

# JUST THE FACTS

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HIGH SCHOOL 101- BOOK #2

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FIRST EDITION

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# CHAPTER 1



## THOUGHTS

*No friendship is an accident.*~ O. Henry, “Heart of the West”

“So how about it, Casey? Is it a date?”

I swallowed hard, holding my cell phone in a death grip, my mind racing a million different ways. “I, uh, um, I...”

My stepdad, Harrison, sometimes uses the word “flabbergasted” to describe when he’s surprised, and I always thought that word was cute but old-fashioned. But right this minute, no other word could describe what I felt.

Flabbergasted.

“You’re making me nervous, Casey,” the voice on the other end chided jokingly. His tone oozed with confidence. “Don’t worry, if you really don’t want to go out with me, it’s cool. We’ll still be friends, and it won’t be weird, I promise. It’s just that after last night, I thought...well, I really want to know you better.”

My heart melted a bit, but I was wary.

## *Last night?*

There was total silence on the other end of the phone, waiting to be broken by my answer. Why was I hesitating? From the first time I had seen this guy, I had recognized him as a total hottie. He had a reputation as a ladies man, true, but he had never been anything but nice to me. And he was good friends with my pal Marla, so didn't that count heavily in his favor?

Oh YEAH, *Marla*. Marla had admitted once that she had a little crush on him most of her life...

"Casey, you there?" An unfamiliar hesitancy in his voice made the decision for me.

*Give the guy a chance. He's giving me a chance! It's just a movie! Nobody else has been asking me out! Seems to me you've been on the break-up end of things lately, not the start-up part!*

I frowned, remembering how hurt I was when my old boyfriend, Davis, had broken up with me right before Christmas. Then yesterday he had driven two hundred miles just to apologize for being such a jerk, showing up unexpectedly on my doorstep. Maybe Davis still wanted...was he trying to let me know....?

"YES!" I blurted out, way too loudly, but I guess I was trying to yell over all of those thoughts clamoring inside my head. I lowered my voice. "I mean, um, sure, I'd like to go to a movie with you on Friday night, as long as it's okay with my mom. I mean, I'm sure it's okay but she won't be here that night and I'm supposed to babysit my little sister and my stepbrother, but I think my other stepbrothers can handle it, so, um..."

"No worries, just check with your mom and I'll call ya later. Okay?"

I tried to smile, even though he couldn't see me. "Okay, sounds good. And, thanks....Colton."

He chuckled, a warm, friendly sound that put me more at ease. As I ended the call, I pictured his sun-streaked hair, that tan, muscular build,

those chocolatey brown eyes...

Hold on. Colton didn't have chocolatey brown eyes. I actually didn't remember the color of his eyes.

Ben was the one with the chocolatey brown eyes.

My chemistry lab partner, Ben. My friend who worked at a vet clinic, who was super smart, who taught me how to spike a volleyball last night, who could always make me laugh...yeah, that guy.

I sighed and trudged upstairs to the game room, relieved to find it empty for once. Flopping down on one of the two big comfy couches, I reached for the TV remote. Time to find an alien sci-fi movie.

I needed to *think*, and aliens always helped me make sense of things.

So, about last night.

Last night, Saturday night, I had gone to a Spring Break kick-off hosted by my church's youth group. Ben had driven Marla and I to the church gymnasium, where we ate tons of pizza and junk food, teamed up for some very bad volleyball, played video and board games, and pretty much just talked and laughed and hung out. It was the perfect start to a hopefully lazy week, even though I did have a bit of English homework.

So I pondered a bit, trying to think of what I had done, or not done, to make such a good impression on Colton.

### **The “Why Did Colton Ask Casey On A Date?” Quiz**

- A. My cute laugh after I got bopped hard on the head with a volleyball when I wasn't paying attention?
- B. Getting pizza sauce on my jeans?
- C. My mad Uno Flip skills?

Upon reflection, surely it was “A”, though to be honest my cute laugh was weak. That volleyball hit me hard, ya'll.

The youth group event was for any high schooler, not just those who regularly attended our church, so it had been fun to see some different friends show up, including Colton and the beautiful Reese, another new friend from school who I never would have guessed would be interested. I had just started attending Rayburn High School in January, so many of my friendships were still in that “baby steps” stage.

Definitely true of my friendship with Colton!

Yeah, we went together to the Sadie Hawkins Dance back in February, but we went in a group with Ben and Marla, and Colton had danced with *any* girl who said yes. We were in the same chemistry class, and chatted every now and then, but that was it. Colton flirted with me, and all the girls at my lunch table, almost every day at school. He flirted with EVERY female, and got away with it because he was just so charming and easy on the eyes. Did any girl really take him seriously? I sure didn't.

So, what was up with his movie invitation?

**Sarah: Overanalyze much??? Girl just enjoy the movie! Enjoy the view if he's that cute!!! Maybe he's in luuuuvvvvvvvv kiss kiss smooch smooch**

**Me: Oh stop it.**

**Sarah: You've really got it going on down there?!? Davis misses you, cute guy asks you out, ben is nice. OH YEAH WHAT ABOUT BEN???**

**Me: Huh?**

**Sarah: Don't huh me girl you talk about ben all the time!!!**

I ignored her, grabbed the remote, turned off the TV and trudged back downstairs, in search of chocolate. In any form. Sarah was my best friend from my old hometown, and we knew each other well, so ignoring her text wouldn't bother her a bit.

In fact, I think I could hear her laughing from hundreds of miles away.



## CHAPTER 2



### WORDS

*Don't try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It's the one and only thing you have to offer.* ~Barbara Kingsolver, Novelist

“You want chocolate walls?” Marla sounded dubious, as she sat on the edge of my bed the next morning, sorting through my paint sample cards. I had sweet-talked my oldest stepbrother, James, into driving me to the local big-box hardware store yesterday, to look at paint choices. Anything to delay dealing with Colton’s phone call. I hadn’t even asked Mom for permission to go on our date yet, though there had been plenty of opportunities.

Besides, it was already Monday of my spring break vacation. If I was going to fix up my bedroom before the week was over, it was time to get this show on the road. The room had previously been occupied by Jackson, my middle stepbrother, who was a junior, just a year ahead of me in school. When my mom married James, Jackson and Jefferson’s dad, Harrison, over Christmas break, Riley and I moved into Jackson’s room, and he moved in with James.

I groaned. “Nooooooo, the *color* of chocolate. I envision an accent wall over there.” I pointed to Riley’s side of the bedroom.. “The other walls we’ll paint a creamy white, and it will look so cozy yet elegant. I hope. A whole lot better than this blah blah beige.”

And no, this truly had zero to do with the color of Ben’s eyes, lest you think I’m obsessed. I had seen a picture of a beautiful brown bedroom over a year ago, and had thought it looked amazing.

Marla shook her head. “I don’t want to burst your bubble, but to me these colors just look blah blah *brown*. Drab. Dark. Depress-“

“I get the picture, okay?” I interrupted, my enthusiasm dimming by the minute.

“And not only that,” Marla continued, “what about Riley? Doesn’t she have to agree on the color?”

“She said she doesn’t care,” I said defensively. Then I sighed. “Actually, I made a deal with her. Mom and Harrison are talking about getting a dog, and I told her that if she let me decorate the room how I want, I’ll let her have my vote on what to name the dog. She’s really excited about that.”

Marla chuckled, tucking a strand of her mousy brown hair behind her ear. “Way to bargain, Campbell. That doesn’t sound like a very fair deal to me, but as long as Riley’s okay with it...”

“Your face looks better, Marla!” Okay, that was random, but as she was talking I had looked at her more closely and finally noticed her blemish-free skin, for the first time this morning. “I mean, your complexion has really cleared up! Are you doing something different?”

Marla blushed a little, which looked good on her, adding some color to her usually pale cheeks. “I started using a new cleanser every night,” she admitted. “And I’ve been trying to cut back on greasy foods.”

“Well, it’s working!” I spoke encouragingly, plopping down on the bed beside her. “I bet *somebody* will notice how nice you’re looking.” I

sneaked a peek at her. “Although that *somebody* already has a crush on you, zits or no zits.”

“Quit pushing it, Casey.” Her voice was quiet, and I could tell she wasn’t in the mood to be teased. We both knew that Jackson had admitted to me that he had liked Marla for years, but so far, the loud but shy guy had yet to do anything about it. He had even gone to a dance with another girl, the idiot!

Reese. Beautiful, popular, confident Reese had invited my middle stepbrother to the Sadie Hawkins dance, and he had agreed to go because he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. It was so exasperating! He had treated Reese like a queen, because he is just that nice of a guy. So, even though they had never had a follow-up date, it was clear to everyone that Reese had a thing for Jackson. She took advantage of every opportunity to be around him, including going to our youth group event last Saturday night, because she knew he’d be there.

Which reminded me....

Colton had been there, too. I needed to tell Marla about my potential date with Colton. Right now.

So of course I avoided the subject.

“There’s not a single one of these colors that you like?” I asked, making my voice whiny and sad. “Should I start all over again?”

Marla shrugged. “You know, I’m probably not the one to ask. I’m not really into decorating, or fashion and stuff like that. I mean, look at me.” She stood up and faced me, striking a dramatic model pose to demonstrate her outfit of cut-off jean shorts and an oversized gray t-shirt, which had a teensy stain on the hem.

I giggled, and Marla smiled good-naturedly, but then I felt bad. “Marla, you need to quit putting yourself down. I mean no, you’re not on the cutting edge of fashion, but your look is comfortable and casual and, um, friendly!”

“Which is why, if you want advice about how to make your room look elegant, you need to consult someone who has figured out how to work that angle,” Marla replied, sounding logical. “Someone like Tessa Atkins at school. You don’t really know her, but... wait, what about Reese? Reese is definitely on the elegant team.”

Marla managed to say that without sounding jealous or snarky, which I really admired. If some girl had made the moves on a guy I liked, I knew I wouldn’t be nearly so nice as Marla.

But then, I still wasn’t sure about Marla’s feelings for Jackson. Did she like Jackson as much as he liked her? She had admitted awhile back that she wouldn’t mind going out with Colton, the friend she had known since they were babies.

I. Needed. To. Tell. Her.

“So what do you think? Want to call Reese?”

I drew my attention back to Marla. “Well sure, I guess I could do that. Uhhhh, I know this is a sensitive subject, but - do you feel awkward around Reese now, because she chases after Jackson? I mean, do you hold it against her in any way?”

Marla looked at me calmly. “Why should I? Reese can like whoever she wants, right? I can’t be mad about that.” She walked over to the dresser and gazed into the mirror, straightening her hair with her fingers a little. “Besides, if Jackson truly likes me the way you keep saying he does, then it’s up to him to prove it. He has to say the words. He has to show it.”

Marla was right.

And as I watched Marla look at herself in the mirror, I had an idea. A brilliant idea, in my opinion. As I opened my mouth to let Marla in on my idea, however, she spoke again, turning around to face me. “And Reese has no clue that Jackson likes me, or that I might be interested in him. If she knew those things and still chased after him, then yeah, I might be upset with her. But she doesn’t *know*.” She looked at me warningly. “And

she's not going to know, either, right?"

I closed my mouth quickly, and gulped. I so deserved that. I had been known to help, or should I say, *interfere* in someone else's affairs recently. As for my bright idea, that could wait for a better time. Something else Marla had said to me just now was making me think.

I needed to call Reese, yes. And now I knew that I had to call Colton.

I knew what I needed to tell him.

## CHAPTER 3



### IDEAS

*We all need to have dreams. The question is, does the dream control you or do you control the dream?~ Robin Jones Gunn, "Surprise Endings"*

"Ah would love to come over and help you redecorate your room! Ah can come right this minute!" Reese sounded downright giddy, like she had been waiting all day long for this phone call. I was pleased. It was so nice to hear such gracious enthusiasm for-

"Is Jackson there right now?" she demanded.

Oh. Yeah. This enthusiasm was not at all about my paint choices.

"Um, I have no idea. I saw him in the kitchen awhile ago at lunch, but I don't know if he's still around."

Reese sighed. "Well, would you minnnd findin' out?" she asked in her honeyed Texas drawl. "If he's not there right now, ah can come over the minute he gets home! Help me out here, girlfriennd!" She giggled in this little girl way, and it was hard to be annoyed with her, even though I wanted to be. I didn't want to feed her obsession with Jackson, that was

for sure. But I could use her help.

“Hold on a sec,” I said, resigned. I left my room, holding my cell phone, and wandered down the hall to check the bedroom that James and Jackson shared. Empty.

“JACKSON”, I yelled, walking back toward the kitchen. “YOU HOME? JACK-SONNN!!”

“Jeez Louise, Casey!” James looked over from where he was standing in front of the open refrigerator, holding the plastic milk container. “Yell much?”

“Sorry, but do you know if Jackson’s here?”

“If he is, I think he heard you. The neighbors heard you. Shoot, the space station had to hear.” James finished the last of the milk, drinking it right out of the container.

Ewww, ewwww.

Then he closed the refrigerator door, threw the milk container away, and turned to grin at me. “Actually, one of his friends picked him up awhile ago and they’re hanging out. If you need him, call him.”

“Please tell me you don’t usually drink right out of the milk jug,” I begged him, still fixated on that event.

“You mean you don’t?” James smiled at me wickedly and rubbed the top of my head as he sauntered out of the kitchen, messing up my hair.

Brothers were still a new experience for me. I didn’t like the gross things they seemed to think were normal. I did like the kidding around. The issue was, I was still not experienced enough to know the difference. James *was* kidding around just now, right?

I heard a faint “Casey, hello?” and realized I was still holding my cell phone, with Reese impatiently calling my name. I lifted the phone to my ear quickly. “Sorry, I’m here.”

“Ah didn’t catch all of that but ah take it that Jackson isn’t there?” she asked plaintively.

“Yes, he’s gone, and honestly, Reese, I don’t know when he’ll be back or what his plans are for the rest of the day.”

There was a long pause, and I figured Reese would ask me to call Jackson and find out his itinerary for the week, but she must have sensed, correctly, that I would refuse because she finally agreed to just come on over. “Ah ‘m sure ah can borrow my mother’s car as long as ah’m back in a couple hours. Be right there.” It sounded like “be raht they-er”.

I ended the call and breathed a sigh of relief. I was genuinely glad for Reese’s decorating help, but even happier that Jackson wouldn’t be around.

The two hours I spent with Reese were actually fun. I brought up my bright idea concerning Marla right away, and she squealed with delight, agreeing to help. I swore her to secrecy, already vaguely regretting bringing Reese into my scheme for obvious reasons, but I pushed those doubts away.

More about that later.

As for my room, Reese genuinely liked my ideas and chose the perfect brown- “cocoa bean”- with absolutely no hesitation, after checking to see what direction our bedroom window faced (east) and talking about light and shadows and sheens and the color of the carpet and furniture. She suggested a new arrangement for the beds and desks that would give us more space, so we spent some time moving stuff around. I was surprised at how much she seemed to know about decorating.

“How do you know all this stuff, anyway?” I asked, completely serious. “You’re like a reno expert on HGTV!”

“My mom’s into decorating,” she said absently, fingering the quilt on Riley’s bed. “You’re going to need new accent colors, you know. How big is your budget/?”



“My budget? Um, well, Mom said she’ll buy the paint supplies. I didn’t ask her about anything else.”

“Do you have your own money? Or a birthday coming up?”, she pressed.

“I have some savings, yeah,” I said slowly. “No job, obviously. And my birthday isn’t until July. What exactly do you mean about accent colors? You mean new comforters for the bed?”

“Yes, and fluffy pillows. Maybe some coordinating wall décor.” She looked around pointedly at the bare walls.

Riley chose that moment to bounce in the room. “Hey!” she said excitedly, looking at the rearranged furniture. “It looks great in here! What are ya’ll doing? Can I help? Are you a friend of Casey’s? What’s your name? I like your shirt and I have one that very same color. Do you live close by? How come-“

“Riley, could you give us a minute?” I interrupted impatiently, still trying to absorb the thought that I might need to spend my meager savings on grown-up things like home décor.

“No, she’s fine,” Reese spoke up, looking at my eight-year-old sister like she was the cutest thang ever. “Ah’m Reese, and ah’m going to help fix up your room!”

“Ooooooh!” Riley said, clapping her hands and looking right back at Reese like a star struck groupie. “I bet you’ll make it look so pretty! Not like Casey with her brown paint, yucko!”

I rolled my eyes and prepared to defend my choice *again*, but Reese just smiled. “Don’t worry, sweetie, we’ll choose just the right colors and it will look ah-mazing. In fact, let’s you and me look on Pinterest at some accent colors. Ah bet you’ll be really good at this. Do you like the color pink? Or maybe a bright teal?”

Riley nodded, obviously mesmerized by Reese’s beauty and her warm twangy accent, and she and Reese settled down on the floor, happily

finding ideas on Reese's phone. I frowned a little, realizing that I had not been invited to this accent color treasure hunt, but I quickly decided that including Riley on at least one decision was fairly strategic. A happy Riley was a quieter Riley. Not that Riley was ever known for being quiet.

“No expensive ideas!”, I warned, meaning it .

**Ben: So did Reese like the chocolate brown idea? Hey, Reese's Milk Chocolate! Get it?**

**Me: She loved it, totally gets my vision. She gave me some good pieces of advice. Reese's Pieces! Get it?**

**Ben: You mean like adding in drinking utensils of a lighter brown, like a peanut butter color? Reese's Peanut Butter Cups! Get it?**

I smiled as I unloaded the dishwasher Monday night. I hadn't seen Ben since the youth group get-together on Saturday night. He was putting in extra hours this week at the vet's office where he worked, trying to make bank. I understood that, but... I missed him.

As a friend, you know. We could talk about anything, dumb stuff, serious stuff. Well, almost anything.

I wondered how he would feel about Colton asking me out. What would he think? Would it bother him? Would he care? I wanted to know, but there was no point in mentioning it because this date was simply not going to happen anyway.

I leaned on the kitchen counter, finally getting ready to call Colton's number, when Reese texted me.

**Reese: Have you started on the English assignment yet?**

Wow, Reese was already thinking about homework? I loved my English class, but Spring Break is sacred, and I was putting assignments off as long as possible. It wasn't that much homework, anyway, just making a list of ideas. I rock at making lists.

