where they made plans to go to a movie sometime. And Mom invited her to church on Sunday.

"Ruby put my mind at rest about the slumber party," Mom said. "You were right, Casey, it should be fairly low-key. Did you know this is the first slumber party Reese has ever hosted?"

Mom was driving me home from my driver's ed class, and Riley was in the back seat. I was super glad I did not have another driving lesson this afternoon with Ms. Cordova. Even though yesterday's lesson was slightly better, I still didn't think she liked me too much.

“I didn’t know that,” I answered. “Did her mom say she would visit our church?”

“She didn’t commit,” Mom said, turning into our driveway. “But that’s okay. I just wanted her to know she was welcome, and would have someone to sit by if she does decide to come.”

“I’ll invite Reese to our youth group meeting next Wednesday night,” I decided. “I’ve been meaning to do that anyway. And I’m glad I’ve gotten security clearance for tonight,” I added jokingly. “I was a little bit grouchy yesterday, sorry.”

“You were a *lot* grouchy,” Riley corrected me, as we got out of the car. “I wish Reese would let *me* come. She *likes* me. When Reese helped us decorate our bedroom she showed me how to choose colors that match and she told me how smart I was and that I might have a gift for decorating. She knows a *whole* bunch of stuff you don’t know, Case.”

“You got that right, kid”, I answered good-naturedly. I had been in a terrific mood ever since my conversation with Ben last night. That talk hadn’t started well, but by the end things had certainly improved.

I just couldn’t quit smiling.

“Okay, *out* with it, Casey,” Reese demanded. “You look like the *cat* that ate the *canary*. Why are you so *happy*?”

Reese’s slumber party had been a resounding success so far. We had done all the traditional stuff- painting our nails, giving each other makeovers, ordering pizza, prac-

ting dance moves, and watching movies. We were now smearing our freshly-washed faces with a mixture of avocado, honey, and lemon, using a facial recipe that Reese swore by.

“This stuff tastes good, too!” I said brightly, licking some from my lips.

“Don’t change the subject,” Mia chided. “Reese is right, spill it! I bet it’s a guy. It’s always a guy.”

“Ooooooh,” Abby squealed. “I bet I know who! I-“

“Wait, ladies!” Reese interrupted. “Nevah mind, all will be revealed soon! Because after our facials have had time to *set*, we’ll wash them off and then we’ll play Truth or Dare!”

She looked directly at me and wagged her finger. “You will have to tell *all!*”

Next to me, Marla gulped, but I had to laugh. Reese looked pretty silly bossing me around with that green goop on her face. We all looked ridiculous, and I think everybody at this party was feeling pretty relaxed.

I *had* guessed right, after all - this was just a good, old-fashioned slumber party. And though there were a couple of Reese’s friends here who I didn’t know too well, they seemed pretty nice and we were all having a great time. It didn’t hurt that Reese lived in an absolutely fabulous house.

“It’s mah grandmother’s home,” Reese had explained when she took us upstairs to her blue and white bedroom, and showed us which bathrooms we could use. “Mah mother and I have only lived here a couple of years.”

“Yeah, you used to live in my neighborhood, didn’t

you?” one of the other girls asked, whose name was Danielle. “I used to see you and your mom and dad now and then, getting out of your car.”

“He wasn’t mah *dad*,” Reese said crisply, and nobody dared to ask her to explain.

“We’re not going to get too personal, are we?” Marla asked nervously. “And the dares won’t be dangerous or anything, right?”

“If you don’t want to tell the truth, who’s gonna know?” Danielle shrugged. “I lie all the time when I play Truth or Dare.”

“Then what’s the point?” Abby argued. “If you’re not gonna tell the truth, then the game means nothing. It’s meaningless!”

“I agree with Marla that the dares shouldn’t be too whacko,” Mia said.

“But then it’s no fun!” Abby exclaimed. “Come on, we have to be a *little* bit wild!”

We were all sitting around in a circle on Reese’s bedroom floor, and it was looking like this game was not going to work out.

“Well, how about this,” Reese suggested. “Ah’ve only played this game once before, and it *did* get a little embarrassin’, but there were also *boys* involved. So maybe we can change it up a bit.”

“You went to a slumber party with *boys*?” The other girl, Emma, sounded horrified.

“It wasn’t a *slumber* party, it was just a party,” Reese shrugged. “Let’s just say it started out as fun, but it did not *end* well. Anyway, boys are who we want to talk about, *right*? So let’s just keep it *simple*. One question each, about guys. And if you don’t want to answer, you don’t *have* to. Are we all good with that?”

We all nodded our heads, some eagerly, and some cautiously.

“And one dare each,” Mia suggested. “Just silly ones, okay?”

“Agreed.” Reese clapped her hands twice and looked excited. “Okay, ah’ll ask the first question, and it’s for Casey, of course. Why are you *smilin’* so much, girl?”

I had already decided how much I was going to reveal about Ben, and it wasn’t a lot, but before I could answer, Abby spoke up.

“It’s Ben, right?” she said gleefully. “I’ll bet you two are official!”

“Oh, Casey!” Marla breathed. “I just knew it!”

“Does Ben go to our school?” Emma asked.

“I haven’t even said anything!” I protested, trying to get a word in, but I was grinning from ear to ear. “So, no, we’re not official. We’re still just friends, but we *might* be official. In a couple of months.”

I could sense the excitement level drop.

“So that’s what’s making you really happy?” Danielle questioned. Her tone was kind but a little condescending. It made my announcement seem a bit childish, certainly not much to be excited about. My smile slipped a little.

“That’s awesome, Casey,” Marla said loyally, and Mia smiled at me.

Reese turned the attention to Mia, who was sitting next to me. “What about you, Mia? Anyone special right now?”

“Tyler Thomas!” Mia fell backwards in an overly dramatic swoon. “I have such a *huge* crush on him! And that fact does not leave this room!” she threatened, sitting back up and laughing. “We’ve been friends for a long time, and I think he likes me, as in *likes* me, but I’m not sure,” she admitted. “It’s driving me crazy!”

“What is said in this group *stays* in this group,” Reese promised her solemnly. “You’re next, Emma.”

Emma passed, saying that she didn’t have a crush on anyone. Abby talked about a guy who had just asked her out to a movie recently, who she really liked but hadn’t heard from since school was out. We sympathized, and then it was Danielle’s turn.

“I’m still going out with Trevor,” Danielle said, naming a guy I didn’t know. “We’ve been dating for six months now, and we’re, you know, close. *Really* close.” She almost smirked. “Our relationship may be a bit too adult for *this* crowd.”

I caught Reese’s eye and she frowned.

“What do you mean by ‘close?’” Abby questioned eagerly. “Are you talking about *sex*?”

“What do *you* think?” Danielle shrugged. “We’re in love. And we’re careful, okay?”

“Mah mother was careful, *too*,” Reese drawled. “She was our age, and in *love*. And seventeen years later, here

ah am.” She stared at Danielle somberly. “You’re taking a *big* chance, girl.”

There was a tense silence.

Danielle’s playful smile disappeared, and she stared back at Reese, her expression challenging. “Well, it’s not like *you* haven’t taken a chance once or twice, *girlfriend*.”

I looked at Reese uneasily and saw, for just a second, a flash of pain in her eyes. She held Danielle’s gaze steadily, though.

“My turn,” Marla said hurriedly, and I could tell she wanted to help out Reese by changing the subject. I also knew how private Marla was, so I wondered what she would volunteer.

“I’m dating Jackson, and that’s all I’m going to say,” she said matter-of-factly. “Except that...” She turned a bright red.

“We talked early on about sex, and we agreed that we’re both going to wait until we’re married. We already made that decision, and it, um, it really helps.”

“You’ve talked about getting married? Already?” Emma gasped.

“No, no, no! At least not to each other! I mean I guess that could happen someday, but what I meant to say is that I’m not going to have sex until I *get* married. I’m going to wait. And Jackson decided that, too.”

“Well, that’s your decision,” Danielle said, sounding a little bored. “Most people don’t feel that way anymore. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with sex if you’re in love. It’s perfectly natural, and beautiful.”

“Yes it is, in a marriage relationship,” Marla said quietly. “That’s the way God intends it to be.”

“I agree,” Mia said, and I nodded my head, too. I was almost speechless in my admiration for Marla, my reserved, shy friend. Look at her, speaking up and talking about sex, of all things!

We were quiet for a while, but it was now a comfortable silence, as we mulled over this conversation. Reese’s party had definitely taken a more serious turn.

“Are we going to do our dares?” Emma asked, hesitantly.

“I’m getting tired,” Mia admitted with a yawn. “It’s almost two in the morning. If we’re going to do these dares, we’d better get started!”

“Maybe we could all do the same dare,” Abby suggested. “Like a group dare, to save time.”

“That might be fun,” Reese agreed. “Any ideas, ladies? Casey, what was that bra thing you mentioned once?”

“That’s more of a prank than a dare,” I explained. “I was at a slumber party once where the first girl who fell asleep had her bra frozen by the other girls. We took her bra, soaked it in water and put it in the freezer, and when she got up the next day, it was icy and cold.”

I smiled, remembering. “The worst part was that it was winter! She had to get up early the next day to go somewhere with her parents, and she really needed to wear that bra. She was a good sport, but it was kind of mean, looking back.”

“Did she actually wear it?” Marla asked.

“I don’t remember,” I said, searching through the snatches of memories I had about that slumber party, when I was thirteen. “I’ll ask my friend Sarah about it. I’m sure I was still asleep when the girl had to leave with her parents.”

“It doesn’t sound that exciting, but we could all freeze our bras together, I guess,” Danielle said, shrugging.

“Why not?” Abby’s eyes sparkled. “It’s going to be hot tomorrow, so we could all get up, put on our frozen bras, get dressed and wear them to the mall or something.”

Reese rejected that idea immediately, to my relief. “Absolutely not! But let’s all wear them here at the house, while we eat breakfast,” she decided. “Mah grandmother is makin’ us waffles tomorrow morning when we get up.”

With that settled, we started gathering our bras, soaking them and putting them in a big freezer in the garage, giggling and chatting the whole time. The garage itself was huge and immaculate, just like the house. *I hope Mom never sees this garage, or she’ll make a list for how to keep our own garage sparkling clean*, I thought. *Yikes!*

“Casey?” I barely heard the whisper. I was halfway asleep, curled up in my sleeping bag. The house was kept so cool that I wouldn’t have to worry about getting too hot overnight, and the overhead fan was on, here in Reese’s bedroom.

“Yeah?” I turned toward the whisper groggily, real-

izing it was Reese who was trying to get my attention. My sleeping bag was positioned on the floor right next to her bed, and Reese was lying on her side, looking down at me. I could hear the quiet breathing of the other girls, scattered around the room in their own sleeping bags.

“How do you know that God is even *real*?”

Chapter 14

Speed Limits

Patience is the ability to idle your motor when you feel like stripping your gears.
- Barbara Johnson

We ate our waffles outside on Reese's patio, wearing our frozen bras and pajama bottoms. There was no neighboring house behind her grandmother's back fence, only woods, and Reese assured us that nobody could spy on us.

"Unless there's some crazy *psycho* out there," she shrugged. "And even then he wouldn't be seein' that *much*." All of us were wearing sports bras, which kept us pretty covered up anyway, and most of us decided to pull on our t-shirts, too.

Shivering, we giggled and waved at the trees behind the fence just in case a *psycho* really was watching.

“It’s amazing how cool these bras are keeping us,” Abby exclaimed. “And it’s already so hot and humid out here!”

“We should do this all the time,” Danielle laughed. “We could start a trend. If they just weren’t so...”

“Wet? Clammy? Uncomfortable?” I suggested, not enjoying the experience too much. “But yeah, at least I’m not hot! And these waffles are delicious, Ms. Matthews.”

“Now remember, you can call me *Miss Ruby*,” Reese’s mom insisted, placing another stack of waffles on the patio table. “And ah’ll let my *mother* know you like her cookin’”, she said with a wink. “Ah can’t cook to save mah *life*.”

Ruby looked young enough to be Reese’s older sister. I had met her once before, a couple of months ago when she helped fix Marla’s hair for prom. She had been wearing more make-up then, and looked elegant and beautiful. This morning, though, she was make-up free, her hair pulled into a messy bun, and it made her look even younger.

Reese is lucky to have her mom’s genes, I thought. And then I remembered what Reese had said last night, that Ruby had been only seventeen when Reese was born. My age, almost.

I couldn’t imagine.

“Ah’m glad you’re the last to leave,” Reese said, closing the front door after Mia left. “What you said last night, about talkin’ to God, and the Bible, well....ah’ll think about it.”

“Someone else could probably give you a better

answer, like historical proofs and facts,” I said apologetically. “I can only tell you my own experience.”

“That’s why ah *asked* you, Casey,” she said softly, inviting me to sit on the luxurious leather sofa in the living room. “Ah wanted to know what *you* thought.”

Last night, or actually early this morning, when Reese asked me how I knew God was real, my sleepy eyes had flown wide open. What should I say? How could I possibly give her a decent answer, when I had so much to figure out myself?

So I just thought a minute, sent up a quick prayer for help, and told Reese my own story. “I just...look for Him,” I whispered to her. “I talk to Him, and I’ve started reading the Bible to find out what He’s like. And He *answers* me. I read His words, and it’s like He’s talking right to me, straight to my heart.”

Reese had listened, but she didn’t comment. “Good-night”, was all she had murmured, a minute later, and then she turned on her back. Conversation over.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced at it to see that Harrison had texted me. “My ride is here, gotta go,” I told Reese, standing up and grabbing my backpack and sleeping bag. “You know what? I think this is the best slumber party I’ve ever been to. Honest!”

Reese looked pleased. “We’ll do it again soon,” she announced. “Come on, ah’ll open the door. And, Casey?”

“Yeah?”

She gave me that beauty queen smile, and flipped her hair behind one shoulder. “That’s one of your fah-ner points, you know.

You're *honest*."

I hoped that Ms. Cordova could not read my honest thoughts right now, though. Because if she could, I knew she would insist that I get out of this car immediately and walk a couple of miles back to the driving academy, under the hot Texas sun, just to punish me.

Let this go, woman! You are such a bad teacher! Someone else would make this whole parallel parking thing a lot simpler!

Outwardly, I was polite. "Ms. Cordova, I can practice this more at home. I've tried now for like, ten times..."

"Then you will try for ten more, Miss Campbell," was the crisp reply. "Use your mirrors."

"I'm improving though, right?"

"Yes, you would only have hit the car *behind* you this last time. Watch the cones."

I looked at her pleadingly. "Ma'am, I can still pass the driver's test even if I don't nail the parallel parking part. I looked it up last night."

There was stony silence as Ms. Cordova turned to me from where she was sitting on the passenger side. She lowered her no-nonsense sunglasses and stared me down.

"Miss Campbell," she said sternly, enunciating every single word tersely, "some things can only be accomplished with hard work and practice. Not everything comes *easily* in this world. Now, for the next ten minutes, you will focus on this task."

I wilted under her words. "Yes, ma'am". *I DO work*

Follow the Signs

hard, I thought, frustrated almost to tears. *How come Ms. Cordova is so nice to everyone but ME?*

I practiced and practiced for the next ten minutes.
And I knocked over a cone every single time.

Ben: Maybe you intimidate HER.

Me: Yeah, right! How so?

Ben: Brains, beauty, personality, you've got it all!

Me: Keeeeeep talking, I like this.

Ben: You'll probably make so much money someday that you can hire someone to do all your parallel parking!

Me: Okay, I'm going to explain all of this to Ms. Cordova tomorrow.

Ben: Get back to me on that.

Me: You never took your turn at the slumber party, telling us what guy you like.

Reese: True.

Me: Talk.

Reese: No, you'll just have to wait for the next slumber party! Already planning it!

Me: You ready to come back home?

Melissa Knight

Jackson: How hot is it there?

Me: Like the surface of the sun.

Jackson: Not ready.

Jackson: Just kidding, I'm ready.

Harrison talked to Jackson and Jefferson once a day for at least a few minutes, and of course Riley gave Jefferson his daily Bonnie report. They seemed to be enjoying their trip, though neither one mentioned their mother very much.

So I was surprised, and a little worried, a few nights before Jackson and Jefferson were due to fly home, to get Jackson's text.

Jackson: Don't tell my dad, but Jeff is acting up. Says he wants to stay with Mom.

Doesn't want to come home.

I called Jackson right away.

"You know what I think? I think Jeff has convinced himself that he'll never see Mom again, after we leave.

That she'll just disappear from our lives again." Jackson was speaking very softly, and I could hear the worry in his voice. I had retreated to the back patio for a little privacy, since everyone was inside at this time of night.

"The kid doesn't leave Mom's side. And Mom is... well, she's trying. But she lets Jeff get away with murder." He gave an exasperated sigh. "My grandparents notice, but I can tell they don't want to interfere and want Mom to figure things out. I think she WILL, but there's only so much that can HAPPEN in two weeks."

His voice started to rise, and it was easy to sense his agitation.

I cut to the chase. "Jackson, no offense, but why are you telling *me* all of this? How come you don't want your dad to know? Because he *needs* to know."

There was a pause, and when Jackson spoke his voice was softer, once again. "I don't want to worry my dad. He thought this trip was a good idea."

I let that sink in. "And you think it wasn't a good idea?"

"I don't know, Case. What if Mom DOES drop the ball again? It could happen. And Jeff would be CRUSHED."

I remembered Jefferson's happy anticipation in the car last week on his way to the airport, and I felt pure, heartfelt anger rising up from my gut. How *dare* Nicole hurt her own child like this?

"But she might NOT," Jackson went on. "I'm probably not giving Mom enough credit. It's hard to say." His voice trailed off.

I felt his misery over the phone. My anger was still there, now joined by a deep sadness. I recognized that grief, that feeling of loss, from when my dad died. Nicole was still alive, true, but would she choose to stay in her sons' lives? Could she be counted on now?

Her track record wasn't very good.

"Gotta go, Case, thanks for listening—"

"Wait, Jackson! Hang on." I fumbled for something to say, anything helpful or encouraging. "Listen, I'll be praying for all of you up there, I want you to know that. Tell Jefferson that Bonnie needs him back home, maybe that will help a little. And... and you really do need to tell your dad and let him handle this, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Sis."

He disconnected, and I went back inside since the mosquitoes were starting to bite. I walked to my room quietly, thinking over Jackson's words. I was angry and sad, true, but I was also very touched that Jackson had called me.

Me.

His sister.

Me: Swimsuit shopping. Come with?

Reese: Yay! Tomorrow?

Me: Yes, my mom and I will pick you up after lunch.

Reese: Or I can pick you up if your mom doesn't want to go.