**Me: Nope. Have you?**

**Reese: No, but I'm leaving tomorrow for Dallas and won't be back until Sunday. I want to get it out of the way! Want to work on it together tonight? Is Jackson there?**

I rolled my eyes. The girl was relentless.

**Me: He was here for dinner but he left again to go to the gym. Maybe you should join the gym.**

**Me: And the homework isn't that hard. Just call me and we can figure it out over the phone.**

**Reese: \*sad face\* which gym?**

I will never be that desperate for a guy's attention, I vowed silently to myself.

And I made the call.

## CHAPTER 4



### MOOD

*You should eat a waffle. You can't be sad if you eat a waffle.*

~Lauren Myracle, "tfn"

#### **The How Did Colton React to My Crushing Rejection of His Date Invitation Quiz**

- A. He didn't answer his phone.
- B. I didn't leave a message, knowing he would see my missed call and would call me back promptly since he was anxiously awaiting my "yes, my mom said it's okay for me to go out with you on Friday night".
- C. He didn't call me back.
- D. He didn't text.
- E. I went to bed, miffed that I wasn't important enough for him to call me back so I could reject him.

Answer Key: Duh.

But on Tuesday morning, the heaping stack of Mexican Tres Leches pancakes in front of me, with a touch of butter melting on the top, brought

me great satisfaction.

I sighed with anticipation and reached for my fork. Next to going out for tacos, pancakes at IHOP were my idea of a *bueno* time. It had been a tradition for years for Mom, Riley and I to treat ourselves to a nice breakfast at least once over Spring Break, so I was glad that Mom was continuing our little annual celebration. And I was secretly glad that it was just us girls.

Mom was an Honors English teacher at my high school, and she one hundred percent loved spring break even more than her students did. So on this balmy Tuesday morning, as she looked forward to her romantic long weekend getaway with Harrison coming up, Mom was in a very, very good mood.

“I’ll pay for new bedding and décor for your room, as long as you keep it reasonable,” she told us with a smile. “How fun! And I’ve been meaning to tell you how proud I am, Casey, of your hard work in chemistry this quarter.”

I saw my advantage and took it. “So wouldn’t it be fun to go on a little shopping spree today? Spruce up our wardrobes, accessorize a bit, maybe hang with Kate Spade?”

“That would be a *lot* of fun,” Mom agreed good-naturedly, “but not today. There are a couple of things I’ve wanted to talk to you about, though.”

She took another bite of her omelet, swallowed and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “Driver’s ed. What with my wedding plans, and moving and all, you’ve been a really good sport about not getting your driver’s license yet. So, would you like to sign up for driving classes next month?”

“Mmmh-hhmmm”, I agreed, swallowing a bite of delicious, warm perfection. Sure. I would be seventeen this summer, so it was time. I hadn’t felt ready last summer to get my license, but I felt more mentally ready now.

“You can take me places,” Riley chimed in excitedly. “We could go to the park and out for ice cream and over to my friend’s house to see her new puppies and-“

“What’s the other thing, Mom?” I interrupted, giving Riley a little side hug so she wouldn’t complain about being cut off.

“Welllll...I was wondering if you’ve given any thought to applying for a position with the school newspaper.” Mom looked at me expectantly. “I found out that sophomores can apply for reporter positions for the next school year, starting in April. You have to have a reference from your English teacher, too. You would be perfect at this, honey! But of course, it’s your decision. I just wanted to make sure you were aware of the opportunity.”

My interest grew as Mom spoke, and my fork stilled. It did sound like something I would be good at doing. My old school was too small to have its own newspaper, so I’d never really thought about a reporter gig. But who loved to research more than me?

“Yeah, I’ll look into it,” I told Mom. I considered bringing up Colton’s date invitation and getting Mom’s thoughts, but decided against it. Not with Riley listening! Maybe later. So I told her about my English homework, since Mom always loves hearing about what other teachers are doing.

“We have to bring a list of ten controversial topics to class on Monday morning, and they’re each worth one point,” I told her. “Which is easy, but the trick is that Ms. Thomas is making it a contest. Any topic that nobody else thinks of is worth ten points. And if only one other person thinks of the same thing, you get five points.”

“That sounds fun,” Mom said, her eyes sparkling. “So what does the person with the most points get?”

“You mean what kind of *food* do they win?” We all giggled. Mom was not above giving out mini candy bars or little bags of Cheez-its to bribe her students. It brought out the five-year-old in the most hardened of

student hearts.

We clinked our almost empty juice glasses together in a toast, before we left the table, as was also our custom.

“Here’s to a wonderful spring break!”, Mom declared, and we all smiled.

It was just breakfast at IHOP with my mom and little sister, eating high calorie food, lasting not much more than an hour. Conversation, giggles, whispers, silences, dialogue.

Would a beach trip or cruise be more fun? Oh yeah, definitely.

But not better.

**Colton: You home? Can I stop by for a few minutes?**

So *now* he chose to contact me, just as Marla and I were about to dip our rollers in the “vanilla latte” white paint, carefully chosen for the non-accent walls?

It was Tuesday afternoon, and we had just finished moving my bedroom furniture to the middle of the room, covering the carpeted floor with a plastic tarp. We were in our oldest, scuzziest clothes, rarin’ to get after it and make my décor dreams come true.

**Me: I’m painting, not a good time. Can I call you later?**

**Colton: Um, I’m actually on your front porch.**

I gulped, texting him that I’d be right there. “Hang on just a sec, Marla, I need to go do something. You can get started if you want.”

“Sure”, she replied, carefully loading her roller with paint. I hung back and watched her roll the paint on the blah blah beige wall for a few seconds. This was going to look amazing!

My conversation with Colton might not be quite so thrilling, but

hopefully it wouldn't take long.

I opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. Colton stood there, his smile faltering a bit when I closed the door behind me quickly. Okay, that was rude.

“Sorry, we're painting,” I said lamely. *And I don't want Marla to know you're here*, I added silently. “I know I look like a mess.”

“You look great,” he replied, his smile returning in full force. Standing there, his hands in his pockets, hair just a bit untidy, tan and ridiculously good-looking, I felt my good intentions start to fade. Remind me why I decided not to go on a date with this guy?

“Well, hey, I won't interrupt, but I wanted to apologize in person for taking so long to get back with you. I had a bunch of stuff to do yesterday and the time got away from me.”

“Oh, it's okay,” I replied, forgiving him instantly. Time gets away from us all, right? “I just wanted to tell you that, umm...” I looked up at him and our gazes held. I couldn't look away.

I had rehearsed what I would say to Colton, but my mind went completely blank. I couldn't think of a single reason why I shouldn't go out with this handsome hunk standing on my porch. As my seeming inability to speak lengthened, Colton's eyes searched mine, and I took note that they were blue, like mine. “So, your mom doesn't want you to go out on Friday?” he guessed. “That's okay, we can make it another night. Any night, no problem.” I made myself speak. “No, that's not it,” I said slowly, frantically trying to remember the words I had somehow thought would be tidy and appropriate. It was so different to practice a conversation in private, than actually speak with a real person. Especially with, shall we say, a dreamy person.

*Remember when you had a hard conversation with Jackson last month? Be honest, bring things into the light. The light always wins.*

“I don't think we should go on a date because I know another girl who



might be hurt by that. I can't tell you who, but there's someone else I care about who might be interested in you and....and it's like a girl code of dating ethics. And besides that, I'm just not sure we should start something....romantic." I hadn't planned that last sentence, but as I spoke it I realized it was absolutely, deeply true.

"Okay, wow." Colton seemed genuinely surprised, and he took a step away from me, turning to face the street. After a few seconds, he turned back to me, not smiling but not appearing upset, either. He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up a bit more. It was endearing.

"So you want to be just friends, huh? Usually that's what a girl says when she breaks up with a guy, not before they even begin the relationship. That's a new one." He looked at me wryly, and I had to smile.

"Colton, has any girl ever told you no before?" As soon as I said it, I knew those words could be taken the wrong way. "What I mean is, I bet every single girl at Rayburn High would be thrilled to go out with you. You're the resident heartthrob! You just happened to ask me, the one dud out of a thousand great choices. Better not play the lottery," I said jokingly, trying to get him to smile again.

He didn't, but he gave me a long, melting look. "Maybe you're the only one who's worth it," he said simply.

I was speechless. He touched my cheek, gently, with his finger. "No worries, Casey, we're friends. I'll let you get back to your painting, now."

He got all the way to his car before I found my voice. "Wait," I called. I walked to the edge of the porch, and he turned his head to look at me, about to open the car door. "Aren't you curious about...my friend who likes you?" I asked.

"You said you won't tell me", he shrugged. "And no, I'm not that curious. Could be anyone, right? I mean, look at me, the heartthrob of Rayburn High."

His reply was lighthearted, but his blue eyes seemed serious, even from a distance. I probably imagined the tone of regret in his voice.

But it broke my heart a little. For him, and maybe for me.

I hadn't expected that.

## CHAPTER 5



### CONFLICT

*“I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.”~ Louisa May Alcott, “Little Women”*

I hadn’t expected the thunderstorms and tornado watch warnings that plagued our town on Wednesday morning, either. Marla and I used the forced indoor time to touch up spots on the freshly painted walls in my bedroom, admiring our previous day’s hard work. The walls looked like a hot cocoa and cream vision, maybe not so appropriate for springtime, but the look was fresh and inviting anyway.

We both agreed that Reese was right- the faded, patchwork bedspreads that Riley and I had used for years did not look good with the cocoa brown walls. “Reese suggested getting plain white comforters, and then finding bright accent pillows,” I told Marla, scrolling through Pinterest to show her the pictures Reese and Riley had oohed and aahed over. “None of that should be too hard to find. I want to create my own art for the walls, at least on my side of the room.”

“You’re not going to hang up pictures of your favorite boy bands?”, Marla teased. “Or you could put up Star Wars posters since you love that

so much.”

“Hey, my path I must decide,” I intoned in my best Yoda voice. “Feel the force I do. Fear is the path to the dark side-“

And just like that there was a huge, rumbling clap of thunder, and all the lights went out. Marla and I screamed, then looked at each other in the dim room and started laughing, hysterically, each falling on our backs on a different twin bed, which were still positioned in the middle of the room, away from the walls.

We could hear Riley and Jefferson yelling upstairs, which made us giggle even more. I knew Mom was home and would handle any fears they had, so I didn’t bother getting up to be a good sister and check on them. And then-

“MRRRROWWWWRRRRR!!” somebody- or something- yelled, jumping through the bedroom door, and we screamed again, more panicked this time, scrambling to sitting positions and trying to see the intruder in the shadows.

It was Jackson, doubled over with laughter. “GOTCHA!” he said triumphantly. “NEED A FLASHLIGHT?”

He tossed one over to the bed where I was still sitting, then looked at the other bed and finally recognized Marla.

“Oh, hi,” he said weakly, obviously stunned to see her sitting there.

“Jackson, you scared us to death,” I said, somewhat admiringly. “Hey, are we still under a tornado watch?”

“I don’t know,” he said distractedly, still looking at Marla. She was looking back at him, smiling sweetly. He smiled back, seeming to relax. I could hear Riley and Jefferson clomping down the stairs and talking excitedly with Mom, and I held my breath. I could almost see the sparks flying between Jackson and Marla, in this darkened room, and I tried my Jedi mind trick to send the little kids a message.

*Please don't barge in and interrupt this moment!*

As usual, my mind trick skills failed, because just seconds later Ry and Jackson were hollering in the hallway, and both rushed past Jackson into the bedroom, waving flashlights that Mom must have given them.

Riley was chattering a mile a minute. "Isn't this cool? Could we do shadow puppets on the wall? Or we can tell spooky stories. Case, do you know any good stories because if you want to go first--"

"MARLA, could I talk with you a minute? Um, PRIVATELY?"

The room got completely still, except for the rain pounding against the windows and the thunder, which continued to rumble, though becoming more distant. Even Riley shut up, seeming to sense a story here, and *not* a ghost story.

Marla didn't say a word. She just stood up, brushed her hair into place with her fingers a bit, nodded to Jackson, and walked right out of that door. And, to my great delight, as Jackson turned to follow her, he gave me a wink, which everyone could clearly see because Jefferson had his flashlight shining full on Jackson's face, which had to be annoying. Jackson didn't look annoyed, though.

He looked determined.

As he walked out the door, I felt a shiver of excitement. Was romantic history about to be made here?

And then my phone started buzzing with the emergency broadcasting alarm text thing, letting us know that the tornado watch had been upgraded to a tornado warning in our area, and that we needed to take cover NOW.

While I was still checking my phone, Mom rushed in the door. "Everybody go to the boys bathroom, pronto," she ordered. "There are no windows there, and it's in the middle of the house. Where are the others?" she asked, heading out the door to track down Jackson and Marla. I knew that James was already at work this morning.

“WE’RE RIGHT HERE,” I heard Jackson’s voice in the hallway. “COME ON, KIDDOS, MOVE IT!”

Everyone herded into the bathroom that James, Jackson and Jefferson shared. It was fairly roomy but not nearly big enough for six people to all maintain their personal space, let me tell you. To my relief, the cleaning lady who came in once a week had done her job well, as judged by my sniff test when I entered the room. I sat down on the edge of the bathtub with Marla and Mom, while the others stood. It was completely dark in the room except for the light from the flashlights and our phones, which we kept checking for updates, tracking the tornado, ready to crouch on the floor and cover our heads if needed.

After about ten minutes, we got the all- clear, and gladly started trooping out of the bathroom. “That was scary,” Riley commented, who had been unusually quiet while we waited.

Mom hugged her. “Yes, it was,” she said. “We need to pray for the safety of anyone else who might be in a tornado’s path today. In fact, let’s do that right now.”

So we all stopped in the hallway and Mom prayed right then and there, thanking Jesus for protecting us, and asking Him to show mercy to others. The rest of us bowed our heads and closed our eyes, except I’ll admit I opened mine to steal a glance at Marla. Did she think this was weird? Did her family pray together? I couldn’t think of another time that Mom had done this, stopping everything to lead us in a quick prayer.

All I saw was Marla’s head bowed, and her eyes closed, respectfully. And right after Mom said “amen” at the end of her prayer, the lights flickered back on.

We all cheered and high fived, and then started going back to the things we were doing before the lights went out.

I started walking to the kitchen. “I’m just going to go check on what’s for lunch,” I told Marla and Jackson, looking over my shoulder at them meaningfully. “Ya’ll can chat in my room!”

“Marla, would you like to go OUT with me?” Jackson blurted, right then and there, apparently deciding not to waste another minute.

I froze.

Marla nodded shyly.

Jackson beamed.

And I left them there in the hallway, to plan their very first date together while I continued my journey to the kitchen. I was thrilled to see them finally connect, but ironically, I felt a little out of sorts.

I had just turned down a date with the cutest guy at school for Marla’s sake! Well, at least partly for Marla’s sake!

And... poor, unsuspecting Reese! Hadn’t Marla technically just broken the girl code of ethics herself, by accepting a date with the guy Reese had her heart set on? But Jackson had liked Marla for years, and he clearly didn’t intend to date Reese.

Did I need to sort through these conflicting scenarios, or should I quit reasoning it all out and just let things be? What were the real facts, clear and true, beyond the made-up girl code of ethics and other “rules” my friends and I followed that seemed to change based on the situation?

I sighed and opened the refrigerator to get out the sandwich stuff, noting the unopened bag of Oreos on the counter that Mom must have picked up at the store yesterday. Good, because no matter how conflicted I was, we were all going to eat those Oreos for dessert, to celebrate.

Jackson and Marla deserved that!

Marla came with us to youth group that night, at Jackson’s invitation, which was great but also made me feel bad because I had never even thought to invite Marla to come, since we had become friends. Maybe because I still felt new there myself, and a little insecure?

Marla hung out with me and Jackson, and everyone was very welcoming to her, just as they had been to me, saying “hi” and “how’s

your break going”, all the usual things. Because it was spring break, some of the regulars were missing, but I noticed some new faces, too, kids who had come to the Spring break get-together last Saturday night.

*I should invite Colton to youth group. And Ben, and Reese. Why not?*

Mia was there as usual, and she came over and chatted with Marla and me for awhile. When it was time to settle down for Pastor Kevin’s short devotion time, I found a seat by Mia as usual, then winked at Marla as she took a chair across the room, next to Jackson. She blushed, but smiled. Jackson leaned over to whisper something to her, and his grin looked like someone had just given him five million dollars.

“What’s the deal?” Mia hissed in my ear, missing nothing, her romance radar on full alert.

“Later”, I mouthed to her, my smile fading a bit when I realized that Reese was probably going to get a certain text tonight from Mia.

I prepared to fight all my usual distractions and try to concentrate on Kevin’s message, but instead, my attention was caught right away.

“I think a lot of us lost electricity this morning, when a tornado came close to our town, right?” Almost everyone nodded. “Well fortunately, for most of us there was no major damage to property, and there were no injuries. However, a certain family who lives outside of our city limits was affected.”

He went on to explain that this family of five, including three little kids, lived in a trailer on some private land, and a tree had fallen on the trailer. “By the grace of God, nobody was hurt, but the trailer is damaged, some of their belongings are ruined, and the parents have no insurance. We have the chance to show love to this family, in a practical way. I’d like our youth group to think of a way that we can help.”

“I heard about that,” one of the senior guys said, a guy named Devin. “My uncle rents them the land where their trailer is parked. Aren’t they here illegally? They’re not American citizens?”



Somebody else snickered and I felt embarrassed. Why would Devin ask a question like that? There was an uncomfortable silence.

“I don’t know,” Kevin replied quietly. “There are a lot of things I don’t know about this family, like where they moved here from, what their background is, what they believe about God, and so on. But consider this, from the book of Luke.”

He opened his Bible and started to read a story about a guy who helped a hurting stranger, all the while knowing that this stranger belonged to a group of people who looked down on, and even despised, the nice guy’s ethnicity.

“Jesus told this story, and He ended it by telling us to go and do the same,” Kevin told us. “The good Samaritan acted kindly, but wisely. He didn’t investigate the hurting stranger to see if he was worthy of help, he just saw what needed to be done, and did what he was able to do. What do you think this means for us, right now, in the situation with this family?”

“We should help them.” It was Devin’s voice, again, and he grinned sheepishly as everyone turned to look at him. “Sorry about my question before, but it’s important, you know? There are real problems with people coming over our country’s borders illegally.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Kevin agreed. “It’s okay to ask the hard questions in this group, and we need to talk about real issues. We don’t have to tiptoe around them or pretend they don’t exist. But understand, as followers of Christ, we choose to look to the Bible to guide our thoughts, our words, and ultimately our actions.”

We all started talking then, discussing different ways a group of teenagers could help, and we came up with a few ideas, agreeing to meet again briefly after church on Sunday to make a final decision. It was probably the best youth meeting I had ever been to, so far, because it was so...*real*. *Real* was something that my mind, and my heart, seemed to clearly recognize..

And I now felt more of a connection to the other youth group

members, believers who were trying to understand and follow God, than I ever had before.

## CHAPTER 6



## INFERENCE

*Time will explain.*~ Jane Austen, “Persuasion”

It was getting real, all right.

James, Jackson, Jefferson, Riley and I all stood outside of our open garage door on Friday morning, waving at Mom and Harrison until their car turned right at the corner down the block, headed for the interstate and their delayed mini-honeymoon.

Three teenagers taking care of a nine and ten year old? Piece of cake. We were armed with emergency phone numbers, healthy snacks, cash for pizza and tacos and a strict list of do’s and don’ts, at least for Riley and Jackson.

James, Jackson and I had a few rules, too, which Mom and Harrison had discussed with us last night. Our first priority was to take care of the little ones, of course, but we could still each have a friend come over, one at a time. We could go to the gym, movies, or wherever, as long as we took turns and worked out the schedule amongst ourselves. James’s work schedule took priority over any other activities.

And, no friends of the opposite sex in our bedrooms, period.

“Like that’s going to be a problem for me,” I had said sarcastically, daring to roll my eyes. “No dates, no boyfriend, and I’m not exactly a loose woman, hello?” I had never told Mom about Colton’s date invitation.

“We’re just setting up the guardrails”, Mom replied calmly. “Keep that car in the lane, right?”

“Yes, and especially the two of *you*, who both now have girlfriends,” Harrison added, nodding at James and Jackson.

“Yessir,” they both responded automatically, as was expected, but I noticed James nudge Jackson a bit, grinning broadly, and Jackson turned a deep shade of red. He was still shy about his brand new relationship with Marla, and therefore so much fun to tease.

“So we’re supposed to rat each other out if someone breaks the rules?” I asked, truly wanting to know. “Aren’t you turning us against each other? Should we make alliances now, like in *Hunger Games*?”

It was Mom’s turn to roll her eyes, but Harrison looked both amused and thoughtful. “That’s a good point,” he admitted, and we smiled at each other, he a little nervously, like he was wondering if he should take me seriously.

Mom also smiled at me, sweetly. “We trust you, sweetheart,” she said. “All of you. *Choose wisely*.”

Ah, those two words that always got me, and she knew it. We gave each other that mother-daughter look, of love and exasperation and understanding and resistance, all at the same time, like a soup.

Let me explain.

When I was younger than Riley, I loved to smell and “taste” the spices on Mom’s spice rack. I loved the cinnamon and rosemary smells, but the taste of raw salt, which made my face scrunch up, and the sneeziness of

ordinary pepper, made my six-year-old self think they were bad, useless.

“On their own, they don’t taste good,” Mom would agree, “but when you mix them in with other food, they bring out the best flavors.” She would make her simple vegetable soup sometimes, and let me add the spices, demonstrating how the spit-it-out-of-your-mouth spices were needed, transforming bland veggies and broth into yummy goodness.

So, you know, sometimes when I was annoyed with Mom, I thought of that soup, if that makes sense. Maybe the things that drive you cray-zay are the spices that bring out your best? It’s a theory.

So here we were now this Friday morning, James, Jefferson and I, at the kitchen table trying to map out a schedule. “I work this afternoon and all day tomorrow”, James informed us. “Tomorrow night I have a date with Lauren, but we’ll hang out here with Jefferson and Riley, if the two of you want to go out with friends. Lauren won’t mind.”

His relationship with Lauren was so settled, and comfortable, like they were past the need for impressing each other. It seemed like a wonderful thing, though would it be boring? *Ben wouldn’t mind watching the kids with you*, I thought, and I knew it was true. I hadn’t seen him at all since last Saturday night, and though he did respond to my texts, he kept implying that he was really busy. Maybe I should just call him?

“I have plans TONIGHT,” Jackson announced, beaming at the two of us. “So I can handle the kiddos today, NO PROBLEM, if you want to do something FUN today, Case.”

“Oooh, so what are your plans tonight?” I asked, leaning forward eagerly, and I watched Jackson wrestle mentally for a few seconds, deciding whether he should tell me his date plans with Marla or not. I was known to be a bit meddling, but on the other hand, I could offer him valuable female advice, and he knew it.

He caved in. “A MOVIE?” he offered tentatively. “And Mexican food after?”

“Perfect,” I approved. “I’ll watch the kids tonight and all day tomorrow until James gets home. Sunday we’ll all go to church together, and then Mom and your dad will be home that afternoon.”

James grunted his approval and rose from the table. “Gotta run,” he said, and left to get ready for work. Jackson wandered upstairs to check on Jackson and Riley, who were playing a video game, and I lingered in the kitchen, the day before me open and free..

What should I do? Browse online for bedroom décor? Take a bike ride on this beautiful sunny day? Call Marla and chat about her big date plans tonight? Text Mia to ask if she had told Reese about Jackson’s love life?

I called Ben. It went straight to voice mail, so I hung up and texted him. He was probably at work, again.

**Uno with the gang tonight, meaning me, Ry and Jefferson, and James once he gets off work? There is talk of pizza.**

After about a half hour, he responded.

**You don’t have other plans tonight?**

Huh?

**Me: Well, my trip to Disney World was cancelled so I’m free. Come on, you know what my Friday nights look like.**

**Ben: I thought you were going out with Colton.**

Stop it right there.

The only way Ben could possibly know that Colton had asked me out was if Colton had told him, because I had never said a single word to anyone about it. Why would Colton tell Ben? They got along, but didn’t seem like best buds or anything.

**Me: Nope. You coming or not? We can even do homework together, to sweeten the deal.**

**Ben: I’ll be there with a jumbo bag of M&Ms.**

I didn't know whether to smile or frown.

Reasons to smile-Ben was coming over, he was bringing M&Ms, Ben was coming over, I would have help entertaining the little kids, Ben was coming over.

Reasons to frown - Nothing.

There were no reasons to frown.

## CHAPTER 7



### FACTS

*Get your facts first, then you can distort them as you please.*

~ Mark Twain, American writer

#### **Controversial Subjects**

1. Darth Vader vs. Darth Maul, for worst villain?
2. Pit Bulls- to ban or not ban as pets?
3. Blue M&Ms vs. Red M&Ms - which is better?
4. Best babysitter- male or female?
5. Should candy be used as a reward in class?

It was Ben's turn. "I dunno," he said dubiously. "Even though I really do want to know if blue M&M's are superior to red M&M's, somehow I don't think your English teacher is looking for these kind of topics." He looked pointedly at my paper plate, where I was fastidiously separating my handful of candy into color groups.

"I want to win the most points," I argued. "I bet nobody else will think of these topics."



“Because they’re stupid,” Ben agreed.

I chose to ignore that remark, and reached for a blue M&M.

After an evening of Uno, Monopoly, pizza and popcorn, the little kids were upstairs watching a Disney movie, James had disappeared into his room, probably to call Lauren, and Ben and I lingered in the kitchen, popping M&Ms, chatting about everything and nothing. I had shown him my freshly painted bedroom, making sure that Riley stayed in the room with us at all times, updated him about Jackson and Marla, and filled him in on all the little details of the past week. I chattered on and on, finally bringing out my English notebook in an act of desperation, just to keep him there, and keep him listening, and try to get him to talk. Something was off, and I knew it.

We both knew it.

As Ben sat there at our kitchen table, I finally allowed a few facts to step out of the shadows of my heart, and into the light. I had missed Ben this week. He was always on the edges of my thoughts. There was no one else, no one, that I would rather be talking about stupid stuff with.

And somehow, all of those facts were making me too nervous to talk about more important things. Why?

Giving up, I made an unusually wise decision. I just...stopped.

I stopped talking, stopped trying to pretend things were normal, and allowed the silence that seemed to scare me, to just sit at the table with us. I let it be.

We both kept eating M&M’s of course, because there was no use letting perfectly good fuel go to waste. But finally, Ben pushed the bag away, looked at me intently, and seemed to make a decision.

“Here’s a topic,” he said quietly. “Why didn’t you go out on a date with Colton tonight? He told me he was going to ask you.”

I looked at him quizzically. *Why would he tell you that, Ben?* But

before I could ask the question aloud, he answered it.

“He asked if it was okay with me,” he said slowly. “If it was okay with me to ask you out. He thought we might be, you know, more than just friends.”

The thought that other people, including Colton, could see something in my relationship with Ben that looked like “more than just friends” made my hopes rise, and my stomach flutter. Was it the way Ben looked at me? Or the obvious ease between us? Then the tummy butterfly took a dive, as I realized what Ben was saying.

“So you told him to go ahead and ask me,” I said, making my voice as expressionless as I could manage. “Because you told him that we’re just friends.” I made the mistake of looking into Ben’s chocolatey brown eyes, and saw the honesty there, but also that guarded look that I had seen once before. I looked down quickly, unreasonably hurt.

“Casey,” he said softly, reaching across the table, and tentatively touching my fingers. His hand was warm, his voice gentle. He had never held my hand before, and it felt agonizingly good, and right. But he was just being kind. Comforting. A friend.

And that’s when Jackson walked in the kitchen door. “I’M HOME!” he announced cheerfully. “M&M’s, YEE-HAW!” He grabbed the bag, and then noticed Ben’s hand, still covering mine, not pulling away. Jackson eyed Ben carefully, “It’s LATE, ya’ll,” he stated, even though it wasn’t even 11:15 according to the oven clock.

I stood up abruptly, slipping my hand out from under Ben’s. “I’m going upstairs to check on the kids,” I said quickly. “It’s past their bedtime. Hope you had a good date, Jackson, and thanks for your help tonight, Ben.” I said it all in a rush, very composed, but inwardly I was panicking, needing to get out of that kitchen, pronto.

I made it to the stairs, before I felt the first tear roll down my cheek.

**Jackson: You okay, sis?**

**Me: I will be.**

**Jackson: let me know if I need to beat someone up**

Like teddy bear Jackson would really do that, but still. I appreciated the step- brotherly concern.

**Me: thanks**

I didn't hear a word from Ben, which was fine because I was mortified. How could I have revealed my feelings to him like that? I had only just recognized and accepted those more-than-friends feelings for him, to myself, tonight at the kitchen table. I had been nowhere *near* ready to let Ben have a peek at those feelings!

But more than anything, I felt a pang of sadness, like I had lost something precious. How could my easy, comfortable friendship with Ben ever go back to the way it was? It would surely never be quite the same, with him thinking I wanted more from our relationship, when he so clearly did not feel that way.

I skipped my prayers that night, and just cried, quietly, so I wouldn't wake up Riley, asleep in the other twin bed.

I think God heard my heart anyway.

## CHAPTER 8



### OPINION

*If you have two friends in your lifetime, you're lucky. If you have one good friend, you're more than lucky.*~ S.E. Hinton, "That Was Then, This is Now"

I'm sure God heard my heart, but I kept Him at a distance because by the next morning I had a plan, a plan I was sure He did not approve of.

I didn't fall asleep until about three in the morning, so I was aggravated to hear Riley bouncing out of bed at what seemed to be just an hour later. I reached for my phone, bleary-eyed, and checked the time. Seven-fifteen. I groaned and pulled the covers over my head. "Go get a pop-tart, Ry," I mumbled, but I think she had already left the room.

Ten minutes later I heard a loud crash coming from the kitchen, smelled coffee, which seemed odd, and decided I had better get up. *I hope James and Jackson are having sweet dreams*, I thought bitterly, stumbling out of my room, then felt guilty when I saw that James was in the kitchen, already dressed and ready for work.

"Did we wake you up?" he asked, way too sunshiny. "Sorry, that crash was my fault, dropped a lid." He was making the little kids help him

unload the dishwasher,

I trudged to the table, sat down in a chair and went face down, covering my head with my arms. “Aaaaaghhhhhh.”

Someone walked over and placed something by my head. I could hear the clink. “So here’s the 411,” James said. “Jefferson has permission to go to the neighbor kid’s house in an hour, and he’ll eat lunch there. My shift is over by four, so as soon as I get home you’re free as a bird.”

I raised my head a bit, peeping at the object he had placed in front of me. It was a cup of coffee.

“Cream or milk?” James was now sitting across from me, still maddeningly cheerful.

“I don’t drink coffee”, I growled, my voice hoarse, probably from all my crying last night.. James looked at me, his expression now a mixture of concern and amusement.

“Looks like now is a good time to start,” he observed frankly. “I suggest you drink it straight-up black.”

“Caaaaasseeeeeeyy, will you please pleassse take me to the park? Jackson took us yesterday and some of my friends were there and it was so much funnnnnn, please, please, please? It’s not that far to bike and I don’t have anyone else to play with if Jefferson is gone and..”

I tuned out Ry’s voice, maintaining eye contact with James. He nodded sympathetically, and pointed to the coffee cup.

“Wow, Case, you look awful, are you sick or something?” Riley was leaning on my shoulder now, peering at me, her eyes big.

I raised the cup to my mouth and took a cautious sip. Hot. Gross. *Caffeine*, I told myself. *Need. It.*

And I chugged down every drop.

Riley and I rode our bikes over to the park, about a mile from our

house. It was a balmy spring day, and as I pedaled steadily, letting the breeze lift my hair, my spirits lifted a bit, too, though maybe it was just the buzz from the coffee. I heard the shouts of kids playing, as we drew near, and Ry called to me excitedly. “There’s my friend Madyson! And Amelia!” She sped ahead of me on her bike, and had already parked it and was running to join her friends by the time I slowed down, and parked my bike beside hers.

I found a shady picnic table, away from other people but still close enough to keep an eye on Ry, put my backpack on the table, and mentally reviewed my plan.

### **The Save My Friendship With Ben Plan**

1. Tell Ben that I turned down a date with Colton because I thought Marla liked him, and about the whole girl code of ethics thing. That part was true.
2. Tell Ben that I really did want to go out with Colton, though, now that Marla was not in the picture. This part was a lie. I did not want to go out with Colton.
3. Text Colton and ask if he was still interested in going to a movie, and if so, I would go out with him once, just once. That would be enough to show Ben that I was interested in Colton. Not in Ben.

It would save my pride, save Ben the awkwardness of thinking that I was interested in *him*, and it would therefore save our friendship. No way could I go to school on Monday and sit in Chemistry class beside Ben, with this thing unresolved between us. It would be hard on both of us, and my plan would work. No harm done.

I refused to examine any flaws in my plan, including the fact that I would be flat-out using Colton, in a dishonest way. It was the only plan I had, the product of a mostly sleepless night.

“Come swing with us, Casey”, I heard Ry yell, waving her hands and pointing to an empty swing on the playground. I started to shake my head

at her, then reconsidered.

Why not?

**Mom: Everything okay this morning?**

**Me: Ry was kidnapped and the kidnappers are now demanding that we take her back, but I'm holding out to make them pay us more money.**

**Mom: Nice try, O. Henry already used that plot. Jefferson is at Tyrone's house?**

**Me: Yes, and they're going to hitchhike to Dallas later.**

**Mom: Glad you have things under control.**

Swinging for twenty minutes had done me a world of good, I decided, returning my phone to my backpack and reaching for one of the water bottles I had stashed in there. I took a long drink, then heard a ding, so I pulled my phone out again. I felt both relief and dread when I saw that Ben had texted.

**Tacos tonight? My treat.**

I relaxed a little. Those words seemed normal, a friend kind of thing. And it would give me the opportunity to carry out my plan, to say what I needed to say.

**Ben: I'll even bring my homework this time, to sweeten the deal.**

I liked this guy. I really, really liked him. He was going to make my little plan so hard.

**Me: Okay.**

I couldn't think of a single witty thing to say, *nada*. Just "okay". He would know I was still upset, so I should add something, but my mind was totally blank.

**Ben: Great, I'll pick you up about six.**

**Me: Okay.**

I sighed. That was all I had to say right now, apparently. I scanned the playground, looking for Ry, and found her still by the swings, so I headed that way. Another twenty minutes on the swings could only help.



## CHAPTER 9



### POINT OF VIEW

*Isn't it nice to think that tomorrow is a new day with no mistakes in it yet?~ L. M. Montgomery, "Anne of Green Gables"*

**Sarah: so dress up a little tonight and add some cha cha!!make him notice you as more than a friend, girl!!**

**Me: Dress up to eat tacos? I think not.**

I had just spent an hour spilling my guts to Sarah, my best friend from my old home town, through texting. A phone call would have been far easier, but I was still on kid duty and didn't want my personal business overheard by either Ry or Jefferson, who was back home from his friend's house.

**Me: Gotta go, promised the kiddos we'd make cookies.**

**Sarah: that's it!!! Take ben some cookies and he will realize how much he needs to be so much more than friends with you!!**

**Me: Because I feed him cookies? I can't think of anything sarcastic enough to respond to that.**

But as we got out the ingredients and cookie sheets a few minutes later, I considered Sarah's idea. Wouldn't taking Ben some cookies be a nice, conciliatory "friend" thing, actually? Or was it a stereotypical girlfriend strategy?

By the time the batches of chocolate chip deliciousness were cooling on the kitchen counters, and Ry, Jefferson and I had sampled way too many, I made up my mind.

I wouldn't dress up, but chocolate chip cookies were from God. Giving them to someone was never a mistake.

I waited on the porch, the sun already getting lower in the sky, ready to get in Ben's truck when he pulled up, because I didn't want anyone to see him, mainly Jackson. I had told James where I was going, according to Mom's instructions, but James didn't know anything about last night's drama and tears. Nobody except Sarah did, not even Jackson, really, though he knew *something* had happened between me and Ben.

Besides, by the time I got back home, everything would be the same in my friendship with Ben, as before, and I could invite him in to hang out and talk to whoever he wanted.

I swallowed hard, rehearsing the planned words in my mind for the thousandth time.

When Ben's white truck pulled up, I walked quickly to the passenger side and opened the door, hopping in.