Follow the Signs

Me: Oh, she HAS to go! It's one of the swimsuit laws.

I sent her an eye roll emoji.

Reese: There are laws?

Me: Yes. Until I'm 30, Mom has to approve of my swimsuits. Not too revealing, not too sexy. That's why I need you for a second opinion, to make sure I don't wind up with something dreadful.

Reese: LOL!!! I'll be ready.

Reese's mother had not come to our church last Sunday, but Reese had seemed interested when I called and invited her to our youth group meeting, earlier this week.

"We're also having another swim party for just high school juniors this Saturday at Tyler's house," I told her. "Our youth group is getting so big that we can't all use the pool at the same time, so our pastor, Kevin, thought we could divide up by grade levels. It's not a perfect idea, but at least this way we can each invite a friend or two."

"Then ah'll wait and go to the pool party! Sounds like fun," Reese said decisively. "Will there be preachin'?"

I almost laughed, but I could tell that Reese was serious. “No,” I answered solemnly. “Just swimmin’. And splashin’. Oh, and we’re all supposed to bring a snack. Tyler’s parents provide water bottles. And bring your own swimsuit and towel.”

So now, on this hot Saturday afternoon, Mom, Reese and I were on a swimsuit quest. “I *have* to find a suit,” I admitted to Reese as we entered the gloriously cool, air-conditioned mall. “When I got home from Tyler’s last pool party I noticed that the seat of my old suit was almost see-through, just worn out from being in the chlorine so much last summer.”

“That would be embarrassin’,” Reese giggled. “So you don’t have another suit?”

“A bikini,” I admitted. “But I don’t wear it to pool parties. That’s my *own* rule.” I sighed dramatically. “There’s a really humiliating story behind that.”

Reese raised her eyebrows, but by then we were in the swimsuit area of one of the large department stores. “I’m going to browse over here in the old lady department,” Mom said jokingly. “I want a suit, too, and a new cover-up. You girls take your time, and I’ll be back in about thirty minutes.”

I told Reese my size and we started browsing through the racks. After a few minutes Reese showed me three suits she had selected.

“Nope, nope, and maybe.” I sorted through her choices quickly. “These first two are bimbo. Mom will never go for that.”

“Ah beg your *pardon*,” Reese said, in fake outrage.

“Ah have a suit a lot like this first one! At least try it *on*,” she encouraged. “It looks more revealin’ than it really is.”

I agreed and took two of her picks, plus three of my own, into the dressing room. I tried on the first one, the bimbo suit.

“Oh, Casey, you look *hot!*” Reese said admiringly, when I emerged from behind the curtain. “The boys will be swoonin’!”

I examined myself from all angles in the three-way mirror. I had to admit, this suit was very, very flattering, and the hot pink color looked great with my blonde hair. “I love it,” I said longingly, “but I don’t think Mom will.”

“Put it in the ‘maybe’ stack,” Reese insisted, and I did, knowing it would never pass Mom’s inspection.

The next two suits were eliminated at once by a critical Reese, but the last two met her approval, made me feel both comfortable and pretty, and were modest enough to meet Mom’s requirements. “I think I like this one the best,” I told Reese, again checking myself out in the mirror. It was a blue floral halter-top tankini, with board shorts, and Reese agreed that it was cute, though not in the same hotness league as the pink one.

Mom found us then, and she fell in love with the suit, too. “It’s a perfect choice,” she said. “And you found it in record time! I had good luck, too.” She showed us her suit and cover-up, and Reese oohed and ahhed over it.

“Casey, show your mom the hot pink one,” Reese suggested, mischievously. “It looks really good on her, Mrs. Findley!”

“Sure!” Mom said amiably, and she settled down on

one of the benches near the dressing room to wait.

I rolled my eyes at Reese, but I went back into the dressing room and changed into the hot pink suit. I still looked amazing in it, if I do say so myself, but I prepared myself for Mom's rejection.

And she gave it.

She was gentle, though. "Oh, honey," was all she said at first, her eyes a little wide. Reese smirked.

I struck a dramatic model pose, one hand on my hips. "So? Does it look good on me or what?"

"A little *too* good," Mom agreed, and she sighed. I could tell this was a "my little girl is growing up" moment for her, but she didn't go there. Instead, she took another route.

"Honey, that suit looks amazing on you," she said. "And it's perfect- but not for a pool party with teenagers. It's a perfect suit for a *honeymoon*. To be seen and admired by your lovesick husband on a secluded beach somewhere. He'll take one look at you and"-

"*Ohh-kay*, Mom, I get it," I interrupted, my face growing warm. She was definitely painting a picture. I glanced at Reese, who was looking at Mom, intrigued. I guess her imagination was taking her to the same places as mine.

But Mom had made her point, all right. I went back in the dressing room and changed into my t-shirt and shorts, placing the pink suit back on the hanger carefully.

Someday, I promised it, smiling. *Someday I'll be completely, totally ready for you.*

But not today.

Chapter 15

U-turn

God allows U-turns

- seen on a t-shirt

Reese knew everyone at the pool party, and I could tell some of the guys sure appreciated her presence. With her long auburn hair, light tan, and sparkling hazel eyes, Reese always drew attention without even trying, it seemed. She wore a cobalt blue tankini which looked gorgeous on her, and I was relieved to see it was pretty modest.

“Sorry about the bimbo comment earlier,” I apologized quietly, as we were spreading our towels on a couple of side-by-side lounge chairs. “I feel bad about that.”

Reese looked amused. “Like ah said, you’re *honest*,

Casey. It's okay, ah guess that suit showed off your assets a little too *well*."

My assets? I was still grinning when Mia, Marla and a few other girls came over and started chatting. "We're going to set up a net and play pool volleyball, if ya'll are interested," Mia said. "Guys against the girls."

"I'm in," I said happily. I'm not athletic, but I was going to stay in that refreshing pool as much as possible tonight. Reese decided to just watch for awhile.

She joined in for the second round, however, and her volleyball skills weren't much better than the rest of the girls. We were all laughing so hard most of the time that nobody was taking the game seriously. The boys, on the other hand, were in full competitive mode.

"No fair," one of the girls finally called out. good-naturedly. "You guys have about five varsity athletes on your side, and we only have one. Although Latisha could beat all of you single-handedly, I'll bet! We're just holding her back!"

"Is that so?" Tyler yelled, laughing. "Is this a challenge I'm hearing?"

The back-and-forth taunts went on until the girls decided to all get out of the pool, in solidarity. "Snack time!" Mia sang out, grabbing her towel. "You guys can play against each other now, have fun!"

"We won!" Tyler cheered, but the rest of the guys looked a little forlorn, being left behind there in the water. They looked at each other, and then at us girls, who were now in cover-ups or wrapped in our towels,

going into the house to get our snacks and totally ignoring the boys.

“Actually, dude, I think we lost,” one of the guys observed wryly.

A bunch of us were sitting on the edge of the pool later on, our feet in the cool water, when I felt, rather than saw, Reese tense up from where she sat beside me. Glancing at her, I then followed her gaze to a tall, blonde guy who had just walked into Tyler’s backyard. I didn’t recognize him, and he seemed older than our crowd, but when he strolled over to Tyler’s older brother and started talking, I figured they must be friends.

“Ah need to go.” Reese’s urgent whisper was almost too soft for me to hear. “Can you get a ride home? Ah need to go. Right *now*.”

One look at Reese’s face, and I decided not to ask any questions. She was pale under her tan, and she looked almost panicked. Even so, she took her time standing up, as if any sudden movements would attract attention that she did not want. I got up too, smiling at the others and hoping they would think we were just planning a trip to the bathroom. I followed Reese back to our lounge chairs, both of us carefully casual, where we collected our towels and bags. I watched the tall blonde guy out of the corner of my eye, but he seemed totally engrossed in conversation with Tyler’s brother.

I met Reese’s eyes, and in wordless agreement, we took the long way around the pool, walking as far away

from the tall guy as we could, heading for the side gate to the backyard so we wouldn't have to walk on the patio to go through the house. I was hoping that the other kids wouldn't see us silently carrying all our stuff. *We should have just left it all on our lounge chairs*, I realized as I saw Tyler's mom notice us from where she stood on the patio.

"Are ya'll leaving already?" she called out pleasantly, taking a few steps toward us. "Casey, it's always nice to see you! And Reese, we're so glad you came tonight and hope you'll be back soon!"

Reese stopped, only a few feet from the gate. I knew it was in her DNA to be polite and respond to Tyler's mother, but she didn't turn around to face her yet. I did, though, and watched the blonde guy even as I spoke. "Thank you, Mrs. Thomas," I said politely. "Reese and I had a great time but we just have to go right now. See you on Sunday."

My heart sank, though, because the blonde guy had turned around when he heard Reese's name, and he was staring at her, right now.

"Let's go," I hissed at Reese, and we made it all the way to her car before she went to the side of the driveway, found a bush... and threw up.

"Ah was fifteen," Reese shrugged. "He was seventeen, he told me he loved me, ah believed him, we had sex, he quit callin' me, end of story."

We were in my bedroom, sitting on the floor with our backs leaning against the side of the bed, just like we had

done when Reese had cried once before, over Jackson. We were still in our swimsuits and cover-ups.

She wasn't crying now, though, and I couldn't guess what she was thinking.

"So you loved him?" I asked cautiously.

Reese sighed. "Ah thought ah did, but what is love anyway? I guess he got what he wanted, and ah was a fool for thinking ah meant any more to him than that."

Love is not self-seeking.

"He really did break mah heart, though. Seein' him again tonight...ah overreacted. It's *embarrassin'*. Anyway, he was mah *first*. Ah cried and cried, for days. Mom noticed and ah finally told her all about it, and...ah guess some good did come out of it all," she mused, pulling her legs up and resting her chin on her knees. "Mom was upset and said she didn't want me to repeat her mistakes, and that's when we moved in with mah grandmother. Until then we lived with whatever boyfriend Mom had at the time,"

"She's had a hard life, though," Reese said defensively, though I hadn't made any comment. "Bein' a single teenage mom, and never makin' much money. She's tryin'.

"But then ah was an idiot and fell for some handsome guy *again*. Last summer. We had been datin' for several months, and he was pressurin' me to show how much ah loved him. So ah agreed, and ah *wanted* to, okay? It was mah decision. Ah thought it would make us closer, but it *didn't*."

She hesitated. "Ah mean, it's as close as you can get,

but it's not *enough*. We could never get our relationship back on track. Ah mean, where do you go from there? We broke up."

She looked at me, her expression sad. "Ah really do want to find a good guy. A guy who will *respect* me, like – like Jackson. Or like your Ben," she admitted. "Ya'll are takin' your time. Ah'm not *used* to that, but ah can see the *benefits*."

"But guys like that don't seem to be attracted to me," she said matter-of-factly. "Jackson wasn't, and ah practically *threw* mahself at him. Ben never looked mah way, but then ah never thought he was mah type anyway, no offense."

"None taken," I responded, actually glad that Ben had never caught Reese's eye, because how could I ever have competed with this beauty queen?

There you go again, putting people in a box, I corrected myself. Reese was so much more than just a pretty face, and I told her so.

"Reese, face it, the right guy might not come along for years. But you're a treasure, and the right one is going to recognize that," I told her with conviction. "We're only in high school, after all. Why hurry things so much?"

Why indeed?

I felt guilty. Here I was, telling Reese to be patient when I was so impatient with Ben, definitely wanting to hurry our relationship along from "just" friendship to the boyfriend/girlfriend level. Maybe our pause button *did* need to be pushed a little longer.

I didn't like that idea, though, so I sat it on my mental back shelf and focused again on Reese.

"Ah'm not used to the men in mah life bein' *faithful*," Reese continued thoughtfully. "Not mah father, not mah boyfriends so far...but ah'm not givin' up. Maybe ah've been fishin' in the wrong *pond*. Ah'll come to your youth group next Wednesday, okay?"

I smiled at her encouragingly. "Great idea!"

It didn't seem quite right for Reese to come to my church just to check out the guys, but it did sound reasonable. What did I know? I would just have to let God deal with all that.

In the meantime, it was my job to just be Reese's friend.

Chapter 16

Parallel Parking

How to Parallel Park: Park somewhere else.

- advice on Pinterest

Jackson and Jefferson had just gotten home by the time I was dropped off from my driving lesson on Monday afternoon. I could hear Jackson's booming voice as I walked in the kitchen door, and I hurried into the living room where he and Mom were sitting on the couch, talking. Jefferson and Riley were on the floor with Bonnie, who was obviously ecstatic to see Jefferson again.

"CASEY!" Jackson yelled happily, when he saw me. "We're BACK!"

"Great, now all the food will start disappearing again," I grumbled, but I grinned at him and we fist-bumped. "Hey kid, remember me?" I asked Jefferson

teasingly, and he actually stood up and gave me a brief hug, before returning to the floor to snuggle with Bonnie.

I sat down in an armchair and we all chatted awhile. I kept watching Jefferson, who seemed content to be home. I had texted Jackson a few times since our last phone call the other night, and I didn't think he had told Harrison yet about his concerns when he was in Michigan. Maybe it had all blown over, and everything was all right now. I sure hoped so.

Jackson looked tired, though. "We did a LOT of hiking and outdoor stuff," he said. "Got some GREAT pictures. But I'm ready to go to work tomorrow so I can get some REST," he joked. He stood up and stretched. "Well, I'm gonna go take a shower. Gonna see MARLA tonight! And you" - he pointed to me - "are invited if you want to come along. James too."

Another girl might not have been too happy to have tag-alongs on her date, but I knew easygoing Marla wouldn't mind.

"I'll drive!" I volunteered, and tried not to be insulted when Mom looked alarmed.

"I had a talk with Mom after I CALLED you last week, Casey," Jackson said, reaching for some tortilla chips. We were all seated outside the taco place, at a picnic table shaded by a huge oak tree. Even in the shade it was pretty warm, though it was already eight o'clock in the evening.

Jackson explained to the others the things I already knew, that he had told me during our phone call. "So I

just up and ASKED Mom if she was going to stay in touch, and I let her know how hard it would be on Jeff if she DOESN'T."

"And it would be hard on you and James, too," Marla added sympathetically.

"Not me," James said emphatically. "I don't expect *anything* from her." He took a long sip of his drink.

"I get that, brother," Jackson sighed. "But Mom said she wants to be a part of our LIVES, maybe even move back to Texas in the near future if she can find the right JOB. She told that to Jeff. I guess we'll see."

He eyed James steadily. "I hope she CAN. It would mean a lot to Jeff. And to me," he admitted.

"What does your mom do?" I asked. "I mean, where does she work? And, um, did she ever remarry?" I remembered the information that Grandma Marie had accidentally told me at James' graduation, and I wondered if James and Jackson even *knew* that Nicole had ran away with a married man.

Jackson frowned. "Ya know, I never ASKED!" he answered sheepishly. "I only know she was using her vacation days the last two weeks. And if she got married again, I think she or Dad would have MENTIONED it over the years. Wouldn't they?"

"She's an accountant, like Dad," James said unexpectedly. "Or at least, she *was*."

We sat for a few moments, eating quietly, each lost in our thoughts. I wondered what it would be like to have Nicole living closer, maybe even back in the same town.

Would Jefferson want to live with her, at least some of the time? Would Nicole want that, too?

And would James just keep ignoring her?

“You should have told me about this earlier,” Harrison chided me the next evening. He wasn’t talking about Jackson’s concerns with Nicole, though.

He was about to give me a parallel parking lesson.

“Did your instructor tell you how to use the window triangle method?”

I looked at him blankly, from my position in the driver’s seat of the old Dodge that I was going to be sharing with Jackson.

“I’ll take that as a no. Okay, there are three simple steps, and each step involves lining up your car with a certain reference point on the car beside you. So, I’m going to park my car and your mom’s car out on our street real quick, and I’ll leave enough space between them for you to parallel park,” He got out of the Dodge, and hurried to go move the cars out of the garage and into the street.

I was horrified. He wanted me to practice with *real* cars, and not traffic cones?

“Back out of the driveway and let me pull the cars out!” he hollered, and I did so obediently. I was good at backing out. But no way was I going to be responsible for denting his car or Mom’s, and I told him so once he had moved both cars and settled back in the passenger seat, beside me.

Harrison looked straight at me. “You won’t dent the cars,” he said confidently. “You can do this, Case. We’ll take it slow, and you’re going to succeed the very first time.”

“Okay, Obi Wan,” I sighed. “It’s *your* insurance claim. Remember I don’t have a job to pay for any damages.”

His gaze did not waver, though he swallowed pretty hard. “You’ve got this. It’s go time.”

Harrison’s car was parked in front, and after I pulled up alongside his car, he had me back up until the rear end of his car appeared in my rear triangle window, on the right.

“Now turn your wheel to the right, and start backing up.” He continued giving me instructions, having me check my left side mirror for the second reference point, and then my right side mirror for the third.

I just gritted my teeth and did whatever he said, doing everything super slow. He had been warned, after all.

“Now put the car in park, and let’s get out and see how you’re positioned.” I did, and we both got out, very slowly on my part. At least I hadn’t heard any sickening crunches of metal against metal, which was a very good sign.

“Well, look at that!” Harrison’s voice was pleased and proud.

I had done it.

I shrieked. “YESSS!! FINALLY!!!” I wished with all

my heart that Ms. Cordova was here right now. “I’m going to take a picture!”

“Practice it again, though. Do you see how you could pull up a little farther, to center yourself in the space? But you did a fantastic job, Casey. I knew you would!”

“The way you explained it helped me a lot, Harrison. Thanks!” *And thanks for giving me some confidence*, I added silently.

“We’ll celebrate this on Saturday,” Harrison decided. “You have your learner’s permit, so you can drive us all out for ice cream, maybe. I’ll sure your mother will look forward to it,” he added with a wink, reading my mind.

“As long as I get to parallel park,” I told him happily.

I texted the picture to Ben.

Ben: Nailed it! Congrats!

He sent me a picture of a calf.

Ben: I helped deliver this bad boy today.

Me: Awwwwww. I think Bonnie needs a baby brother.

Ben: I'm picturing a bull in your backyard.

Me: We could name him Clyde. Bonnie and Clyde.

"Ms. Cordova?" I said timidly. It was my last scheduled driving lesson, and we had practiced more highway driving, merging, and emergency braking skills. I had done it all perfectly, or so I assumed since I had not been griped at about anything.

Yet.

But I wanted the chance to show off my new parallel parking skills, and The Grim One had not asked me to do so, even once. My lesson was almost over, and we were sitting in a parking lot, while Ms. Cordova wrote down some notes. She looked up and waited for me to continue.

"Um, don't you need me to parallel park?"

"Not today," she said crisply, and returned to her notes.