"We made cookies today! Here's a present from Ry, Jefferson and me!" I said cheerily, putting the plate of cookies on the seat between us, proud of myself for thinking of the perfect way to appear casual, unruffled, and *friendly*.

"Wow, tacos can't compare to homemade cookies," Ben replied, sounding grateful and nervous.

Nervous?

I dared to look at him. He was wearing nice jeans and a dark red polo shirt, nicer than what he usually wore to school. It looked like he had gotten his usually-shaggy hair neatly trimmed, though it still wasn't that short. And his eyes, looking at me intently, looked all melty and warm as usual, but his expression was still...hesitant.

I looked away, resolutely. *Don't worry, friend, I won't freak out on you again*, I promised him silently. I wished I had listened to Sarah, though, and dressed up just a little. At least I was wearing my nicest shorts and cute sandals.

And then I heard a bark, followed by a whine.

"She might smell the cookies," Ben said, grinning.

She?

I looked behind me, and there in the bed of the pickup was a crate, with little whimpers coming from it. "You brought a dog??" I asked, surprised.

"Not just any dog- this is Bonita, from Dr. Gary's office. I thought Riley and Jefferson would like to babysit her tonight. If it's okay, I mean. She's a stray puppy that someone dumped off at the clinic and she's healthy, just a bit malnourished, and--"

I didn't wait for him to finish, but opened my door, got out and climbed into the back of the truck.

"AWWWW," I marveled, putting my fingers through the crate, as the puppy licked them frantically, yipping playfully. "Can I hold her?"

All thoughts of tacos and tension disappeared, as Ben climbed in the truck bed, unlatched the crate, lifted the puppy out and placed her gently on the ground, clipping a leash on her collar.

"Let her do her business first", he advised. "She gets pretty excited, if you know what I mean."

“She’s adorable,” I breathed, even as Bonita showed me exactly what Ben meant, leaving a tiny puddle near my feet. “Is she a golden, or a lab?”

“Maybe to both, probably some terrier mixed in,” he said, stooping down to scratch her ears. “She’s a mutt, and not housebroken either. Your parents might not want her in the house, but your backyard is fenced, so she can stay back there if you think the kids want to play with her while we’re gone.”

“Are you kidding? *I* want to play with her, forget the little kids,” I responded, picking the wiggling puppy up carefully and nuzzling her close, as she licked my chin.

“I figured,” Ben said, and right then I looked up to smile at him, and he smiled back without any of the reservation he had shown last night, or just a few minutes ago. He looked happy and content, the Ben I knew.

Bonita was a hit, as I knew she would be. Lauren came through the back door and into the backyard where everyone was gathered, oohing and ahing and taking turns holding her. “I rang the doorbell but no one answered, so I just came in and was wondering where everyone was-“

She stopped in her tracks when she saw the puppy, and squealed with delight, smitten on the spot. Bonita responded, as she had on a regular basis, by peeing, this time in Jefferson’s arms. “GROSS!” he shouted, but he just laughed and laughed, not putting her down.

We all laughed, and I turned to say something to Ben, and he was already looking at me, quietly, still smiling. Our eyes met, and I knew then, instinctively, that my plan had to change.

I could not lie to Ben. I would keep the news that I liked him as more than a friend to myself, a secret close to my heart, but I would not pretend to like Colton in a romantic way. If our friendship suffered, then I would just have to live with that.

The whole reason I could talk so freely to Ben in the first place was because we kept things real. So if I lied to him, even if he never found out,

*I would know, and our friendship could never be the same anyway.*

I guess it took the innocence of a puppy to help me realize that. Maybe that's why God made puppies, to help us remember to be better people? Anyway, at least I felt like talking to God again, and I breathed a quick prayer a bit later, as I picked up my purse, and Ben and I left the house, taco-bound.

*Jesus, help us. And I'm sorry I didn't talk over my plan with You in the first place.*

## CHAPTER 10



### DIALOGUE

*To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.*~ William Shakespeare, “Hamlet”

“I need to tell you something,” Ben said, “before you go in.”

We were sitting in his truck in my driveway. Our favorite taco joint had been noisy and busy, as usual, not a place for deep conversation, which was a relief, actually. But here we were, and the time had come. This awkward conversation was going to happen.

“Yeah,” I said slowly, “I need to tell you something too, and please, let me go first, okay?” I wanted to get this over with. Now.

It was dark, but our porch light was on, and the stars were bright tonight, above us. Ben nodded, looking over at me intently.

“I want you to know, one reason I didn’t go on a date with Colton was because I thought Marla had a crush on him, and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. But, more importantly, I realized that even if Marla wasn’t in the picture, I really didn’t want to go out with him, anyway. Don’t get me wrong, he’s cute and nice and probably an amazing guy, but I...I realized

I wasn't interested in him, not like that."

I took a deep breath. "And you know, if I went out on a date with him, it would change my friendship with him. It would never be the same. Like you and me."

I looked at Ben, letting him see the tears in my eyes. "Like you and me, Ben. I don't want anything to *ever* change our friendship. I've only known you for three months, but honestly, you're just...my really good friend. I need that."

Ben was quiet for a long time. He shifted his position, facing forward now, and stared out the front windshield, deep in thought. I let the silence sit for awhile, then couldn't keep still anymore.

"Ben?" I asked tentatively. "Isn't this the point where you reassure me and tell me everything's okay? Did I say something wrong?"

Ben sighed, and turned again to look at me. His face was in the shadows, and it was hard to read his expression. "You worry too much, Casey."

"It's what I do", I agreed, still, of course, worried.

"It's my turn to talk," Ben said. "Listen up."

So I did.

"First of all, you'll always be my friend," he said, slowly. "Nothing will change that, so it's one thing you don't have to worry about." His voice was firm and reassuring.

"But I'm going to be honest with you, because that's what friends do," he went on. Uh-oh, this was where he was going to tell me that he was still uncomfortable being around me, after I let on that I liked him last night. He had avoided me all week, probably because he could sense I was getting too attached to him, and he needed space. I tensed up again. I needed to hold a puppy, ASAP.

I was so busy imagining what Ben was going to say that I was hardly

paying attention to his actual words.

“When Colton asked me if I would mind if he asked you on a date, I was surprised. I didn’t know it was so obvious that... well, that other people might guess I like you. You know, *like you*.”

*Wait, what?*

“And I assumed that you would probably be excited about being asked out by Colton, since all the girls seem to go after him. And the fact is, I didn’t have any right to object, even if I ....wanted to.”

I was melting inside. “Did you? Want to object?” I found the courage to ask, in a small voice. I could hardly breathe.

He studied me, there in the dark. “I want what’s best for us,” he said finally. “For the long run, not just for the right here and right now. And, listening to what you just told me, about how our friendship is so important to you- and it is to me, too- well, let’s just leave things be. But Casey”- and for the first time he sounded a little hopeful, and vulnerable- “let’s also leave ourselves open, okay? Open to the possibilities. See where our friendship takes us.”

Open to the possibilities.

Those were my thoughts when I said goodbye to my old ex-boyfriend, Davis, after his surprise visit to my house last Saturday. Was that really just a week ago? With Davis, the possibility of a renewed relationship with him seemed like a fairy tale, sometime in the distant future, when we were both older and hopefully wiser.

But with Ben, sitting alone with him here in his darkened truck, the stars twinkling above us, the spring breeze warm through our open windows, the possibilities seemed very, very within our reach.

In that moment, I wished with all of my heart that he would move over, gaze at me with those chocolatey brown eyes, and just kiss me. I found myself leaning closer to him, slightly, then settled back on my side of the truck, embarrassed.



*I want to be more than a friend, Ben. I want to date you. I want you to hold and kiss me and move beyond this friendship stage.*

All I had to do was tell him that, and things could change. Right here, right now. Should I?

I looked out my window at the stars, turning my face away from Ben. My old friends twinkled silently, oblivious to my yearning and indecision. Did I want things to change?

The silence grew again, as I stared out that window, but unlike I would have done, Ben didn't prompt me to answer or respond to his words in any way. He just sat there, patiently, giving me time to think, like he always had as my chemistry tutor, and like he always did as my friend.

*My friend.*

The word resonated deeply within me, and I made my choice.

For some decisions, maybe there aren't always right or wrong answers. Any choice carries risk, and you know that ahead of time. I could make lists and research and agonize over the what-ifs, but in the end, maybe it was best to listen to that still, small voice that told me what to do.

*Thank you,* I whispered silently, to the One above the stars, *but please don't ask me to wait forever,* and I turned back to face Ben.

"I like the word 'open'", I said. "Much better than the word 'closed'. Deal." I stuck out my hand, he took it, and we shook on it. I could feel the tingling of attraction from holding his hand, and I wondered if Ben felt it too, but instead of dwelling on regret, I chose to smile.

*I bet this possibility is worth waiting for.*

# CHAPTER 11



## PLOT

*Rivers know this: there is no hurry. We shall get there some day.*  
~A.A. Milne, “Winnie-the-Pooh”

I thought we would never get out the door the next morning.

“How do Mom and Harrison do this every Sunday?” I asked myself for about the seventeenth time. I was frantically brushing my hair and dabbing on make-up, had only had two bites of breakfast, and Jackson was already roaring for everyone to get in the car so we wouldn’t be late for church.

To my credit, I had gotten up a little earlier than usual, full of good intentions, still feeling all mellow and content from the previous night. I had supervised breakfast for both the little kids, taking a turn as the chirpy cheerleader when James and Jackson finally stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing their eyes and looking for the coffee that I – yes, I- had inexpertly made.

I let Riley go first in our bathroom while I cleaned up in the kitchen, and was floating around the living room, adjusting pillows and straightening up in general, when it finally dawned on me to check the

clock.

After that, it was like the scene from “Home Alone” where the family overslept and is trying to get to the airport on time.

I finally crawled into the backseat of the car, the last person in, and shut the door. “Floor it!” I ordered, but James ignored me and drove, in his usual cautious way, to our church. We were only ten minutes late.

After the service, the little kids had to linger with James, Jefferson and me while we had our emergency youth group meeting. Pastor Kevin reviewed the different options that our group had discussed the previous Wednesday, to help the family who had experienced tornado damage. We agreed that their most immediate need was financial.

“Car wash!” someone suggested. “We’ve done that lots of times, and it always brings in good donations.” Lots of kids murmured in agreement, and one or two checked their phones to make sure the weather forecast was sunny for next Saturday.

“Ya’ll remember next Sunday is Easter, right? Will that be a conflict?” Mia asked, but then kept going before anyone could respond. “Actually, we could play that up, like ‘get your cars all shined up and ready for Easter’ or something like that!” It was a good idea, and we decided to go for it. By the time the brief meeting ended, I had volunteered with Mia to create and hang up flyers at school, to advertise the car wash.

I felt happy knowing I was going to help someone in a real way. And today, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, we were heading for a drive-thru to get burgers for lunch, and Mom and Harrison would be back home in a few hours, hopefully with a cute souvenir t-shirt for *moi*.

This last day of spring break was feeling pretty wonderful, very likely due to my talk with Ben last night. As our car idled in the drive-thru line, I looked out the backseat window, ignoring Ry and Jefferson’s bickering over the best way to teach Bonita to play dead, and tried to remember all the details.

*I want what's best for the long run, not just the here and now*, Ben had said. I almost shivered with delight. What teenage boy said things like that? What did he really mean by “the long run”? What hopes did he have for our future? Would-

“CASE, WHAT’S YOUR ORDER?” Jackson ended my dream-fest abruptly, and I gave him my order for a burger, fries, and Dr. Pepper, promising myself I would return to those thoughts later.

**Reese: Hey, I’m back from Dallas! May I drop by and see your room?**

Oh dear. Of course Reese deserved to see my newly-painted bedroom, since she had picked out the cocoa and vanilla colors so perfectly, but did she know yet about Jackson and Marla?

**Reese: Is Jackson there? Has he missed meeee?**

I guess that answered my question - she didn’t know.

Mom and Harrison were due back home any time now, and I was doing some laundry, planning my back-to-school outfit for tomorrow and planning on finishing up my English homework. James was keeping an eye on the little kids, and Jackson had just left for the gym. I could stall, and tell Reese it wasn’t a good time to come over, but there was no way I could let her show up at school tomorrow and start flirting with Jackson, not knowing that he was now off limits! And Marla was her lab partner in Chemistry, I remembered with a groan. Drat that Mia for not spilling the news to Reese already!

**Sure, right now is the best time to come on over. J isn’t here.**

I studied my response, then went back and deleted the words “**J isn’t here**”, before I sent the text. If Reese was going to come over, I wanted her to do it right away, before Jackson got back from the gym. If she knew he wasn’t here, she might delay her visit, hoping to catch him at home later. Reese’s strategies were predictable.

**Reese: Be there in a few!**

I sighed, and hoped that Reese had met some fantastic, adorable hunk in Dallas who had fallen madly in love with her, to help her recover from the news I was about to deliver.

She hadn't.

At first Reese was just really, really quiet, her expression skeptical. "Would you repeat that?" she asked, sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at me incredulously. "Surely you did not just tell me that Jackson is dating *Marla*?" Her honeyed drawl sounded thicker than ever.

"She didn't flirt with him," I said cautiously, wanting to protect Marla but also not wanting to hurt Reese's feelings any more than necessary. "He was just...interested in her and not many people knew that. He—"

"Why not ME? Marla is so *plain*! She doesn't *dress* well! What does he possibly see in *her* when he could be dating *me*? What is he *thinking*?? Reese stood up and started pacing around the room, her arms crossed tightly across her chest, muttering to herself angrily. I watched her uneasily, hoping she wouldn't break anything, and wincing at some of her choice words. So I was relieved when Riley opened our bedroom door and yelled, "Mom's back!"

I saw my opportunity and took it. "Listen, Reese, I need to go say hi to Mom and Harrison real quick. You just stay right here and, and...I'll be right back."

I practically ran out that door. I knew how to deal with a sweet Reese, a take-charge Reese, and even a somewhat manipulative Reese, but an angry, jealous Reese?

Help.

Mom and Harrison were in the living room, hugging and chatting with Riley, Jefferson, and James. I joined in, happy to see them back home where they belonged, in charge of the little kids and regular non-fast-food meals.

"It was a breeze," I had to admit to them, though, as we all settled into

sofas and chairs. “Ry and J are actually pretty easy to handle.” The little kids beamed, looking like the angels they clearly thought they were.

“Must be our great parenting,” Harrison said to Mom, pleased, and he gave her an extra-long hug as they sat close together on the couch.

Mom smiled, glowing and relaxed, and right there in our living room they had a moment, staring into each other’s eyes, and looking like teenagers in love.

*Get a room*, I thought, and then realized that, oh yeah, that’s what they had just done for a whole weekend. I quickly dismissed that very awkward thought.

“Did you bring us anything?” Jefferson asked excitedly, and Mom got up and hunted for some shopping bags they had brought in.

“Case, I can’t wait to tell you about all the cute little shops we went in,” she said over her shoulder. “You would love this town!”

“I want to hear everything!” I agreed, and then remembered that I had a very angry guest in my bedroom. “Umm, Mom, Reese is here and we were kind of in the middle of a conversation, so do you mind if...?”

“Oh, go ahead,” she said, shooing me away with her hand. “We’ll catch up later.”

I smiled at her, genuinely happy my mom was home. Yes, we had a *lot* to catch up on.

In the time it had taken to welcome Mom and Harrison home, Reese’s mood had changed, from furious to heartbroken.

As I entered my bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind me, I saw that she was sitting on the floor, leaning against the bed, her knees pulled up with her arms wrapped around them, staring into space. If she had been crying hysterically, I think I could have handled that better. Instead, I saw one silent tear run down her cheek, then another, and my heart went out to

her. I've been there. Quiet tears are the worst.

I grabbed a Kleenex, handed it to her, then settled onto the floor beside her, also leaning against the bed. Before I could think of any comforting words, she repeated her question from earlier, this time in quiet anguish.

“Why not me?”

She sniffled a bit, but went on. “We had a wonderful time at the Sadie Hawkins dance. He laughs at my jokes and has always seemed happy to see me, and... but...” her voice trailed off.

“That’s the way Jackson is,” I said slowly. “He’s nice to everyone. He would never hurt you intentionally, Reese.”

“Oh, ah know that,” she said impatiently, wiping a tear with her hand. “That’s the thing. He’s a *good guy*. Trustworthy, dependable, nice. Obviously not attracted to *me*.”

Surprised, I looked at Reese more closely. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” she said sadly, and I wondered if her hurt had more behind it than just this incident with Jackson.

“The thing is”, she went on, “Ah need to face the facts. Jackson doesn’t like me as a girlfriend, and he never did. Ah asked him out, and he was nice about it, but’s that’s all. No more. Ah made a *fool* of myself, letting him see how much ah liked him and chasing after him like ah did. What an *idiot* ah’ve been!” Her shoulders sagged.

“Reese, no, don’t beat yourself up like this! You went for your dream, you know? You took a risk! At least you had the guts to do that!” As I spoke the words intended to encourage Reese, those words circled right back to me. Had I lacked guts last night, in deciding to remain just friends with Ben? Had I said no to a dream?

*I want what’s best for the long run, not just the here and now.*

I sighed, and reached over to give Reese a side hug. “It’s awfully hard to wait on finding the right guy, at the right time, and all that.”

We sat there awhile, lost in our own thoughts, until it dawned on me that Jackson would probably be home from the gym soon.

“Um, Reese, Jackson will-“

“-be home soon,” she interrupted, finishing my sentence. “Ah thought of that. So-“

She slowly stood up, stretching a bit, then walked over to my dresser mirror for an inspection. After finger-fluffing her beautiful auburn hair and wiping off her smeared mascara with another tissue, she turned around to me and gave me a weak, yet defiant smile. “Ah’ll see you at school tomorrow,” she said. “Don’t you worry about me, ah’ll be just *fine*.” And then she flipped her hair over her shoulder.

I smiled at that, though I could still see the wounded look in her eyes.



## CHAPTER 12



### DRAMA

*“And now,” cried Max, “let the wild rumpus start!”*~ Maurice Sendak, “Where the Wild Things Are”

“And the winner of our Controversial Subject contest is.....Daniel Dixon!” Ms. Thomas announced, to no one’s surprise. We all clapped and cheered, and I leaned over and gave Daniel a congratulatory high five as he received his amazing prize, a small pack of fruity gummy bears. Daniel, who sat across the aisle from me, was a star basketball player, always worked hard at everything he did, and had blown everyone away with the originality of his list, researching controversial subjects in third world countries instead of focusing on the best M&M colors, like me. In all fairness, I *had* added some serious topics to my list, but as predicted, most of those topics were on *everyone’s* list.