"Ma'am, I would really, really like to try." She looked up at me sharply and I almost lost my nerve. "I mean, if it's okay with you."

Ms. Cordova studied me. "Very well. I assume you've been practicing?"

"I have!" I told her, nodding my head vigorously. "I'm doing so much better!"

"I'll get the cones out of the trunk," she told me, and then it dawned on me.

I had not been practicing with safety cones! I relied on being able to see my three reference points, on real cars, like Harrison taught me. My stomach clenched up, and I backtracked, a little panicked.

Getting out of the car, I hurried over to Ms. Cordova, who was setting out the cones in the hot parking lot. “Um, ma’am? You know, our lesson is almost over and this might take too much time, so we don’t really have to do this after all.”

Ms. Cordova glared at me. “Miss Campbell, you are going to parallel park. Get back in the car.”

Help me, Jesus! I trotted back to the car, chastened, and Ms. Cordova joined me a few minutes later.

“Excuse me a minute,” I told her apologetically, popping out of the car again. “I just need to get a good look at those cones.” I walked behind the car and really studied them, trying to visualize actual cars instead of the bright orange cones, before returning to the driver’s seat.

“Are you ready now, Miss Campbell?” Ms. Cordova asked, her voice sounding- could it be? - almost amused.

“Ready,” I muttered, and tried to block everything out except me, the car, and the cones.

Slowly, I started backing up. The first reference point might be the hardest, since I couldn’t see a real car through the right-side triangle window in the back seat. I had to use my right mirror to locate the cone, and I did the best I could.

It’s now or never. I turned the wheel and started backing up again, carefully locating my second and third

reference points. I moved the car forward a smidgen, and then let out a deep breath.

We both got out of the car to take a look.

I grinned.

Ms. Cordova nodded.

Mission accomplished.

“Time for you to drive home,” Ms. Cordova said. “You’re my last lesson today.” I searched her face for a smile, a glimmer of approval, anything, but her face was impassive.

I wasn’t going to let this bother me. I had won, and I was done.

I silently drove us to my house, making complete stops at stop signs and constantly checking traffic conditions, and finally pulled into the driveway.

“Well, I guess this is it,” I said lamely, eager to be done with her company. “Thanks, Ms. Cordova.”

“Before you go, Miss Campbell, I want to give you my final assessment,” she announced. “You will get an official copy on your last day of class tomorrow, but I have some comments which I do not usually write down.”

Here it comes, I thought glumly. All the reasons she doesn’t like me.

“On our first lesson, you seemed arrogant. You made several common mistakes, and though they were relatively minor, each one could have led to an accident. But you listened to instruction, started taking things more seriously, and improved to the point where I was searching for ways to challenge you. Safely, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed, surprised. She thought I was a

good driver?

“If you perform as well on your driver’s test as you did today, I predict that you will pass the first time. As long as you don’t get cocky,” she warned me sternly, and I nodded up and down earnestly, thrilled to hear her words.

“Here, I have something for you.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a small white envelope. “I like to give each of my students a little gift. Open it.”

I did, curious about what this woman would give *me*, the student I thought she had loathed.

It was a tiny metal angel.

“There’s a clip so you can put it on your visor. It’s a reminder to be careful.” Ms. Cordova hesitated. “It’s a gift from me, not the driving academy. If you don’t believe in angels, you may return it to me.” She looked at me fiercely, as if daring me to say I did not believe angels existed.

I smiled at her, very touched by her gift. “I do believe in angels, Ms. Cordova,” I said softly. “Thank you so much. And I promise that I’ll be careful. And not cocky. I promise.”

“Very well,” she said stiffly, but then she relented and gave me a small, but genuine, smile. “You may go inside now, Miss Campbell.”

I carried the unexpected gift in my hand carefully, as I got out of the car and walked to my front porch. This tiny angel would always be a passenger in my car, watchful and caring, but a little cranky.

And her name would be Ms. Cordova.

Chapter 17

Water Over Road

*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods
drown it.*

– Song of Solomon 8, the Bible

“Tonight we’re going to talk about sex.”

All the kids at our youth group meeting stopped whatever whispered conversations were still going on, and I had to grin. That one three-letter word was enough to rivet our attention completely on our youth pastor, Kevin, during our regular Wednesday night meeting.

Kevin smiled, too. “We discuss sexual purity every few months, because it’s critical. The choices you make now, as teenagers, can have ripple effects for the rest of your lives, in different ways.”

Beside me, Reese tensed. I glanced at her, and she

was looking directly at me, suspicious. I shook my head slightly at her and shrugged. Did she really think I told Pastor Kevin about the very private conversation we had last Saturday? Surely she knew I would never do that!

Concerned, I tried to focus on Kevin's words. "The Bible has a lot to say about sex, in a marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Read the Song of Solomon, one of the books in the Bible, and in parts of it you might just blush."

Some of the kids laughed, and I took a mental note. *Song of Solomon – put on reading list!*

"In order to talk about sex, though, we have to talk about love. Most of us long for the real thing, the kind of love that endures for a lifetime."

I dared to peek at Reese again, and she was now glaring at Kevin, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed defiantly.

Kevin continued. "There's no point in obeying a list of do's and don'ts, if you don't trust the one giving you those guidelines. So, that's why we have to talk about love. But not the love you have for your boyfriend or girlfriend. Not the love you have for your family, or your friends.

"I'm talking about the One who created love, the One who *is* love. If we don't know *Him*, and choose to trust Him and His love for *us*, then the boundaries are easy to ignore."

Kevin paused.

Reese still looked grumpy.

"Most of us, though not all, have had fathers who

loved us. But we can all understand that a good father protects and guards his children, and wants them to have the best lives and futures they can possibly have. So he gives limits. Most are obvious, like not allowing a toddler to play with a knife, or a teenager to stay out all night. Other boundaries or rules don't seem fair and aren't easy to understand, at least not right away.

“So the child has to decide whether to trust his father, to trust his father's intentions. To trust his heart.”

Kevin's voice softened. “Jesus gives us clear signposts to guide us in our lives, and many times they feel outdated or frustrating. But like a good, loving father who teaches his children, the boundaries God gives us are for our good, even if we can't see the love behind them right away.”

He talked awhile longer, and a few kids asked questions, which was strangely not at all awkward. I felt tense and uneasy, though. What was Reese thinking? Would she feel offended, or defensive of the choices she had already made? Did she think we were a group of old-fashioned, uptight whackos? Was she-

“Father, You love everyone here in this room, no matter what choices we've made in the past,” Kevin prayed. “Your greatest desire is to have a relationship with us, not to condemn us. Help us to seek You, and know You, and trust You. Amen.”

No matter what choices we've made in the past.

Those words stilled me. Reese was far from the only one who had made poor choices.

I lingered in my seat for several seconds after Kevin's

prayer, lost in thought, and finally realized that everyone else was getting up, grabbing a few more snacks from the back of the room, and in general getting ready to leave.

Reese, Mia and Marla were chatting together with a group of girls by the snack table, and I walked over to join them. “You’re leaving to visit your old home town on Saturday, right?” Mia asked, turning to include me. “I’ll miss you, but I hope you have a blast with your old friends!” We all started talking, and I was relieved to see that Reese seemed perfectly comfortable, not mad or upset at all unless she was just faking it extra well.

“Let’s ROLL!” Jackson said, coming over to our group, car keys in hand. He had driven me, Marla and Reese to the meeting tonight and was obviously ready to go.

Reese squeezed my arm as the four of us walked outside to the parking lot, and then pulled me back to let Jackson and Marla walk ahead. “Ah know you’re nervous,” she drawled softly. “And you *should* be. Ah thought you had betrayed mah *confidence*.”

“You know I didn’t, right?” I whispered, still anxious.

“If ah thought you did, ah wouldn’t be *talkin’* to you right now,” Reese answered, the usual sparkle back in her hazel eyes. . “And you might have a few scratches, just sayin’. Ah trust you, Casey. But no offense...” she paused. “Ah don’t know if ah can trust your God. Or if I even believe he’s real. Just so we’re *clear*.”

I didn’t have a good comeback to that, so I just nodded.

Reese sighed and pulled me along towards the car again, where Jackson and Marla were already waiting. “Some guys tonight were pretty hot, though.”

I sure didn’t know how to respond to *that*, so I nodded again, smiling a little weakly.

I’m sorry about the whacko thing, I sent a quick prayer up to Jesus, feeling guilty. *I guess if I’m considered a whacko, though, at least I’ll be one for You.*

“Since when is Jefferson this annoying?” I grumbled to Mom as I packed my last-minute toiletries on Saturday morning. “He’s been a brat ever since he got back from Michigan.”

“Maybe the honeymoon period is over,” Mom admitted. She was sitting on the edge of my bed, waiting for me to finish packing so we could make the drive to Sarah’s house, two hundred miles away. “I mean, blending two families together is hard, and we’ve had a relatively easy transition in most ways. There were bound to be some bumps in the road at some point.”

“I think he needs a bump on his behind,” I muttered. “Did I tell you he”-

I was interrupted by a loud crash, and then a wail, coming from the kitchen. It sounded like Riley, though.

“Can I pack really quick and go with you for the week?” Mom said jokingly, as she went out the bedroom door to check on the latest disaster.

Jefferson *had* been a terror since a day or so after he

got back. Any little thing made him mad, and his outbursts seemed over the top. Maybe that wasn't so unusual for a ten-year-old boy, what did I know? But he was not the same Jefferson that he was before his trip.

Before Nicole. Grrrr.

"Have you seen my laptop?" Mom asked, coming back in the bedroom, leading a sniffing Riley by the hand. "I could have sworn I left it on the kitchen table last night."

"It's probably upstairs," I replied, shoving my pajamas in the suitcase on my bed. "I'm done! Are you and Harrison ready? Let's go!"

"And me, too. I'm going, too," Riley said in a small, trembling voice.

"You too, Ry Ry," I said, feeling a little guilty. I was in such a hurry to get on the road, and here was my little sister, missing me already. I knelt down in front of her, and gave her a hug. "You'll get to visit with one of your good friends today, and then you'll come back to pick me up next weekend. I'll be home before you know it!"

"And I'll have the room all to myself this week," Riley said, her face brightening. "And you won't hog the bathroom and I can try on some of your clothes and maybe your make-up" – she saw my glare and stopped talking, but still grinned at me, obviously delighted with the prospects.

Okay, so maybe she wasn't going to miss me *that* much.

. . .

“This is the life!” I sang out.

It was Saturday evening, and Mom, Harrison and Riley had left hours ago, after dropping me off at Sarah’s house, leaving from there to meet our former neighbors for a late lunch. Sarah and I were in her backyard pool, laying on inflatable pool floats, the kind that have the pillowy things to rest your head on, with built-in cup holders.

“You just love me for my pool,” Sarah sighed, looking tanned and stunning in her white bikini. “I feel so used.”

I was wearing my bikini too, the one I refused to wear to pool parties. Sarah had three brothers, though two of them were older and no longer lived at home, and her younger brother was at a friend’s house for the evening. We were blessedly, contentedly alone, and had been talking a mile a minute ever since I had arrived, just like old times.

We wouldn’t be alone for long, though, according to Sarah.

“Everyone can’t *wait* to see you! I actually lied and told our friends you were coming tomorrow, not today,” she smirked. “Just so we could have some extra time together. Tomorrow night we’ll have the gang over, and then Monday we’ll go to the YMCA so you can visit your tired old public pool.” She wrinkled her nose. “Probably full of pee. Why you want to go back there is beyond me, but I’m your loyal friend, so...”

“You didn’t have to lie, Sarah, sheesh!” I told her, still stuck on that fact. “And that pool meant a lot to me, growing up. I learned to swim there, and had my first

crush there, on one of the lifeguards. I think I was twelve.”

“I know all that,” Sarah said, brushing my comments aside breezily. “Wednesday is the fourth of July, of course, so there’ll be the parade in the morning and fireworks out by the lake that night. Then Thursday is your birthday! Seventeen, finally! And still no license, you little late bloomer, you. When can you drive on your own?”

“I can’t take my test until the end of September,” I admitted. “I have to log in more practice hours. It’s no big deal, though, since Jackson can drive us to and from school. So what are my birthday plans?” I asked her, faking a serious look. “Can we hire that creepy clown that showed up on your seventh birthday?”

That sent us off into gales of laughter, remembering, though it wasn’t really all *that* hilarious.

It’s just that it was fun to laugh, to be with an old friend who knew me back in the day, who knew all my stories and shared my memories. Sarah had known my dad, and was there when my world had stopped turning several years ago, after he died. She held my hand at the funeral.

And she had forgiven me, a few months ago, when I had believed the worst of her. I didn’t deserve her. I had to let her know, somehow, right now, how much she meant to me.

So I paddled my float over to hers, and gently reached over to pat her arm affectionately. Then I grabbed the side of her float and turned it over, putting some muscle

Follow the Signs

into it, and enjoyed her loud squawk as she rolled over into the water.

I would pay for this, but I owed her a lot of debts, anyway.

What was one more?

Chapter 18

No Parking

The road to success is dotted with many tempting parking spaces.

- Will Rogers

I stared at the picture of the fish.

Me: Is this a patient?

Ben: No, it's dead.

Me: Why are you sending me a picture of a dead fish?

Ben: Catfish, caught it at Lake Kirby. Good size. Dinner tonight!

“Let me see! You’re grinning like a fool so it has to be Ben!” Sarah said, snatching the phone from my hand. We were getting ready for my welcome-back pool party tonight, held right here at Sarah’s house. I shrugged and plopped down on the side of her bed. Sarah knew everything about me anyway, so why not let her check my messages?

“That’s a whopper of a catfish, wow!” she said admiringly. “It will taste so good if they fry it up right. Not that I eat fried foods anymore,” she moaned, handing the phone back to me. “I’m really trying to eat healthy. I need to lose about ten more pounds.”

I frowned. Sarah was always worried about her weight. She used to be a little overweight when we were kids, but had looked very healthy and fit for several years now, in my opinion.

“You don’t look like you need to lose weight, Sarah, honestly. But I know what you mean about eating healthy. I’m way too addicted to tacos,” I admitted. “And pasta. And cake.”

“All the good stuff,” Sarah agreed with a sigh, sitting next to me on the bed. We both stared at our reflections in her dresser mirror, which was right across from her bed, and made weird faces at each other.

“You ready to see Davis tonight?”

“I guess.” Like I hadn’t thought about that moment a thousand times in the last few days. I had last seen my ex-boyfriend on my Spring Break, when he drove all the way to my new home just to talk to me.

“I heard something last week.” Sarah hesitated,

studying my reflection in the mirror. “I think Davis has another girlfriend now, but I’m not sure. He doesn’t hang out with our old group so much anymore, now that you moved. I just wanted to warn you in case he brings her tonight, or you hear something.”

I gazed back solemnly at Sarah’s reflection, trying to decide how I felt about that. I wasn’t surprised, wasn’t hurt...so far so good. “Maybe, just maaaaaybe, I’m happy for him,” I finally said, testing the words as I spoke them, as if to evaluate how much truth they really carried.

Sarah stared back at me.

“Liar,” she decided, and reached behind her to grab a pillow, hitting me over the head with it.

It was like I had never moved away. Of course, I hadn’t been gone that long- only six months- but catching up with my old friends, most of whom I had known since kindergarten, was like a little family reunion. Same jokes, shared memories, familiar teasing. It was like putting on your most comfortable pair of fluffy socks, after being on your feet all day in heels. Not that I ever wore heels all day, but you get the idea.

Sarah’s dad cooked hamburgers and hot dogs on the patio by the pool, and we feasted, chatted, and did a bit of swimming. All of the old gang came, including Davis.

By himself.

He kept his distance, though, avoiding my gaze and barely speaking two sentences to me.

“It’s a guy thing, I think,” Sarah observed later, after everyone had left and we were getting ready for bed. “Based on my older brothers dating habits, if they stopped dating a girl, it was totally *over*. Like, they could never be just friends again, even if the girls were okay with that.”

We took a break from talking to brush our teeth, but once Sarah had rinsed her mouth and spit into the sink, she continued. “Maybe that’s just the way my goofy brothers are, though, not all guys.”

I spat into the sink, too. “I’m actually pretty concerned about that”, I admitted, wiping my mouth. “Not with Davis, but with Ben. What if we decide to officially start dating after he gets back from Abilene, and it doesn’t work out? Could we go back to being close friends again after that? If not, it would break my heart.”

“Are you going to make a list of pros and cons?” Sarah teased me, knowingly. “Come on, girl, you worry too much! You have to take some risks, you know!”

“Mom actually gave me some good advice recently,” I remarked. “She told me to love Jesus first and listen to what He says, and to let my decisions flow from that. I’m trying, and yeah, I know I worry too much. But still.”

We walked out of the bathroom and started to go our separate ways, Sarah back to her bedroom and me to her family’s very comfortable guest room. “Goodnight,” she said pensively, then stopped, there in the hallway. “You’ve changed a little,” she said softly. “You talk about God more than you used to.”

I remembered my “does-she-think-I’m-a-whacko” concerns with Reese, and smiled.

“I think that’s a good thing,” I admitted, just as softly, and gave Sarah a hug.

The “So-How-Did-The-Rest-of-My-Old-Hometown-Visit-Go” Quiz

1. How was my old best friend, the YMCA pool?

A. Wonderful, as usual.

B. A little too crowded , lots of little kids, heavily chlorinated.

C. The lifeguards weren’t as cute as I remember.

D. Reese went with me, but never even dipped a toe in the pool.

E. All except for C.

2. Did Davis decide to fall in love with me again?

A. Well yes, how could he not?

B. Nope.

C. He showed up at the lake with his new girlfriend, who was wearing the exact same swimsuit that my mother would not let me buy.

D. Both B and C.

3. And, how did my big seventeenth birthday party extravaganza go?

A. Our plans were fun, but actually pretty low-key. Burgers and hot dogs again, plus chips, cake and ice cream, poolside with the gang, at Sarah's house.

B. Sarah's dad saved some fireworks from the night before, to set off in my honor once it got dark!

Follow the Signs

C. Ben was going to call me at 11 a.m. sharp. My birthday was also the first day of his FFA convention, and he would be booked all day, but he was making sure he talked to me.

D. There was no party. No fireworks. No phone call answered, *nada*. None of it happened.

ANSWER KEY: E, D....

and unfortunately, **D**.

Chapter 19

Detour

... a series of (detour signs) will line your route until you end up in the same area your original route would have taken you. Just follow the detour signs and you'll eventually get to where you need to be. Trust the signs.

- Aceable.com online blog

Mom called at eight o'clock the morning of July 5th, my birthday, but I had my phone volume turned way down and I guess I was sound asleep because I didn't hear it ringing. When I woke up about an hour later, though, I noticed and called her back.