“Now let’s get down to business, since we’ve all enjoyed a nice long rest over Spring Break,” Ms. Thomas said cheerfully. Everyone groaned.

“You will be assigned a partner, and the two of you will decide on one of the topics discussed this morning. Each partner will take opposing sides to the issue, in preparation for an oral debate. To prepare for the debate,

you will each write a persuasive essay, defending your point of view. The essays are due next Tuesday.”

She went on to introduce rhetorical devices, letting us know that we would be studying them in depth next week. It sounded very interesting to me, an English geek, but my mind still raced ahead, already hoping that Reese and I could be debate partners.

My hopes were dashed with Ms. Thomas’s next words. “I’m going down the class roster by last name, alphabetically, and will assign partners that way. After I’m done reading all the names, you will have the rest of this class period to find your partner and decide on your topic. Allen and Aguilar, you are partners. Bennett and Carrera, Campbell and Dixon...”

Ms. Thomas kept reading the names, and I looked over at Daniel, who smiled at me and shrugged. I didn’t know him that well, but at least I knew he would do a great job. I smiled back briefly, then turned around to look at my list again, hoping Daniel wouldn’t hold the M&M idea against me and think I was an airhead.

It reminded me of the first time I had seen Ben, in my chemistry class earlier this year. He was balancing a ruler on his nose and I was certain he was the class goof-off, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. He was so smart, and funny, a good listener, and those eyes, and... I sighed dreamily, then made myself snap out of it when I realized that lots of students were standing up and moving around the room.

Time to plan with my new debate partner!

Daniel was already scooting his desk closer to mine, not wasting any time. “So what sounds good to you, Campbell? Any topic you’re really passionate about?”

I looked down at my list, then looked over at his list, and pretended to be very serious. “Well, the fact that you were given a package of candy as a reward for your academic excellence is very disturbing to me. It’s like the educational system is trying to warn us that outperforming other students will be met with...disdain?”

Daniel looked at me, trying to decide if I was serious, then cautiously covered the package of gummies with his hand. “I’m not givin’ these up”, he declared, looking defensive.

My fake seriousness changed to embarrassment. “Oh, no, I was just kidding you, I didn’t-“

Daniel busted out laughing, and just like that, we were friends, though I noticed he didn’t offer to share his gummy bears with me.

We actually decided on a topic from my list, about illegal immigration, after I told him about the family my youth group was planning to help with our car wash next weekend. “I wouldn’t say that I’m passionate about the subject, but it hits close to home, right? It’s something everyone in Texas can for sure relate to, since we’re a border state.”

Daniel agreed. “How about this- our question will be, should immigration laws be stricter or more lenient? I’ll take the side of stricter laws, and you take the side of more lenient. You okay with that?”

“Sure,” I agreed, already looking forward to the challenge. Ms. Thomas had made it clear that we didn’t have to agree with whichever side we took- we just had to present the facts to support the position. I could do that.

With that settled, I looked around for Reese, and saw her sitting across the room with another girl, obviously still discussing their topic plans. She had walked into Chemistry this morning dressed to kill, in her short-but-still-appropriate-for-school denim mini-skirt and white blouse, smooth, light tan, and perfectly waved, shiny hair. From my seat in the back row, next to Ben, I had seen her flash her beauty-queen smile at Marla, before turning around to take the seat right next to her. I was proud of Reese, and relieved that she hadn’t clawed Marla’s eyes out.

I think she was over that, but you could never be too sure.

And then I remembered something.

“Oh excuse me, Daniel, I need to go talk to Ms. Thomas,” I told him,

and he nodded, standing up to move his desk back to its original place.

“Please don’t ask her to quit rewarding us with gummies,” he requested, and I could tell he wasn’t joking. I grinned.

“Your weakness I now know, use it against you I will,” I intoned. He looked at me uncertainly, and I just went on. What was with these guys who didn’t get the Yoda thing?

I talked to Ms. Thomas about applying for the newspaper staff, and she gladly agreed to give me a reference. “Here’s a flyer telling you everything you need to know,” she said, handing it to me. “Take note of that deadline! Your sample writing can be either a factual article or an opinion piece, on a topic of your choice, and you only have three weeks left. If you’d like for me to review your sample before you submit it, that’s allowed and I’ll be glad to give you suggestions. But I’ll need a couple of days to do that, at least,” she warned.

I thanked her, feeling confident and excited, and then the bell rang, and class was over.

Lunch was a little awkward. Reese, Mia, Marla, another friend named Abby and I usually sat at the same table in the cafeteria, though today the weather was so warm and sunny that we moved outside to the courtyard area, where there were lots of picnic tables and benches. Ben had second lunch this semester, so I never saw him during lunch, nor Jackson or James, for that matter.

Most of the time Reese, Mia, and Abby did the talking while Marla and I listened, and today was no different. Reese had made sure to position herself so she wasn’t looking at Marla, probably a wise move, so my nerves started to settle and I was enjoying my hummus wrap with cucumbers, just how I liked it, and my chips. All was well until Abby took the conversation into dangerous territory.

“So did you spend a lot of time at Casey’s house last week?” Abby

asked Reese teasingly. “Has Jackson asked you to Prom yet? I guess you can’t ask *him*, since you’re just a sophomore. Too bad!” She took a big bite of her sandwich and munched for several seconds until she realized that no one was answering her question. The rest of us carefully avoided eye contact with each other, and the silence grew.

“Wait, what are ya’ll not telling me?” Abby demanded, sensing drama. She put down her sandwich and leaned forward. “Did something happen that I don’t know about?”

Just then Colton appeared, right on schedule, doing his usual rounds of flirting. “Didja miss me over break, ladies?” he asked, leaning over to steal one of Marla’s French fries, and flashing each of us his heartbreaker smile. Well, he smiled at everyone except *me*.

Me, he completely ignored, just like he had ignored me in Chemistry this morning. Okay, I could accept that. It was uncomfortable, but-

“I know *you* didn’t miss me,” he whispered close to my ear, but deliberately loud enough for everyone else to hear. He gave my shoulders a light squeeze, winked just at me and then disappeared into the crowd of students chatting and hanging out in the courtyard.

And just like that, the attention was completely off of Reese, and on me. Drat that boy.

“Well, DO TELL!” Reese commented archly, her green eyes narrowed just a bit. “What exactly did he mean by *that*?”

My mind searched quickly for the easiest explanation that was still true. “Well...”

I glanced at Marla. She still had no idea that Colton had asked me out, or why I turned him down, and she looked puzzled.

“Colton asked me to go to the movies with him last week, but I had other plans. No big deal.” Enough said, in my opinion.

But not for my girls.

“You turned down a date with Colton?” Abby squawked. “Are you crazy?”

“Tell us *everything*,” Mia implored. “Quick, we only have about three minutes left before the bell rings.”

I felt cornered. “I really don’t want to talk about it right now,” I said hesitantly, and to my surprise, it was Reese who rescued me.

“You don’t have to,” she said simply. “Leave her alone, girls.” I smiled at her in gratitude and she smiled back wryly, letting me glimpse the pain that was still in her eyes for a brief second. We were bonded right now, both with secrets we didn’t want to share, though at least one of my secrets was a happy one, my new “just-friends-but-maybe-more-someday” status with Ben.

Then the bell rang, and as we all gathered up our trash and got ready to go to our classes, Reese whispered in my ear just as Colton had done, only she made sure no one else could hear her words.

“You’re telling me everything after school, girl. *Everything!*”

I could tell she meant business.

## CHAPTER 13



## COMPARE

*Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.*

~Oscar Wilde, Irish poet

### **Plans tonight?**

Would seeing a text from Davis always hit me in the gut like this? Five years from now would I not feel a single thing for him, one way or the other?

**Me: Ben is coming over, bringing Bonita.**

**Davis: Friends?**

**Me: Yes. Though Bonita's manners aren't that good. She pees all over the place.**

**Davis: ???**

I smiled and allowed Davis to ponder my response for a few minutes. It was Friday afternoon, and I was sitting at the kitchen table, laptop in front of me, waiting for Riley and Jefferson to come in the back door any minute after their school bus dropped them off.

**Davis: I guess bonita is a dog?**

**Me: you got it!**

**Davis: How good of a friend is ben?**

On the one hand, I was flattered and thought, *oh wow, Davis is jealous!*

On the other hand, I was annoyed and thought, *oh wow, Davis is jealous?*

It's all about punctuation, class.

I decided not to respond, since we all know how complicated my answer could be, and turned back to my English essay which I was just starting. I was on my game, and it helped that Ms. Thomas had allowed us time to do the research for our essays during class this week. I had my resources all documented and my outline planned, and just needed to get the right words typed in, which was usually pretty easy for me. But it wasn't, this time.

Because the more I had researched, the more I realized I was just scratching the surface. I could find plenty of reasons to support more lenient immigration laws, but I could also see the flaws in those reasons. And I knew that my debate partner, gummy bear Daniel, would seize on all of those flaws during our debate.

Of course, I would find flaws in *his* arguments too, for stricter immigration laws. He was probably a little stressed as well, at least I kind of hoped so.

It was all just so much more complicated than I had thought.

So when I heard Riley and Jefferson open the door and rush in, happy and hungry, I closed my laptop in relief. "When will Bonita get here?" Jefferson asked, opening the refrigerator to grab a water bottle. "Are we ordering pizza tonight?"

"Later and yes," I replied, answering both questions at once. "Grab a



banana or apple”, I directed them, as I did almost every single afternoon when they got home, and I winced every time I said it. I knew as well as they did that fruit was the healthy option, but...

I waited until there was a break in Riley’s chattering, and then said offhandedly, “Ya’ll want to make some cookies?”

Riley looked at me, stunned, and Jefferson cheered. Then Ry flung her arms around me and hugged me hard. “We get to see Bonita and make cookies, too? This is the best day *ever!*”

I grinned and hugged her back. The ever-dramatic Riley said those words at least, oh, once a week, but this time, I knew her words were probably prophetic. Because, if Mom and Harrison liked Bonita after meeting her for the first time tonight, she was going to become part of our family. They had already talked privately with Ben about all the details.

Cookies were definitely called for, to celebrate what probably was going to be an eventful evening for the Findley/Campbell fam!

Mom and Harrison fell in love with Bonita, no surprise there, even when Bonita immediately left her mark on Harrison’s dress shoes. He had gotten home late from work and went immediately to the backyard once he got home, hearing all the commotion.

“So this is the little girl who has stolen everyone’s hearts,” he said, bending over and scratching Bonita behind her ears. She squirmed in ecstasy and peed on his shoe, but he just laughed. “They needed shining anyway. I’ll go change and be right back.” He looked around the backyard first, smiling. “We have quite a crowd here,” he commented. “I like it.”

We did have a crowd, at least a small one. Besides the ones who actually lived in our house, we had Ben, Lauren, Marla, the neighbor kid, Tyrone, and his little sister, whose name I didn’t remember but who looked to be about five or six years old. Tyrone’s mother was also there, chatting with Mom, but she was going to take her daughter home soon,

before the pizza came. They were only here to meet the star of the show, Bonita.

James and Jackson had carried some more folding chairs from the garage to the back patio, so everyone would have a place to sit, and Mom, Lauren and I lit a few outdoor candles, setting out paper plates, napkins, and a big garbage sack to collect the trash. It wasn't a fancy patio or backyard, but it looked nice. Mom was already planning to dress it up soon with some big pots and plants.

"You're going to miss Bonita," I told Ben later that evening. We were both stretched out on side-by-side lounge chairs, the kind you tan on beside a pool. Hmm, a pool... I would definitely suggest that upgrade to Mom and Harrison.

"It's okay, I get visitation rights," Ben replied lazily. "Besides, my mom is ready for Bonnie to find her forever home. We already have three dogs and a cat."

"You do?" I rolled over on my side so I could see Ben better. His eyes were closed and he looked completely relaxed. I studied him, there in the dusky light, the sun low in the sky. There was still a lot I didn't know about him. *Because most of the time you talk about yourself*, I admitted. Sad but true.

Ben's eyes opened, and he caught me watching him. I blushed, though it was probably too dark for him to notice, and he gave me a half smile, like he knew I had been checking him out.

"Hey, before I forget, do you think you can come to the car wash fundraiser tomorrow?" I asked him briskly, trying to recover my dignity. Marla and I had taped flyers all over the school earlier that week, after getting permission from the principal.

"I'll drive my truck over during my lunch break", he promised. "I hardly ever wash it, so it may look like a completely new truck afterwards. In fact, I think it's held together with dirt, so I don't know, maybe I *shouldn't* get it washed."

“You should start coming to our church youth group,” I told him impulsively. “I mean, it’s open to everyone. Marla started coming, and there are lots of other people there you probably know. We meet on Wednesday nights, just for an hour, so it doesn’t interfere with homework too much. I didn’t much like going at first, but now I’m really starting to like it, so…” I was babbling, and shrugged apologetically. “Sorry.”

“No worries, I ‘ll think about it,” Ben said. “I just have a lot going on, with school, work, and FFA stuff. You know we’re going to the state convention this summer in Fort Worth, and there are some things our chapter needs to prepare for.”

I knew that Ben was president of Rayburn High’s Future Farmers of America club, a big accomplishment for a sophomore. I also vaguely knew that the club wasn’t just for future farmers, but I didn’t know much more than that. So I listened carefully as Ben talked about his responsibilities, and what his club members were involved in. I did learn a lot, but I also discovered that Ben’s brown eyes had an extra sparkle when he talked about something he really loved, that his brown hair was starting to grow out again even though he had it trimmed a week ago, and that the stray lock of hair that got in his eyes sometimes was just crying out for me to smooth it back. And how could I have ever thought that Ben was ordinary looking?

He was most decidedly not. He was lanky, dark-eyed, Texas *handsome*.

“PIZZA’S HERE!” Jackson yelled.

Apparently those were the words Ben had been waiting for, because he grinned, stopped talking and got out of his lounge chair. He walked over to my chair and held out his hand.

“I’m starving, let’s go!” he said. “Gotta get out of that comfy chair. And hey, I really will try to come to your youth meeting sometime, okay? It’s just not something I’ve ever really considered.”

I remembered what James had told me last week, the morning he

introduced me to coffee, and I smiled up at Ben. “Well, maybe now is a good time to start.”

I took his hand, trying not to let him sense how unsteady and breathless his touch made me feel, and allowed him to pull me up off of the lounge chair, groaning and laughing. He didn’t let go of my hand right away, though, and it felt completely, totally...

right.

## CHAPTER 14



### METAPHOR

*My own forecast? How about stressful with a hundred percent chance of freaking out.*~ Jenny B. Jones, “In Between”

“Jackson asked me to the prom last night,” Marla whispered during the car wash the next morning, leaning close so nobody else could hear. She and I were part of the soap crew, scrubbing down the left side of each vehicle, while another crew handled the right side.

I stopped my sponge in mid-swipe and turned to look at her. “Marla, that’s awesome!” I squealed. “The *prom!*” Everyone knew that an underclassman could only go to prom if your date was a junior or senior. “But wait – when did he ask you? How could I have missed it?”

“Well, you weren’t there”, Marla said reasonably, still keeping her voice down. “He asked me in the car, when he was taking me home last night.” She continued carefully soaping up the driver’s side door, smiling and waving a little self-consciously to the elderly driver who was looking at her through the closed window.

*That’s it?* I thought, a little disappointed for Marla. No romantic, creative promposal? I sighed, kneeling down to give the front bumper one

last scrub. Jackson was just so oblivious. Had he not been paying attention his first two years in high school? Didn't he realize that most girls longed for a very public, somewhat elaborate invitation to the prom? It had really been a big deal at my old high school, but maybe it wasn't so much here, I reflected sadly. Not that there was any chance at all of me being invited to the prom this year.

"I know what you're thinking," Marla said dryly. "And no, I don't care that Jackson didn't make a big deal about asking me to prom. Well okay, I care a *little*," she allowed. "But just think, Casey...I'm going to PROM. With a guy who LIKES me. Who would have ever thought?"

She looked at me, I looked at her, and we just lost it, right there. We jumped up and down, holding each other's soapy arms, and shrieked and giggled. The rest of our crew grinned at our laughter but didn't ask what was going on. I guess teen-age girls do this all the time.

"Step back!", our crew leader called out, and we all did, allowing our freshly washed car to move forward in line to the rinsing crew. Another car pulled up to take its place, and we started our washing routine again, for what felt like the hundredth time that morning.

We were raising a lot of money, if the long line of waiting cars was any indication. Our "Shine Up Your Cars for Easter" campaign was working, and someone had come up with the great idea of passing out a piece of candy to each person in a car, which was a hit. The candy and everything we needed to wash the cars had been donated, including the use of the water hose at a local gas station managed by a church member. Every single cent we made would go to the Silva family who, as it turned out, not only had three little kids but also one on the way.

"Changing the subject," Marla continued quietly. "Colton told me that he asked you out, and that you turned him down."

I reached up and over to scrub the top of the car vigorously. I knew that Marla and Colton were neighbors and had been friends since they were babies. Even though I had managed to dodge talking about him to

Mia and Abby this week, and had given just enough information to satisfy Reese's curiosity, it didn't surprise me too much that Marla would find out about our non-date straight from the primary source. And after Colton's ignoring and teasing act on Monday in the courtyard at lunch, he had treated me like he did everyone else, friendly and flirty as usual.

"He didn't bring it up, if that's what you're wondering. I asked him if something happened between the two of you over spring break, and he told me," she explained. "I didn't mean to pry, but since I already did—" she wrinkled her nose mischievously- "I'm going to pry some more. Why didn't you go out with him? Although I'm pretty sure I know why."

We both knelt down to wash the lower part of the car. "Oh-kay, wise one. You tell me why I turned him down." I paused and looked directly at her, curious to see if she would get the answer right.

And bingo, she did, mostly.

"You have a crush on Ben," she replied confidently. "It's so obvious, and Ben likes you too. Anyone can see that. And I take credit for it," she went on smugly. "You would never have gotten to know him that well if you had been Colton's lab partner, when you first started at Rayburn back in January. I'm the one who directed you to sit by Ben instead, to be his partner. Am I right, or what?"

I was speechless. Every single thing Marla just said was true. Everything. Except-

"Everyone really thinks this?" I asked, a little concerned. "I mean, Ben and I really are just friends."

Marla said "hmmph!" and gave me this knowing look.

I chose not to meet her gaze, focusing intently on the hood I was now washing. "How is Colton? Is he okay? Not that I think I broke his heart or anything, that's ridiculous," I quickly clarified. "We don't know each other that well. But was he...?"

"You surprised him," Marla said honestly. "You probably bruised his

ego a bit, and that may be a good thing. But I do know he asked another girl out right away, when you turned him down, and she said yes. So I don't think he was crying in his beer or anything."

That made me feel better. I think. I tried to picture Colton crying in his beer, or root beer, or whatever he might drink when he felt depressed, and felt a bubble of laughter rising up. I looked at Marla again, she looked at me, and we both started giggling again.

"You're going to need a DRESS!" I told her, and enjoyed seeing the laughter in her eyes change to alarm.

Bonita, or Bonnie, as we were now calling her, arrived at our home later that afternoon, to settle permanently into her new home. Ben brought her over in his truck, also delivering some equipment he had been letting her use, like a crate, leash, water bowl, and half-full bag of dog food.

"This is too much," Ben protested as Harrison handed him some cash. "All of this stuff is used, except for her collar."

"It's still cheaper than if I went out and bought everything new," Harrison insisted, and Ben gave in, thanking Harrison and pocketing the money.

"Have any of you trained a dog before?" Ben asked, looking around at Mom, Harrison, Ry, Jefferson and I. We all shook our heads, except for Harrison.

"We had a dog who died years ago when the boys were little," Harrison replied. "Jeff was just a baby, so he doesn't remember her at all. Nicole, my ex-wife, did all the house training, I suppose, because I don't remember anything about that part. So just assume we know nothing, and tell us what to do".

*So her name is Nicole?* I still didn't know much about Harrison's ex-wife, who had left him and all three boys years ago. But what I did know, I didn't like. What kind of mother left her kids, including one who was



just a toddler at the time?

We all sat down around the patio table in the backyard, watching Bonnie trot around and sniff every single inch of the grass around the fence, and Ben started giving us brief instructions about house training, how to teach basic commands, her shots schedule, and how much to feed her. “Most big pet stores have puppy training classes that you might check out, too,” he said.

“Does Bonnie sleep in her crate at night?” Mom asked.

“Well...” Ben looked sheepish, which made him look adorably cute. “She’s supposed to, but when I first brought her home from the clinic she was so little, and she cried when I put her in the crate at night, and, well...”

“She sleeps in bed with you,” I finished for him, grinning. “Am I right?”

“Guilty,” he admitted. “Sorry, it can be a hard habit to break.”

*I’ll bet, I thought dreamily, then dismissed that thought abruptly. Stay in your lane, Campbell!*

The little kids got up and started playing with Bonnie, trying to teach her to fetch, and the talk drifted to other things. Ben revealed more about his job at the vet’s clinic, and we laughed and groaned at his behind-the-scenes stories. Mom asked about my sample newspaper article that I still needed to write, and we tossed around ideas for that. Mom and Harrison talked about how busy our spring was going to be, with Jackson’s baseball season in full swing (pun intended) and graduation for James coming up in May.

“I’ve been looking into driver education classes for you, Casey, and I think a summer session will be best,” Mom added. “With James and Jackson still sharing a car, it will be difficult to get you to the driver’s academy each day and pick you up, and we still need you at home to watch Jefferson and Riley after school. But we can discuss all this later,”

she said, shaking her head, stretching lazily, and standing up. “It’s way too beautiful a night to be worrying about schedules. I’m going to go inside and see what I can round up for supper. Tuna melts, anyone?”

Ben nudged my foot with his, and I looked at him. *Tacos?* he mouthed, and I nodded happily.

This boy was handsome, smart, adorable, and he understood my culinary needs.

He was an exquisite friend.

As Ben and I headed toward his sparkling clean truck, freshly washed by me and the rest of the youth group this afternoon, we saw James pull up in the driveway, in the old car he shared with Jackson. He was alone.

I waved at him, and he raised his hand, acknowledging us. “I thought he and Lauren had a date tonight,” I told Ben. “Maybe’s he’s picking her up later.”

“Or maybe they had to cancel,” Ben agreed, as we settled into the truck cab. He hesitated. “Should we invite him along? Save him from the tuna melts?”

That would be a nice thing to do, I realized, even though Mom’s tuna melts were actually really good. It wasn’t like Ben and I were on a date, after all.

But I didn’t want to invite James. I wanted Ben all to myself. But, I wanted Ben to want me all to himself, too, and here he was inviting James along.

“Oh, all right,” I said, rather grumpily. “Hang on.”

I got out of the truck, and started walking to the car, where James still sat, which was rather strange. Why hadn’t he already gotten out of the car? Maybe he was checking his phone.

James was sitting very still, staring straight ahead, with the engine still running. He didn’t even notice me approaching until I tapped on his

window. He rolled it down.

“You okay?” I asked, and then noticed his grim expression. Kind, easygoing James never looked like this, angry and hurt. The last person I had seen looking like this was Reese, when she had found out that Jackson had asked out Marla....

....oh, no.

“James?” I whispered, with growing alarm. “Did something happen?”

“I’m going inside”, he told me abruptly. “Please move.”

I hopped back quickly, and James turned off the engine and got out of the car, slamming the door loudly. “Sorry”, he muttered, as he noticed me wince, and then he sighed, looking at me directly, stone-faced.

“Lauren just broke up with me.”

## CHAPTER 15



### EVIDENCE

*I don't think that we're meant to understand it all the time. I think that sometimes we just have to have faith.* ~Nicholas Sparks, "A Walk to Remember"

I saved the finishing touches on my immigration essay, found the classroom website for Ms. Thomas, copied and pasted the essay to my email and hit send. It was Easter Sunday night, and I had finally finished up all of my homework, leaving the essay for last. I was confident that my writing was well structured, thoroughly researched and interesting to read, but I still wasn't quite satisfied. It just felt off, similar to the way my whole outlook had been "off" since learning about James and Lauren's breakup.

And after meeting the Silva family when they dropped by the car wash yesterday, seeing their cute little kids in person, and witnessing their tearful gratitude for the kindness our youth group was showing them, the words in my essay seemed so incredibly impersonal. I had presented the facts to support one position on immigration policy, yes.

But the facts couldn't seem to tell the whole story.

The stories of the people behind the facts.

**Sarah: I can't believe she broke up with him before PROM!!! Bad timing!!!**

**Me: I know, it's odd. James still isn't talking about it.**

**Sarah: by the way, Happy Easter!!**

I printed out a copy of my essay that I could keep in my folder, and went to our dining room to pick it up. The dining room doubled as an office, and the printer sat on a desk that was pushed against a wall. I picked up some papers that Mom had obviously printed out from one of her students, and decided to be nice and deliver it to her.

She was in her favorite grading / lesson planning place, curled up on one of the two comfy couches in the upstairs game room, papers strewn around her everywhere. Harrison was on the other couch, listening to Jefferson read aloud beside him, and Ry was cuddling on the floor with Bonnie, who seemed very sleepy after a day of almost non-stop attention.

“Here ya go”, I whispered to Mom, handing her the paper. She murmured her thanks in a distracted way, totally focused on her laptop.

For some reason before I headed back down the stairs, I looked at each of them again. There were Mom and Ry's familiar faces, and the other two faces that were slowly becoming part of my personal landscape. A year ago none of us had any idea we would be here in this room today, all together, doing ordinary Sunday night things. About four months ago, Mom and Harrison had become legally married, giving each other vows of faithfulness in a church.

But we hadn't become a family then. Maybe it was true legally, factually, on paper.

It was only now, though, in individual moments that we could never have exactly planned or predicted, moments that we weren't even fully aware of, that we were becoming real.

A real family.

*But will it last?*

I wasn't trying to be negative- I simply thought it was a fair question. Nicole had left her little boys and husband to fend for themselves. Lauren broke up with James, a guy who really seemed to love her. My real dad had died unexpectedly, leaving Mom, Ry and I grieving for years. There just didn't seem to be any guarantees about families and relationships lasting, and I was sure that statistics would show this as a fact. Right?

I went back to my bedroom and propped myself up on my bed, with its new white quilted bedspread and fluffy, teal blue pillows. Ry had chosen the pillow colors, going with one of the suggestions Reese had given her, and our shared bedroom was looking almost exactly the way I had envisioned it, pretty and cozily elegant, except we still had nothing on our walls.

**Ben: Bonnie doing okay? Any news about Lauren?**

**Me: Yes, no.**

I didn't feel like talking or texting with Ben, or Sarah, or Marla, or anyone. Instead, I decided to do a little more research, tonight. Right now.

I had been reading the Bible on my phone at bedtime, for a few months now. Okay, that sounds a lot better than it actually was....I forgot some nights, and lots of times I was so sleepy or distracted that I only read a verse or two at a time. But I was discovering that even reading for five minutes was better than nothing, giving me a lot to think about before I fell asleep.

I went to the Bible app on my phone, to pick up where I had left off in the book of John. I was in chapter twenty, and Jesus had just risen from the dead, like we had talked about this Easter morning in church. But one of His followers, Thomas, refused to believe it until he actually saw and touched Jesus himself.

So Jesus let him, and then said, *“Because you have seen me, you have*

*believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

I read His words again. Those who have not seen, yet still believe.

Hmmm. Today we celebrated the fact that Jesus had been killed, but had come back to life, and is alive today. I knew in my heart, deeply, that this was true, a fact. But I had to admit, I would probably have been just like Thomas, back then. Skeptical, demanding proof, evidence, guarantees.

Just like I did now? Wasn't I still an awful lot like Thomas, wanting guarantees that things would work out the way I hoped?

And was that so wrong?

*Please help me figure this out, Jesus, I asked silently. I believe that you're alive, and that you love me, but I still have all these insecurities and questions. Like, all the time.*

Ry came in the room just then, interrupting my heartfelt prayer. “It’s Jefferson’s turn to let Bonnie sleep in his bed. I sure hope she doesn’t pee, do you think she’ll pee? She didn’t last night,” she reminded me proudly.

After getting reluctant permission from Mom and Harrison yesterday, Jefferson and Ry were taking turns letting Bonnie sleep in their beds at night, as long as they put a thick towel under her just in case. I think they were afraid that Bonnie would whine extra long and keep everyone awake at night, with her missing Ben as well as adjusting to a new house.

I wasn’t thrilled about the prospect of a whiny canine roommate, but was pleasantly surprised when Bonnie turned out to be a quiet sleeper, curled up near Ry’s pillow. And both kids were warned that they had to get up super early in the morning to let Bonnie go in the back yard to do her business.

“Who knows?” I replied to Ry’s question. “Come here, you.” Riley happily ran over to my bed and climbed in, giving me a big hug. “Love you, Ry Ry,” I murmured, snuggling her close for a minute, like I used to do when she was a baby. “Okay, that’s enough, get out”, I grumbled, pushing her away, and she did, giggling and bouncing into our adjoining

bathroom to brush her teeth.

“You still owe me about Bonita!” I heard her yell over her shoulder. Yeah, I did. I had told Ryley she could have my vote when it was time to name our new dog, in exchange for letting me choose our bedroom wall colors. But Bonita had trotted into our lives with her name already established, so Ry got the short end of the deal there. *She’ll forget, or I’ll bribe her with another trip to the park*, I decided, yawning. *No big deal.*

Maybe some relationships are bound to change, but I didn’t think sisterhood ever would.

At least I hoped not.

“It’s time to prepare for our debates,” Ms. Thomas announced in class the next morning, smiling brightly. “This is one of my favorite units, and I hope each of you will have fun with this!”

Most of the class was quiet, and some looked a little anxious. I nodded my head at her happily, though, forever the English nerd, and leaned forward at my desk. It’s not like I had any debate experience, but how hard could this be? I was very good at arguing with people, and wasn’t a debate pretty much just arguing?

Ms. Thomas promptly burst my little bubble.

“An argument is *part* of a debate,” she informed us. “A formal debate is composed of arguments and counterarguments, giving proofs to support a position. In a debate, appealing to emotions can be very effective, but must be backed up with logic.” She went on to show us a slide show, explaining rhetorical devices, and drew us into discussions about each point.

When the bell rang, I stuffed things in my backpack automatically, preparing to go to my next class. I was thinking about what Ms. Thomas said earlier, about how emotions needed to be backed up with logic, at least in a debate. My own emotions had been ping-ponging all over the



place lately- happy, excited, discouraged, cynical, confused, and on and on. And they changed so quickly, just like real ping pong balls could get away from you, and bounce crazily all over a room!

Was there some fact, some truth, which I needed to focus on, to bag and manage all my ping-ponging emotions?

“Casey, please come see me for a few seconds,” Ms. Thomas called, interrupting my deep thoughts. I hitched the backpack over my shoulder and went to her desk, which was cluttered as usual.

“I won’t keep you long – I just wanted to see if you’ve started working on your sample article for the newspaper!” she said, looking at me intently. That was one cool thing about Ms. Thomas- she might have a messy desk but she always looked you in the eye and gave you her full attention, like she had nothing else in the world to do but listen to you.

“No, ma’am,” I admitted. “I haven’t even thought of an idea yet, but I’ll start working on it tonight.”

“You’re a good writer, Casey, and I know you’ll give it your best effort.” She paused briefly. “Just remember your audience, and most of all, have fun with it, okay?” She smiled encouragingly.

I smiled back, soaking in her positive words. Have *fun* with it? Have fun doing something that I actually loved to do, instead of worrying and stressing about it?

What an idea! I shook my head, still smiling ruefully, and hurried to my next class.

## CHAPTER 16



## CHARACTERS

*People are more than just the way they look.* ~Madeleine  
L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time"

Reese was certainly having fun.

I got to the school courtyard a little later than usual for lunch, since I had decided to stop by my locker first, and started walking to the picnic table that I usually shared with Reese, Mia, Abby and Marla. My steps started to slow, however, and finally stopped, as I took in the scene before me.

Standing by our table, five guys were lined up in a row, wearing red t-shirts over baseball pants and cleats. Each of the first four guys had a letter on his shirt, spelling out the word PROM. The fifth guy, at the end, had a question mark on his shirt. I was at the scene of a PROM-posal!

Another guy was kneeling by the table, next to where Reese was sitting, holding up a sign that said- I walked a little closer so I could see it better- "JUST PITCHING YOU AN IDEA, REESE- WILL YOU SWING DANCE WITH ME AT PROM?"

Lame, but so cute! I sighed, truly happy that Reese was getting a very public, somewhat romantic promposal which was almost certain to cheer her up. Reese evidently said “yes” because I could hear loud cheering coming from the guys lined up at the table, and the guy with the sign leaned over to give Reese a short, sweet hug.

Jackson was on the baseball team, so I recognized a few of the guys and they nodded and said “hi”, as I finally sat down at the picnic table.

“Gotta run”, Reese’s future date said regretfully, but smiling broadly. “A couple of the guys and I have class right now. We had to get permission to miss a few minutes.”

“Aww, ya’ll are so sweet,” Reese drawled, eyes sparkling and looking, as usual, like a million dollars. “Ah’ll talk to ya’ll later!”

After they left, we all started chatting excitedly, even Marla. I think she was relieved, like I was, at the thought that Reese might start focusing on another guy besides Jackson.

“Ah totally did not expect that! Wasn’t it fun? Ah’ll get to go to *prom!*” Reese gloated. “Ah wish all of us could go,” she quickly said, and we knew she meant it.

“Maybe if someone else on the baseball team needs a date, you can suggest one of us,” Abby said hopefully.

“Do you like this guy?”, Mia asked curiously. “I don’t even know his name.”

“It’s Robert Hernandez”, Reese informed her. “He’s one of our best players, ah think. And so, *so* good-looking.”

“He’s a starting pitcher,” I agreed. “A very good player.” Everyone looked at me, surprised. I shrugged. “Hey, I don’t really know him, but I’ve been to a couple of home games because of Jackson. He and Robert are friends.”

“Oh yeah, *Jackson*,” Abby said, looking over at Marla. “Do you think

he'll ask you to prom?"

"He already did," Marla said happily, and Mia and Abby squealed and reached over to high-five her.

"Do you have your dress yet?" Mia asked Marla, and when Marla shook her head no, Abby chimed in.

"You and Reese can go dress shopping together!"

There was awkward pause as Abby realized her *faux pas*.. "That is...I mean you might just want to go with your mom," she mumbled to Marla quickly, glancing at Reese apologetically.

Reese did not comment, and took a long sip from her water bottle, wiping her mouth daintily with a napkin afterwards.

"So, do you know how to swing dance?" I asked Reese brightly, trying to lighten the uncomfortable silence that had fallen on our table like a fog.

She thought about it, then flipped her shiny, wavy auburn hair over one shoulder. "Ah can learn," she replied determinedly. "If the music calls for a swing dance, then ah'll learn to swing dance." She grinned at us regally, chin lifted high, making sure to include Marla in her smile. I had never admired her more.

Reese didn't know it, but she gave me an idea, or at least her prom date did.

And the more I thought about it, Ms. Thomas was absolutely right. Why not have fun with my writing, for once? I had thought about doing a piece on immigration policies for my school newspaper sample article, since I'd already done so much research on it anyway.Or I could write a feature story about the Silva family, if I could find a way to protect their privacy.

But I was a little tired of thinking deep thoughts, and researching complicated subjects. There were answers to questions that I needed to find, yes, but worrying about them wasn't going to get me any closer to the answers. Right?

So...what did I love to write about? What topics made me happy? The answers came quickly, and naturally.

*People. Humor. Fun quizzes!*

I smiled to myself, flexing my fingers before I opened my laptop, that night. The *Rayburn Report* editors were going to get a sample of the real, unedited Casey! Well, not really, of course, since I knew I would go through and overthink every single word I wrote, and edit, rewrite, edit. Still.

It was a risk, but my mind was made up. I would entertain yet educate my audience, have a bit of fun, and hopefully be asked to join the newspaper staff next year.

“If you think it’s not an appropriate sample to submit, I do have a backup,” I told Ms. Thomas sheepishly, as I handed her my two articles on Friday morning.