"Casey!" she said, and I mistook the tension in her voice for excitement.

"You called way too early," I told her chidingly. "But that's okay. I guess you have something to tell me?" My voice was teasing. Mom always sang the happy birthday

song to me, every single year, after I woke up on my birthday.

But not this time.

“Jefferson is missing,” Mom told me, her voice strained with worry. “We haven’t seen him since he went to bed last night.”

“He apparently sneaked out the back door sometime during the night. He has his own bedroom, and Bonnie-our dog- was sleeping in Riley’s bed. She and Jefferson take turns,” I explained unnecessarily. Sarah and her parents listened intently as we all sat around their kitchen table, their expressions concerned.

“He took his backpack and a few clothes. His bike is gone, too. Everyone slept in this morning after watching the fireworks last night, so I guess he got a head start to... to wherever he’s going.”

For the first time since Mom had given me the details this morning, I felt dread rise in my gut. “He’s only ten, almost eleven. He can’t be *that* far away. But nobody can find him. They’ve called the police and everything. All the neighbors are looking.”

“He sounds like a smart kid,” Sarah’s mom said soothingly, reaching across the table to cover my hand with hers. “I’m sure he’s okay, and will turn up very soon.” Miss Kim was like a second mom to me, and her words reassured me. She was right- Jefferson was smart. He would be okay. And then I remembered something.

“He has money,” I said slowly. “We all gave him

money for his trip to Montana, and I don't think he ever spent it. I only gave him ten dollars, but I bet Mom and Harrison gave him more than that. I need to let them know."

"I'll get you some coffee, dear, while you make that call," Miss Kim said, rising from the table.

Neither Mom nor Harrison answered their phones, so I called James. "He has money," I said bluntly, and James knew exactly what I meant.

"We've thought of that," he said wearily. "We're not sure where he kept it, but we can't find any money in his room. There's no note, nothing. I'm gonna hogtie that kid, once we find out he's okay."

"How is Riley doing?"

"She's awfully quiet. Scared to death, I guess. Lauren is staying at the house with her, and the rest of us are all out looking."

"I'll post something on Facebook to let my friends know, and maybe they'll help look, too," I told him, and hung up, anxious to do that immediately. It was *something* I could do.

I hated being so far away right now.

Opening the Facebook app on my phone, I went to my home page, already planning what I would type, and then I paused, stunned.

I was still sitting at the kitchen table. Miss Kim had put a cup of coffee and a bagel on the place mat in front of me, though she and her husband had quietly left the kitchen during my phone call. Sarah was still sitting there, however, watching me. She saw my face, took the

phone out of my hands, looked at the picture I had just seen, and said a bad word.

“Ignore this,” she told me sternly. “We’ll deal with it later. You talk, I’ll type. *Now.*”

And between my shaky voice and Sarah’s decisive fingers, we got the message out, adding a picture of Jefferson that she located on my phone.

My brother is missing. Please help look for him if you can.

I called Mom again a little later, and this time she answered. “Mom, I just thought of something. Have you checked the browsing history on your laptop?”

There was a brief silence. “Why, do you think Jefferson could have...but he doesn’t know my password to log on...”

“Riley does,” I said grimly. “And that’s my fault because I gave it to her awhile back to look up a cookie recipe. You leave your laptop on the kitchen table a lot, and Ry and I were both in the kitchen messing around. I should have told you, but.... the thing is, remember last Saturday when you couldn’t find your laptop? Where did you find it?”

“I’m going to check the history,” Mom said abruptly. “I’ll keep you posted.”

She disconnected the call, and once again I was left

waiting, two hundred miles away in the town I grew up in, full of good friends and great memories.

And I wished with all my heart and soul that I was not here.

I wished I was *home*.

Sarah disappeared for several minutes while I nibbled at my bagel and sipped coffee, checking Facebook every few seconds just for something to do. Several friends had already commented on my post, promising to leave right then and there and look for Jefferson. Marla, Reese, and Mia, all texted me, and their words were encouraging but left me stone cold. If I felt this fearful as just a stepsister, I tried to imagine what Harrison had to be going through.

Or Nicole. Did she even know yet that Jefferson was missing?

I tried to pray. *Help us find Jefferson. Protect him, please.*

Sarah reappeared, her father behind her. He was jingling his car keys, and he smiled at me compassionately.

“Go pack up,” Sarah ordered me, but gently. “I’ll help. We’re taking you home.”

I looked at both of them, surprised, and felt my eyes fill with tears.

One of my prayers, my very private one that I thought was too selfish to even ask for compared with all the more serious prayers going up, had just been answered with a *yes*.

I was going home.

“He’ll probably be found before I get back,” I told Sarah apologetically. Together we were packing my suitcase in the guest room, putting my still-damp swimsuit in a plastic bag to carry separately. “I feel really bad that your dad is going to use one of his vacation days to drive all that way and back, and it’ll probably be for nothing.” I started feeling teary again. “And you and your parents made all those wonderful plans for tonight, and now I’m ruining *everything*. And-“

“Casey?” Sarah interrupted.

“Yeah?” I said, sniffing.

“Just shut up,” she said good-naturedly, closing my suitcase with a snap.

I did for a minute, and then Sarah sat down on the bed, putting her arm around me. I leaned my head against her shoulder.

“How did you know I wanted to go home so badly?” I asked quietly.

Sarah sighed, and gently nudged my head away. She got up from the bed, left the room briefly, and came back carrying a package wrapped in bright lime green paper, my favorite color. She handed it to me.

I slowly, carefully unwrapped it. It seemed like most people had forgotten it was my birthday.

It was a picture frame, the kind that holds two pictures side by side. On the left was a picture of Sarah and me when we were about six years old, arms linked

and smiling into the camera, both of us with missing front teeth. It had been taken on a trip to the lake.

On the right side was a selfie we had taken earlier this week, at the same lake. The two of us were again linking arms and smiling into the camera, this time with better teeth. The pose was almost exactly the same, and I remembered how Sarah had retaken this picture several times until she had gotten our positions, and probably our smiles, just right, to mirror our six-year-old selves.

“This is how I knew,” Sarah said softly. “We have history. I’ll *always* know you, Casey.” She knelt down on the floor in front of me, and took my hands in hers.

“And by the way...” she hesitated. “Happy birthday, best friend.”

I cried again, and not because my birthday was truly an absolute disaster so far, but because I was grateful to be known, and loved, by a friend like Sarah.

No matter where I was, and no matter what.

My phone rang at 10:55 a.m., while we were on the road. I looked down and saw that Ben was calling. *Five minutes early*, I noted, feeling a little detached, and then paused, debating with myself about whether to answer or not.

Sitting beside me in the back seat, Sarah noted my hesitation and snatched my phone away, looking to see who was calling. She immediately declined the call and handed the phone back to me. “Later,” she said, shrugging. “I’m sure there’s a perfectly logical explanation for

that Facebook picture but right now is not the time to deal with it, okay?”

I nodded, feeling numb and praying that the phone would ring again soon, this time with some good news about Jefferson. That didn't happen, but Ben tried calling again twice, and I started feeling guilty. Did he know anything about Jefferson? He had a Facebook account but rarely checked it, and who else would call to let him know? Everyone would assume I had already done that.

I looked over at Sarah. “I need to let Ben know about Jefferson,” I told her, and she nodded.

“Okay, yeah, you do,” she said. “But let me send the message, okay? I'll let him know it's me doing the texting.”

Against my better judgment, I gave Sarah my phone and let her type a message to Ben. “Let me see it before you hit send,” I asked, as my brain slowly started fighting the numbness that seemed to hold it hostage.

“Oops!” she said innocently, and my heart sank a little, because I knew what *that* meant. With a sigh, I reached for the phone and read the message she had already sent to Ben.

Me: This is Sarah. Jefferson is missing and everyone is looking for him!!! Casey is on her way home. AND CHECK YOUR FACEBOOK PAGE!!! You hurt my girl and you die.

She had included a lot of angry emojis, and I actually felt a little sorry for Ben. I should have texted him right away, and in fact I should have taken his first call, I scolded myself. Why did I always, always doubt him?

I'm stressed, I told myself. Jefferson is my first priority right now.

But even after two more hours, as Sarah's dad was pulling into my driveway, Ben had not responded.

Chapter 20

Focus

*Always focus on the front windshield and not the rear
view mirror.*

– Colin Powell

Mom finally called, though. And Harrison, James, Jackson, and Marla texted me, in a flurry of messages that seemed to come all at once.

About halfway through my journey back home, my youngest stepbrother had been found, hugged, and rejoiced over. He had then been questioned at length, reprimanded, hugged and cried over again, and then grounded until he was thirty.

And so had my little sister, though to a lesser extent.

The “So What on Earth Happened with Jefferson?” Quiz

1. Why did Jefferson run away from home?

A. He ran away because he got mad at Harrison and was being a brat.

B. He ran away because he thought it would be a big adventure.

C. He ran away because he wanted to go stay with his mom again.

2. How did Jefferson plan his getaway?

A. He looked up bus routes on the internet, from our town to Lansing, Michigan, where Nicole lives.

B. He printed out a map from our house to the bus station downtown.

C. He printed out a map from the bus station in Lansing, to Nicole's house.

D. Both A and B.

3. How come Riley got in trouble, too?

A. She gave Jefferson the password to Mom's laptop so he could look up all this information. And yes, that was partly my fault too, which was made crystal clear.