Oh yes, I had caved in to my nerves after all, and written a serious article about the details of the car wash fundraiser, as a substitute in case Ms. Thomas nixed my “fun” article. It’s just that the more I thought about it, the more I really, really wanted to be a part of the newspaper staff. And second-guessing and self-doubt were big specialties of mine.

“I’ll read them over this weekend,” Ms. Thomas promised. “That will give you plenty of time to revise and submit your sample by next Friday. You might not *need* to revise anything,” she reassured me with her warm smile,” but just in case.” I thanked her, thinking that I should bake her some chocolate chip cookies to show my gratitude, but would that be a really over-the-top act of sucking up? I’ll write her a little thank-you note, I decided, if I get on the newspaper staff.

And, even if I don’t.

“Ready to debate me, Campbell?” Daniel asked, grinning, as I returned to my desk. The bell had rung, but Ms. Thomas hadn’t started class yet, so students were still chatting here and there.

“Not even close,” I admitted, turning around in my seat to face him. “But I will be!” Next week each set of partners would read each other’s essays, and then we would be given time to research and prepare our counter-arguments. I was realizing that, in this case, it might be better to have a debate partner who was just plain lazy and didn’t do his or her research, making the debate so much easier to win. But no, I was stuck with hard-working, intelligent, motivated, honor student Daniel Dixon.

“Hey, do you know my step-brother, James Findley, on the basketball team?” I asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Findley? Yeah, I know him, good player”, Daniel said admiringly. “He got a basketball scholarship to Southeast, right? Man, that’s what I’m hoping for when I’m a senior, or at least a scholarship *somewhere*.”

“He also got an academic scholarship,” I said proudly. James had only found out about the academic scholarship a few days ago, a bright spot in his otherwise depressing week. “I’ll bet you get an academic too when the time comes,” I added generously.

Ms. Thomas was trying to get our attention now, so I started to turn around, but I heard Daniel whisper, “Naw, I’m going after a *debate* scholarship, girl,” and I had to look back at him and smirk.

“Whoever wins has to buy the other one gummy bears”, I hissed, and he nodded, his dark eyes gleaming.

Then when class was over, he made sure to have the last word, as we shuffled out the classroom door, along with the other students.

“I like the sour gummies best, so you’d better be lookin’ for ‘em.” His deep, contagious laughter made everyone smile as he made his way through the crowded hall, and I had to grin, too. I knew we were just joking, but still. This guy was *competitive*.

But... so was I.

Game. On.

## CHAPTER 17



### IRONY

*Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.*~ C.S. Lewis, “The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe”

Competitive was not a word I would ever have associated with shopping, until it came to prom dresses. And Reese.

“There’s not a lot of *time*,” she moaned, as we sat at “our” picnic table. It sounded like “t-ahm”. “Prom is only two weeks *away*, and all of the decent dresses have been *taken*. And ah for *sure* don’t want to duplicate someone else’s dress by shoppin’ at the *mall!*” She shuddered.

“Look online”, Abby insisted for the hundredth time. We had been having this same conversation all week, ever since Reese’s grand promposal on Monday, and every option seemed to have been discussed and dismissed, over and over.

I caught Marla’s eye, and she looked at me uneasily. I knew Marla didn’t have a dress either, and I could tell that Reese’s concerns were starting to infect her, too. Marla didn’t care too much about fashion, but even she had to acknowledge that prom was a pretty big deal.

“Ah’m hopin’ my mom will take me to Dallas this weekend,” Reese admitted. “If she’s not too busy. There would be so many great options *there*.”

Reese never mentioned her dad, so I assumed that her mom was single. I would have to ask her sometime, I thought. During these first few months at Rayburn High, I had focused mostly on adjusting to my new stepfather and stepbrothers, but it was high time to learn more about my new friends, too. There was a lot I didn’t know and wanted to find out, about Reese, and Marla, and of course Ben.

Especially Ben.

*And Colton, too*, I admitted, as he sauntered over to our table to carry out his daily flirtations. Ever since that time when he made his teasing “*I know you didn’t miss me*” taunt that had all my friends wondering what was going on between us, he had reverted back to his usual casual friendliness. He didn’t make as much eye contact with me anymore, but maybe that was just me being hyper-sensitive.

“Are you going shopping for a dress soon?” I asked Marla quietly, while Colton and the other girls laughed and chatted.

“Tomorrow,” Marla replied, also speaking in a low voice. “Mom’s excited about it, but she’s kind of like me, you know, not exactly fashion-forward. Would you like to come?” she asked, anxiously. “Mom won’t mind a bit, and I would like your opinions. We’re just going to the *mall*.” She said the last sentence in a whisper, a wry smile on her face.

“Oh, *nooo*,” I whispered, faking a super shocked expression, my eyes wide, and Marla giggled.

Unfortunately, we didn’t realize that Colton had wandered off by that point, and the other girls heard the last part of our conversation, even though we were keeping our voices down.

“There’s nothing wrong with getting your dress at the mall, Marla,” Mia said, giving Reese a reproachful look. “There will still be some good



choices there.”

Reese looked uncertain, not seeming to know whether to apologize for dissing the local mall, or defend her obviously heartfelt convictions about prom dress protocol. I watched her take another sip from her water bottle, and realized for the first time that this must be a Reese technique, stalling for time when she didn’t know what to say. I had seen her do the same thing before..

“Marla, ah’ll go with you tomorrow if you want me to,” Reese finally stated, a tad hesitantly.

I held my breath, and I suspect Marla, Mia and Abby did too. *What* did Reese just say? Was this an olive branch? Was Reese forgiving Marla for her unintentional sin of “stealing” Jackson’s heart?

“Unless ah’m on my way to Dallas, that is,” Reese added firmly, “but otherwise, ah’ll be *glad* to help you pick out a dress. In *fact*, before prom night, ah’ve actually thought of a *wonderful* idea.”

Reese looked at me and smiled very faintly. Wait, what wonderful idea? Was Reese referring to *my* amazing idea, which I had asked her about a couple of weeks ago during spring break?

Much had happened since then, and I hadn’t even thought about the suggestion anymore, originally intended to help build Marla’s self-confidence. I couldn’t imagine Reese being in a mood to go through with my idea, not after all that had happened with Jackson. So I was stunned, and reminded myself to breathe again and eat a chip.

“Well, thanks, Reese,” Marla stammered, sounding surprised and a bit nervous. I didn’t blame her. “But you don’t have to-“

“Let me finish,” Reese interrupted, looking like a woman intent on a mission, a gleam in her hazel eyes. “How about before prom night, ah’ll do your makeup and hair? Unless you have it done *professionally*,” she amended. “We could see a stylist together, ah suppose. After all, we sophomores need to stick together at the prom,” she ended saucily,

flipping her hair over her shoulder, another trademark that I was used to making a little fun of, but had now grown to respect as a kind of “despite-my-circumstances- I’m- winning- at- life” move.

The bell rang, and it was time to go to class. Reese didn’t wait for Marla to agree with “her” amazing idea, which was a good thing because Marla just kept sitting there, seemingly incapable of movement or speech, until I told her she’d better get moving or she’d be late for class.

It was hard to tell if Marla was happy, or as I suspected yet again, totally alarmed.

Friday afternoons after school are the best. I stretched out on my bed and studied my vanilla latte and chocolate cocoa walls, trying to envision what kind of art I could create, or buy inexpensively, to decorate them. I had about fifteen more minutes before the school bus would get here, depositing Ry and Jefferson just down the street.

I was going to *focus* on these walls.

Until my phone started pinging.

**Ben: Whatcha doing?**

**Me: When you need to think, take a drink. Something I learned from Reese today, how cool is that?**

**Ben: Uhhhhhh**

**Ben: So this is like a drinking game, taking shots? Reese does this?**

I snickered. I honestly never-

**Me: WATER. WATER BOTTLE.**

**Me: It gives you time to think of what to say while looking all cool and natural.**

**Ben: OHHH**

**Ben: She taught you this? Girls teach these things? Will you teach me things?**

Was Ben flirting with me? Or did I only hope that was a flirty question?

It was not, I decided.

**Me: Just come on over later and we'll teach Bonnie to play Uno.**

**Ben: Oh man, have you seen that painting of dogs playing poker?**

**Marla: Can you come shopping with me tomorrow morning? Reese just texted and she's going to Dallas with her mom.**

**Me: Sure, what time?**

**Marla: Pick you up at 9.**

**Lauren: Could we meet sometime and talk?**

Okay. Wow.

My artless walls would, once again, have to wait. And before I could even type a response to Lauren's text, I saw that she was calling me, an actual phone call. She meant business.

"I've passed by this store but have never been inside," Mrs. Williams said, as she pulled into a parking spot. Marla, her mom and I looked at the front of the store dubiously, and no one made a move to get out of the car. The "Second Time Around" sign was elegantly lettered but faded, and the strip mall where the store was located seemed a bit run-down and tired looking.

"Well, we're here, so let's check it out," I said encouragingly. "It'll only take a few minutes, and then we can head straight to the mall."

When Lauren had found out our prom dress shopping plans yesterday during our phone call, she had immediately suggested that Marla check out this consignment store, saying that it sometimes had some really great deals on barely-worn formal dresses. Marla and her mom were open to all

suggestions, so here we were, our first stop on this sunny Saturday morning.

The outside of the store did not look promising.

“Let’s do it,” Marla agreed half-heartedly, and we all climbed out of the car.

A bell tinkled as we went inside, and a very short, gray-haired lady called out a welcome. “Are ya’ll looking for anything in particular?” she asked, from where she was hanging clothing on a rack.

“Prom dresses?” Mrs. Williams questioned, and the lady nodded briskly. “Follow me”, she said, leading us to the back of the store. “We don’t have many left, but you never know. Are you looking for a certain style or color?”

Marla looked at me helplessly. “I don’t have any idea,” she answered honestly.

“I’m just here to help her look,” I told the lady, as she eyed me too, questioningly.

“Well, then,” she said, giving Marla an appraising look. “Let’s see what we have. With your skin and hair color, we’ll look at some pastels.” There were only two racks of formals, of all styles, colors, and sizes, and the sales clerk quickly pulled out three dresses, one light blue, one pale yellow, and another a soft lavender color.

Mrs. Williams looked at the dresses dubiously. “Are any of those the right size, though?”

“Let’s try them on,” the clerk responded matter-of-factly. “Just to get an idea.”

As it turned out, none of them were a perfect fit, and all of them were way too long for Marla, who was already short to begin with. But Marla’s expression changed when she tried on the lavender dress, which was at least a size too big.

“I really like this one,” she breathed, looking at herself in the three-way-mirror just outside the dressing room. It was a simple style, a high-necked chiffon dress, with a waistband and spaghetti straps that crisscrossed in the back. It was pretty, and the style suited Marla, not too fancy, yet not overly plain.

“I love it, but it’s too large,” Mrs. Williams said, pointing out the obvious. “And we haven’t even been to the mall yet. They’re bound to have more choices in your size, honey.”

Marla nodded, but she looked disappointed. “Yeah, we should go check it out.”

“Just so you know, this dress would originally have cost three to four hundred dollars,” the sales clerk said casually. “You can look on the designer’s website. It costs a fraction of that here. As for the size, it can be taken in here and there, which I can do for a fee.” She and Mrs. Williams started talking back and forth, and I tuned it all out, not particularly interested in the details.

Instead I looked at an ordinary girl, wearing a pretty dress that didn’t quite fit, and recognized the wonder in her eyes as she saw herself in a different way, in that mirror.

I walked over and stood beside Marla, giving her a careful side-hug. “You look beautiful, but what are the odds of finding the right dress in less than an hour? What would Reese say?”

Marla caught my eye in the mirror, and we both giggled, knowing that Reese was probably on her way to Dallas right now, traveling hours to discover the perfect dress, which Marla seemed to have found effortlessly, on her very first try.

“I think I would actually like her to do my hair and makeup,” she said slowly. “As long as it’s simple. She’s being awfully nice about it, to even make that offer, don’t you think?”

“Yes, she is,” I said. It didn’t really matter that I had suggested the

idea to Reese. At the time, neither one of them had any idea that they would each be going to the prom. And all things considered, it was *very* nice of Reese, to do the hair and makeup for a girl who was dating the boy Reese had liked. And maybe *still* liked?

I hoped that Reese found the best, most amazing prom dress ever, and that it made her feel extra gorgeous.

## CHAPTER 18



### FLASHBACK

*It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.* ~Lewis Carroll, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"

Marla's mom bought the dress, and she and the gray-haired clerk made arrangements to have the alterations done. There wasn't a lot of time, but the clerk took Marla's measurements right then and there, pinning the dress around the seams while Marla stood perfectly still. The clerk seemed confident that she could speed things through as long as Marla showed up for her next fitting.

We were all in a good mood, as we got back into the car. "Make sure to tell your friend thank you for the tip about this store," Mrs. Williams told me. "Even with the cost of alterations, I think we got a great deal. Now, we still need to go to the mall, right?"

"Yes, I guess I need to get a pair of heels," Marla said glumly. "Unless I can just wear a pair of sneakers with the dress."

"NO", Mrs. Williams and I said at the same time, and her mom smiled at me in the rearview mirror.

“At least not this time,” I amended, giving in a little. “That could be cute with the right dress, but the one you got is so *elegant*.”

“And besides, we need to get Casey to the mall so she can meet her friend,” Mrs. Williams added.

Lauren and I had agreed last night to meet at the mall food court for lunch, since I was going to be there anyway. Lauren actually worked part-time at a dress store at the mall, and since her shift today started at one o’clock, it was convenient for her to come and meet me a little early before her shift.

“I want us to stay friends,” she had told me over the phone last night, sounding a little sad. “And I feel like I need to explain some things.”

“Of course we’ll stay friends,” I reassured her. “And you don’t have to explain anything to me.” But on the inside I was thinking - *totally yes!! Explain yourself!!*

So, here we were, sitting at a table for two in the busy food court, me with my crispy chicken sandwich and Lauren with her small salad with ranch. “I won’t have as much time as I thought,” she said apologetically. “My manager asked if I could come in a little earlier. So...first of all, how is James doing?”

“Umm...” I didn’t know how to answer that question. How on earth did she think James was doing, after having his heart broken in a thousand pieces by someone he loved and trusted? Her question made me uncomfortable, and I grasped for the right words. Before I could answer, though, Lauren sighed.

“I guess that’s a stupid question, or at least insensitive. But I really do care about James. I miss him horribly and I wonder all the time if I made a mistake.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“Well...” *Can’t you just tell him that?*

“But in my heart I know I made the right decision. Not just for me, but for him, too. I just didn’t know it would be this hard, and that I would feel



so insecure about it afterwards.” She was openly crying now, wiping at her tears with a napkin.

“So....”

“The thing is, it’s not like James and I were engaged, or anywhere close to even talking about that kind of commitment. That was never on our radar, and it was time to face the facts. We’re going to different colleges next fall, I’m going to pledge to a sorority, and we both need to have the freedom to explore other relationships, including dating other people. I don’t feel like I should have to apologize for recognizing that.” Her voice grew steadier, less broken.

“Lauren, I –“

“James is like a golden retriever, you know?” She actually smiled a little, to herself. “He’s steady and faithful, and such a good, good guy. I will always love him. But the zing wasn’t there anymore, you know? ” She tilted her head, and looked at me, her eyes begging me to understand. “James is so sweet that he would never break up with me, and I knew that. So as coldhearted as it sounds, if our relationship was going to end, I had to be the one to do it. And I did.”

Lauren sat back in her chair, her salad untouched, and finally stopped talking. She dabbed at her eyes and looked at me expectantly. She was ready for my feedback, I guess.

And I didn’t have a clue about what to say.

So I followed Reese’s example and took a long sip of Dr. Pepper through my straw, sending up a hasty prayer. *Jesus, I need a little wisdom here.*

Wise or not, I blurted out the one thought that immediately came to my mind. “But Lauren, couldn’t you have waited until after prom?”

There was a pause, and I realized right away how shallow that sounded, but maybe it was somehow the right thing to say because oddly enough, Lauren started to laugh. “RIGHT?” she said, almost sputtering. “I

was an *idiot!!*” and then I started to laugh too, and we both laughed helplessly until she, again, had tears in her eyes, and I did too. It was the kind of tension-releasing laughter that makes you feel a little guilty, but you don’t want to stop.

“And then she ate her salad, and I finished my sandwich, and Marla and her mom brought me back home. Oh, and Lauren said she’ll let me use her employee discount at the store where she works.”

Mom chuckled at that, and we settled into a comfortable silence. We were sitting side by side in the back yard, stretched out on the lounge chairs just like Ben and I had done the week before, catching up and watching Jefferson and Ry teach Bonnie another trick.

Like Lauren had done earlier today, I was doing all of the talking so far, and Mom was listening. I reveled in it, actually. There aren’t too many people on this planet who want to hear every single thing I have to say, and in fact, my mom was the only one in that category, with my grandmother maybe a close second. But right now, I needed to talk, to let all the thoughts and conversations that had been bubbling around in my brain come spilling out. I didn’t expect Mom to tell me how to make sense of them, or give me all the answers.

I just needed her to listen.

I told her about my lunch with Lauren, the upcoming debate, my sample newspaper articles, Reese’s disappointment over Jackson, Marla’s dress search, the Silva family, and even a little bit about me and Ben.

“I’ve been thinking lately, about....decisions. There are so many options out there, so many ways things can go.” I hesitated. “Like, when you and Harrison broke up after high school. I mean, I’m obviously glad you did that, since you wound up marrying Dad of course, But what if you had decided to stay together?” I would never have been born, I recognized immediately, but I ignored that and went on.

“And like with Lauren and James....what if she really has made a big mistake? What if she has regrets later in life and realizes that she should never have broken up with him? And, with Harrison’s ex-wife, *Nicole*...” I said her name distastefully. “As bad as this sounds, she must have had some reason for leaving her family, right? Even if it was a terrible reason, she must have thought it was the right thing to do. So-“

I folded my arms across my chest and took a deep breath. I should probably just start talking about prom dresses or puppies and give Mom and I both a break.

“So how do we know when a decision is good or not?” Mom asked, gently. “Is that what you’re getting at?”

“Pretty much,” I agreed. “If only we could time travel and know ahead of time how things would work out. Or maybe God could give us three freebies, you know, like, ‘pick any three times in your life when you want a text from heaven that says yes or no’. Wouldn’t that be helpful?”