B. She let him borrow her birthday flashlight so he could read his map to the bus station, while riding his bike in the dark.

C. She gave him all of her cash, which was a hefty amount since she's like me and doesn't spend a lot of her birthday and Christmas money.

D. She let all of us worry ourselves SICK by keeping a secret that could have ultimately endangered Jefferson.

E. ALL. OF. THE. ABOVE.

4. How come nobody found a ten-year-old boy for such a long time?

A. He made it to the bus station, on his bike, before anyone at home was even awake.

B. He left his bike in someone's yard, near the bus station, behind some bushes.

C. The police actually did look for Jefferson at the bus station, but he hid in the women's bathroom which was apparently deserted when he first got there, early in the morning. I guess he sat in a stall and pretended to be a girl? So many questions.

D. He was discovered when he came out of the restroom to buy his bus ticket, at the last minute before the bus left.

E. We underestimated Jefferson's ability to become invisible, when he wanted to be.

F. All of the above.

ANSWERS: C, D, E, F

After Sarah and her dad dropped me off at the house, met all the J's, and chatted for a few minutes, they left again pretty quickly to make their return journey back home.

"You're all exhausted and don't need us around," Sarah's dad said firmly, when Mom urged him and Sarah to stay the night. "And don't give it another thought...we were glad to bring Casey home. We were trying to figure out how to get rid of her anyway." He gave me a wink.

I smiled at him, forever grateful for this very nice guy.

"Let me know what happens," Sarah whispered, giving me a goodbye hug, and I knew what she meant. Ben. The Facebook picture. Jefferson. Life.

"Always," I whispered back. "Everything. Always."

And they left.

"Casey?"

Jefferson had been in his bedroom when I got home, and I just now tapped softly on his door and opened it, hesitantly. He was in bed, and I guess he had been asleep because one side of his face looked all smushed from where he had been lying on his pillow. He looked like you would expect someone to look after spending a sleepless night biking and then hiding in a bathroom stall - tired and cranky. Bonnie was curled up at the foot of his bed napping, though she woke up when I came in the room and wagged her tail a little.

“I thought you were gone. Why are you here?” he asked, struggling a bit to sit up, and sounding puzzled.

I walked over and sat on the edge of his bed. “I came back to see you,” I said. “You had me worried sick, bro.”

He studied my face. “Are you mad at me?”

“Oh yeah,” I said honestly. “But mostly I’m just glad you’re safe, and you’re home.”

“You didn’t have to come back,” he said in a small voice. “Isn’t it your birthday? Aren’t you missing your big party?”

I looked at Jefferson, assessing. Out of all the J’s, he was the one I paid the least attention to, because he was so much younger and I guess our worlds just didn’t intersect that much.. I wondered if I should give him a little lecture on how he had inconvenienced me, and ruined my week with his actions. That was absolutely true.

And then I saw his eye twitch.

My eye twitches sometimes when I’m nervous, or feeling overwhelmed. But a ten-year-old’s eye shouldn’t twitch.

“Listen up,” I told him, firmly. “I came home because I needed to. I wanted to be with my family and with you because, well, you’re part of my family now. That’s... that’s just what family does.”

“We don’t run away,” he responded seriously, like he had been told that several times recently, which I’m sure he probably had.

“No, we don’t run away,” I agreed, reaching over to give him a quick hug. “We stay and work things out.” As

soon as I said those words, I thought of his mother, Nicole.

She ran away. It was no wonder if the poor kid was confused

Jefferson let me hug him for about three seconds, and then wriggled away and reached for Bonnie. But he did give me a smile. "Happy Birthday, Casey," he said. "I wish I had a present for you, but Dad's keeping my money for awhile," he added gloomily.

I just shook my head and grinned.

Ben: Come outside.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and my impromptu birthday dinner was being planned. Pizza delivery and ice cream? A birthday cake from the grocery bakery?

I opened my front door, and saw Ben's truck in the driveway.

And there was Ben, sitting on my front steps. It was blazing hot, but at least the steps were in the shade at this time of day.

I walked over to the steps, and settled down beside him, not too close. Nothing was surprising me today, but still-

"Aren't you supposed to be in Fort Worth?" I asked, not looking at him.

"Yes," he said. "I am. In fact, I'm leaving again in

about half an hour, to make it back for at least part of an event tonight. But when I got your text, or actually Sarah's text" - he paused, and I stole a glance at him.

"- I decided I had better get back here and take care of business," he said, holding my gaze. He wasn't smiling, but I could hear the amusement in his voice. "Your friend doesn't mess around, does she? So, three things. First of all, Jefferson. I heard he's okay? Safe?"

I nodded my head. "Safe inside," I confirmed.

"Good. Second thing - that stupid Facebook picture." He held up his phone and went to his Facebook app, finding the picture of him and Miranda on his home page. He was smiling into the camera, but Miranda was not. Instead, she had an arm wrapped around Ben and was giving him a kiss, almost on his mouth. They looked one hundred percent like a "we're-crazy-about-each-other-and-want-everyone-to-know-it" couple.

I looked at the picture sullenly. "Miranda tagged me on that picture," I pointed out. "I'm not even her Facebook friend, and she tagged me! On purpose, to make me jealous, I guess."

"You need to change your security settings," Ben pointed out reasonably, which rather annoyed me. "And did it work, Campbell? Did she make you jealous? But moving on," he said hastily, when I looked daggers at him, "she was taking pictures with everyone in our FFA group this morning. I didn't know she was going to kiss me, and I sure didn't know she'd plaster the pictures all over social media."

"She's got some good selfie skills, if she can take a

picture that good while she's busy kissing a guy," I said grumpily. But I was feeling better. Ben had driven all this way...

"What's the third thing? You said there were three things?"

"Yep. You know, I never wrote in your yearbook, Casey. We both forgot about it, but I finally thought of something to write. Can you go get it?"

I was rather touched, but also surprised. "My yearbook? You drove all this way to write in my yearbook?"

"Go get it", was all he said, and I finally noticed that he was looking rather sweaty, and I probably was glowing a bit too.

"Come on in out of the heat," I told him, and he quickly agreed and walked into the house with me.

While he chatted with Mom and Harrison in the kitchen, I went to my room and found my yearbook, on the shelf by my desk. I picked it up, found a pen, and went back to the kitchen. "Let's go in the living room," I told Ben. "Nobody ever hangs out in there," I added meaningfully, looking at Mom and Harrison and hoping they got the message.

We settled down on the couch, and Ben opened my yearbook. "Hmm, where to sign? No, don't tell me and don't look. I'll choose a page and you can find it later."

"You mean I can't read it right away? The suspense will kill me," I told him, halfway serious.

"Nope, can't look," he told me firmly. "It's really not that big of a deal, but it's your birthday, I don't have a present, and this is all I've got. Work with me here."

So I looked away, humming the theme from Jeopardy just to annoy him, and was actually a little concerned when it only took him about a minute to write his mystery message. Didn't he have more to say to me than that?

"Done," he said cheerfully, closing the yearbook. "Do ya'll have any food around here?"

"Stay for dinner," I begged him. "We're having pizza, cake and ice cream, just like every birthday since I was five."

"I wish I could," he said, and put his arm around me, pulling me close. I snuggled up to him. This awful, awful birthday was improving by the minute. "But I can't stay, so I'll just pick up something on the way back. Tell me about your week."

So I told him about meeting up with my old friends at the lake, about Davis and his new girlfriend, about revisiting the YMCA pool, and about all the birthday plans Sarah made, that wouldn't happen.

"That's really a shame," Ben said, turning his head to kiss my forehead, and I could barely think enough to put a sentence together.

"It's okay," I finally managed to say. "I'd rather be here anyway. Right here, with you."

Ben sighed and pulled me closer. "You know, I have this feeling you're going to drive me absolutely crazy, Campbell," he murmured, close to my ear.

I pulled away enough to look him in the eye. "And I don't even have my license yet," I said proudly.

Follow the Signs

He smiled, and his look left me breathless, but he didn't kiss me again.

And then he left, to drive back to Fort Worth.

It took me awhile to find what Ben had written in my yearbook. I looked by his picture, my picture, the FFA group page, the usual front and back pages that were left blank for writing messages...nothing.

And then, I knew.

I flipped through the pages at the front of the yearbook until I found the faculty section, and there by the picture of Mr. Voss, our former Chemistry teacher, Ben had drawn a cartoonish test tube with liquid bubbling in it. He's good at drawing, or at least doodling, and underneath the test tube he had written a simple equation.

“you + me = _____. You decide.”

Simple and to the point, that was Ben.

My Ben.

Sarah: Okay, that's cute but jussssst a bit sappy.

Me: Sappy = happy

Sarah: sappy = crappy??

Melissa Knight

Sarah: but seriously girl, fill in that blank!!!

Me: Already did.

Sarah: I know your answer!!!

And, I knew that she did. Of course she did.
Because all the signs pointed to-

-together.

A note from the author

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed the third book in the **High School 101 Series**! If you will leave a review for *Follow the Signs* on Amazon, I will greatly appreciate it. Also check out my author page on Facebook!

Be sure to check out the next book in the series, *Breaking News*! And remember, God sees you, loves you and has wonderful plans for you. Stay close to Him, and follow His signs!

Books By Melissa Knight

High School 101 Series

#1 Feelin' the Chemistry

#2 Just the Facts

#3 Follow the Signs

#4 COMING SOON – Breaking News!