Mom chuckled, but she didn’t say anything right away. We just kept watching the kids and Bonnie, who was now growing tired and acting like she wanted to lay down. I sat up in my chair and whistled, calling Bonnie over so I could pet her and scratch behind her ears, which she loved. I let her crawl up onto my lap, and Jefferson and Ry disappeared into the house, shouting that they would be right back.

“I understand what you’re saying, Casey. But I don’t think I would want to know the future.” Mom’s voice was almost a whisper. I turned slightly so I could hear her better, still holding Bonnie.

“I didn’t know how quickly your dad’s life would be taken, when I married him. How we would have only a few years together.”

There was sadness in her voice, but she continued. “We both made decisions based on the facts we had at the time. We both put our faith in God. And though Austin and I didn’t grow old together, like we planned, God was with us, both of us. Even when I couldn’t see it at the time, and even when it’s hard to understand to this day...”

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*

Mom reached over and rubbed Bonnie's silky ears.

"Love Jesus first, Casey. Listen to Him. Let your decisions flow from that. And as much as I want you to *make good choices...*"

Mom paused dramatically as I winced, at that all-too-familiar phrase.

"- try not to worry so much. Some things, in fact most things, are beyond your control anyway."

I frowned. "That's supposed to be encouraging, Mom?"

She laughed, and settled back down more comfortably in her lounge chair. "That's the best I've got, kid. Now don't bother me, I'm taking a nap." And she closed her eyes, a smile on her face. She didn't open her eyes even when Ry ran out of the house screaming, saying that Jefferson had broken a glass.

"Oh, okay, I'll handle it, Mom, don't bother getting up," I said, my voice dripping with fake sarcasm, transferring Bonnie gently to the ground, preparing to go inside and assess the damage.

Her smile just widened. "I'm making a good choice," she murmured. "Would you mind bringing me a glass of iced tea?"

I rolled my eyes, but had to admire her.

"With a slice of lemon, please."

Mom for the win.

## CHAPTER 19



### THEME

*The world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are strong at the broken places.*~ Ernest Hemingway, “A Farewell to Arms”

“I liked this piece,” Ms. Thomas said, handing me one of the sample newspaper articles I had given her, “but I LOVED this one”, she finished, handing me the second one. “I noted a few minor suggestions on both, as you’ll see. Your first sample is traditional, well-written, and a safe choice. It’s exactly what the paper is asking for. The second one, well...” she smiled and looked at me intently.

“It’s funny, reveals some of your personality, and best of all, it actually makes the reader think. It will very likely stand out in the crowd among all of their other submissions. But it’s a little riskier,” she admitted. “The newspaper staff is asking for either a facts-only news article or an opinion piece, and your sample blurs the lines a bit on both. The staff may recognize the chance you took and honor your solid writing, or they might eliminate your sample automatically, because you didn’t follow the rules exactly. That would be within their rights.

“So, it’s up to you, Casey.” She laid her hand on my shoulder, gently.

“You decide, and good luck! I’m rooting for you!”

“Thanks, Ms. Thomas,” I said sincerely, though inside I was groaning. *No more decisions, please!*

I wanted to be on the newspaper staff. I did not want to blow this opportunity. But what would increase my chances? Should I play it safe with a straight-up news article, along with hundreds of other students? Okay, maybe not hundreds, but dozens?

Or, should I take a risk and submit the article that I actually had fun with, which showcased my writing and got more attention, but which broke the rules a bit?

“Why so glum, Campbell?” Daniel asked as I sat down at my desk, stowing my backpack under my chair. “Didn’t find a sale on sour gummy bears yet?”

I shook my head wryly, before turning around to face him. “Happy Monday to you, too, Dixon,” I said sweetly. “Actually, I’m just waiting to see you cry when you read through my essay today and realize how outmatched you are.” It was all bravado, because I knew good and well that if anyone cried, it would probably be *me* when I read through *his* essay.

“Whoaaa, GOOD one,” Daniel chortled good-naturedly. “You got *attitude*, girl, I like that. But it will not be enough, Campbell, it will not be enough.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back around as Ms. Thomas started class. “In a few minutes, you will exchange essays with your partners,” she instructed. “Take notes on the essays. Write down the arguments your partner makes, and look for any areas that he or she didn’t back up with data.”

She gave us a few more pointers, we exchanged essays, and the room grew quiet as we each started reading and taking notes.

I soon realized that Daniel had *not* been kidding. Attitude and talking

smack would definitely not be enough, taking him on in our debate. His arguments were on point and well-defended. His essay was *good*.

I turned around quietly in my seat and managed to get his attention, giving him a begrudging smile and a thumbs-up. To my surprise, he did the same.

“Campbell, you got *game*,” he admitted as the class started packing up right before the bell rang. “You’re going to give me some competition after all. I like that.”

“You thought I wouldn’t?” I demanded, raising my eyebrows. The bell rang and I waited for the loud buzz to stop before continuing. “Underestimate me, did you? A mistake you have made. Careful you must be.”

“Hey, why do you always talk like that?” he called after me, as I made my way to the classroom door, with the other students. “Is that some secret girl thang?”

I chuckled, and had a brilliant idea. If I did get on the newspaper staff, maybe I could start an “Ask Yoda” advice column....oooooh yeah...

“Ohhhhhhh, Reese”, I breathed, “it’s gorgeous.”

It was Thursday after school, and Reese had brought the prom dress she and her mom bought in Dallas over to my house, before she went to her first appointment to have the dress altered.

Spread out on my bed, the gown was a deep emerald green, shimmery with beads and sparkly sequins on the straps and waistband. It had an open back, and a V-neck that was a little daring but not too much. It was feminine and flirty, and would look amazing with Reese’s auburn hair and hazel eyes.

“We were so *lucky*,” Reese chattered on, as she had been doing since she walked in the door. “This dress *almost* fits but not *quite*, and my mom

*finally* found someone who promises she can get the alterations done before next Thursday. That's cutting it *close*, and she's charging us a *mint*, but it's so *worth* it! And here are the *shoes!*" she added gleefully, opening a box to show me a pair of delicate, strappy silver heels. "Ah just need the perfect earrings and necklace and ah'll be *ready!*"

I sat on the edge of my bed, careful not to disturb the dress. "There's a lot to this," I observed. "I mean, I went to the homecoming dance at my old school last fall with Davis, and it was a big deal, but not anything like prom."

"Show me your homecoming dress!" Reese demanded, and so I went to my closet and found it, still covered in the thin plastic sheet from the dry cleaners in my old hometown.

I took the plastic off carefully, and fluffed out the dress to show it to Reese. Seeing it again made me nostalgic, remembering how excited and nervous I had been, going to the dance with handsome, popular Davis. We had so much fun that night, dancing and hanging out with our group of friends, laughing at each other's jokes and feeling so posh in our fancy clothes.

I felt a little sad, too. I still missed those friends, and my old school, and the life I had left behind. I missed that heady feeling, of being recognized as Davis's girl.

"You're missin' him," Reese said sagely, after oohing and ahing appropriately over my much-less-sparkly, short black homecoming dress.

"Yeah," I said simply. "Though I think I just miss how I felt when I was with him."

"Isn't that the same thing?" Reese asked curiously.

I paused. "I don't think so. Nope, not the same thing."

Reese seemed to mull this over, as I hung up my dress in the closet again.



“Ah think you’re right,” she said quietly, putting her prom heels back in their box. “Ah miss Jackson, still, but actually don’t know him all that well. Ah miss the way he made me *feel*, though, when we went to the Sadie Hawkins dance, and every time he saw me after that. He treated me like a princess, like ah was so...” she searched for the right word. “So *valuable*.” Her eyes had a misty look.

My heart went out to her. “You are valuable, Reese”, I said softly. “If Robert has any brains at all, he’ll treat you that way, too. Don’t you settle for anything less.”

Reese didn’t respond, but quietly picked up her dress and zipped it into the garment bag she had brought it in. “Ah better get goin’,” she said. “Can’t be late for my appointment!”

She smiled at me, though it seemed forced. “Ah’m going to do Marla’s hair and makeup before prom at my house, if she can come over. My mother used to do hair, so there’s no need spendin’ any more money than we already have. And *believe* me,” she said, her smile finally reaching her eyes, “that dress cost *way* too much. Even ah was *shocked*.”

I guess she could live with the shock, though, since she merrily waggled her fingers at me with a quick “see ya later” as she gathered her things and went out the door.

That night at dinner, we continued the months-old Findley-Campbell tradition of going around the table and each sharing one good thing about our day, though we no longer went in any particular order. We had learned early on to keep things short, since the little kids lost interest quickly, and with seven of us, it took awhile to give everyone a turn.

When it was my turn, I swallowed my bite of turkey meatloaf, which was actually quite yum, and told them how glad I was that my debate preparations were coming to an end. “The debates start next Monday, and I’m more than ready to just get mine over with, win or lose. You know my debate partner,” I added, looking at James. “Your friend Daniel Dixon, on

the basketball team?”

“Yeah, he’s a good guy,” James said, reaching for more green beans. “But you can beat him, Case. Take him down.” He grinned at me encouragingly.

“I met one of your friends recently, too,” I remarked to Jackson. “You know Robert, on your baseball team?”

“ROBERTO, YEAH!” Jackson said, but he didn’t look too pleased. “Good PLAYER. How did you MEET him, Case?”

“He asked Reese to prom,” I said. “Your turn, Ry.”

Jackson was pretty quiet for the rest of the meal, though in all fairness it was hard to get a word in edgewise sometimes. He got my attention when we finished the meal and started to clear the table, though. “Come TALK to me for a sec, Case.”

I followed him into the kitchen, carrying my dirty plate and fork. Mom, Jefferson, Ry and I had all helped make dinner, so Harrison, Jackson and James were in charge of cleaning up. I was impatient to get started on my homework, but curious about what Jackson wanted to talk about.

He didn’t waste any time. “You know how I said Robert is a good PLAYER? Well, he’s a PLAYER in the other way, you know what I MEAN?”

Harrison, who was rinsing off dishes at the sink, looked at Jackson sharply, but he didn’t comment.

“I’m....not sure,” I said carefully. “You mean he’s a flirt?”

“I don’t know about THAT, but I don’t think Reese should DATE him,” Jackson said plainly.

James snorted, wiping the kitchen counter, and Harrison looked concerned. I just looked at Jackson like, *really?*

“No offense, Jackson,” I replied, “but you don’t have any right to tell Reese who she should or shouldn’t date. And besides that, it’s just one date, and it’s *prom*, and Reese is so excited.”

“A LOT can happen on ONE date,” Jackson said stubbornly, “at least according to ROBERT.”

He started loading the dishwasher with James, and nobody spoke, as we all digested what Jackson was implying.

Harrison was the first to break the silence. “It sounds like you’re genuinely concerned about Reese,” he said, drying his hands on a kitchen towel. “and that’s worth speaking up about.” He turned to me. “Maybe you could find a way to let Reese know about Robert’s reputation, Casey? As a friend.” His eyes were serious.

I sighed. The last thing I wanted to do was cast shade on Reese’s sunny prom plans. But Harrison was right.

As her friend, I would have to find a way to do just that.

**Me: Big home game tomorrow night for Jackson, come with?**

**Ben: Will you buy me peanuts and cracker jacks?**

**Me: What are cracker jacks, anyway?**

**Ben: Don’t know, never had any.**

**Me: Checking Amazon now.**

**Ben: Will settle for peanuts, in the meantime.**

**Marla: Reese wants me to come to her house before prom next Saturday to do my hair and makeup. Will you please come, too?**

**Me: C’mon, are you afraid of Reese?**

**Marla: YES.**

**Me: LOL, ok I'll support you. Is your dress ready?**

**Marla: I go for my next fitting this Saturday. Did Jackson tell you we're going to the After Prom party at the church?**

**Me: He tells me nothing, dear. Sounds fun!**

Hmmm.

The After Prom party had been discussed last night at our youth group meeting. Apparently our church sponsored this every year at our church gym, giving prom-goers a safe place to hang out after prom, doing things like playing pool, ping-pong, a karaoke contest, and other stuff. They provided snacks and even served an early Sunday morning breakfast. It sounded like fun, and....

...maybe this was a good idea to suggest to Reese, if she hung out after prom with Robert? It would be good for them to be around lots of people, meaning less opportunity for hanky-panky!

Did I *really* just use the word "hanky-panky"?

To my relief, Marla unknowingly helped me out at lunch the next day.

"Hey Reese, do you and Robert know about the After Prom party at Casey's church? Jackson and I are going, and you both should come too. It'll be fun." Marla said, right when we were all settling down at our table at the beginning of our lunch period. I wondered if Jackson had told Marla about his distrust of Robert.

"We're already goin' to a party after prom," Reese said politely. "It's at the house of one of his friends who's a *senior*. Lots of kids are going."

I had seen enough teen movies to know what that kind of party probably meant. "Umm, Reese, I don't mean to act like your mother or anything, but will his friend's parents be there? Will there be drinking?" *And any hanky-panky?* I added silently. I unwrapped my sandwich slowly, already concerned.

"Will Robert try to *seduce* me?" Reese added in a mocking way,

obviously amused. “Honestly, Casey, it’s just a party. Ah’m sure the parents will be there, and my mother is perfectly fine with me goin’.” She took a small bite of her avocado wrap. “And ah can handle Robert, don’t you worry.”

“You shouldn’t have to *handle* him,” I replied grumpily, but I just left it there when I saw Mia’s warning look.

“So how did your dress fitting go?”, Mia said brightly, obviously changing the subject.

The conversation shifted, and I turned to glance at Marla, still a bit put out. She just shrugged a little, and the rest of lunch was full of lighthearted talk and our usual visit from Colton, with a slight twist.

This time, he had a girl on his arm, a pretty brunette who I recognized from my geometry class, though I couldn’t remember her name. She was hanging on to his arm possessively, and wore a short, cute Rayburn High cheerleader outfit. The entire cheer team was wearing their uniforms today in honor of tonight’s big baseball game.

“Hey, Britney”, Reese cooed.

“Hey, ya’ll,” Britney replied, flashing us a brilliant smile for a few seconds before she turned her full attention back to Colton. You could tell she had zero interest in chatting with our group of girls. “C’mon, Colt, let’s find somewhere to sit.”

“Oh, ya’ll can sit *here*, we’ll make *room*,” Reese said innocently, yet we could all hear the mischief in her voice. Britney had no intention of sitting with us.

“Let’s go, Colt”, she said, more petulantly this time, and Colton looked a little annoyed, but he gave in.

“Later, ladies,” he said, winking at us, and they walked away, he with a swagger, while Britney gave us a smug look.

“Bless her *heart*,” Reese said sadly. “Hangin’ all over him like that.”

“What do you mean? She’s so *lucky!*” Abby exclaimed. “Colton is usually one date and done, but it looks like Britney has snagged him!” “I kind of feel sorry for her,” Mia commented. “I wouldn’t like it if my guy flirted with other girls, with me standing right there. Sheesh.”

I silently agreed with Mia, and at the same time I still felt a little annoyed. Yes, I had turned down my chance to date Colton, but I was obviously not that special to him in the first place since he had immediately asked someone else out, and he now had Britney attached to him like glue. For a minute, that day on my front porch, I thought he had truly liked me, but I would have been just another notch on his belt. What was with this guy?

THIS guy, though...

Jackson’s Friday night baseball game was about to begin, and Marla and I had saved Ben a seat near the top of the bleachers, where most Rayburn students usually sat. Mom, Harrison, and the little kids were sitting near the bottom with a bunch of other parents, and James was somewhere around, sitting with his friends.

I looked at the slim rectangular box Ben handed me triumphantly, as he climbed onto the bleacher beside me.

“Cracker Jacks!” I said happily. “You found some!”

“I called around to some stores last night”, he said, shrugging good-naturedly. “I thought we should check them out. I bought a couple of boxes we can all share,” he added, leaning over to include Marla.

“Thanks,” she said, and gave me a knowing smile, right there in front of him. I just grinned, sappily. What guy called around to different stores to find a specific snack, just to make me happy?

This guy. I scooted just a little closer to him, not caring if he noticed.

He did notice, and his smile got a little more lazy. He held my gaze

steadily for a few seconds, then leaned in a little closer to me, too, so that our arms were now touching, though there was plenty of room on the bleacher for us to spread out, and have lots of space.

*I don't want that space, I realized. I'm going to open that door of possibilities just a lit-tle bit wider.*

And, munching contentedly on the Cracker Jacks, Ben certainly seemed okay with that.

## CHAPTER 20



## RESOLUTION

*There are no happy endings. Endings are the saddest part, So just give me a happy middle And a very happy start.~ Shel Silverstein, “Everything On It”*

The next week was a blur of debates, newspaper results, and the big event for so many except me, of course- prom night!

### **The “ How Did The Last Week of April Go Down?” Quiz**

1. Who won the debate?
  - A. I won the gummies.
  - B. Daniel slam-dunked it.
  - C. It was deemed a tie by Ms. Thomas and the rest of the class.
2. Which article did I submit to the newspaper staff?
  - A. I submitted the “safe” article, and the staff thought it was good but not outstanding. I did not win a reporter job for my junior year, and I was totally bummed.
  - B. I submitted the “safe” article, and the staff approved it, though



it helped that not too many students were trying out for a reporter spot anyway. I won a reporter job for my junior year!

- C. I submitted the “risky” article, and the staff got a kick out of it but ultimately disqualified me, because I didn’t stick to the exact specifications for my submission. I cried.
- D. I submitted the “risky” article, and the staff unexpectedly called me in for a conference during one of my classes. The editor-to-be for next year scolded me up and down for not meeting the specifications, and gave me a lecture about staying in my lane and not going rogue. I felt totally depressed but then she grinned at me and gave me a reporter job for next year. I cried.

3. What was the “risky” article about, anyway?

- A. It was a how-to article/quiz about choosing the right promposal for your hoped-for prom date.
- B. It was a quiz matching some Rayburn High staff members to the Star Wars characters they most resembled.
- C. It was a funny quiz about how to tell if your high school relationship is destined to last (perfectly clean and totally not based on my own experiences, I assure you).

4. How did the pre-prom hair and make-up session go with Reese and Marla?

- A. First of all, Marla and I discovered that Reese and her mom live with her grandma, in this gorgeous, fancy house. Reese’s room is about what you would expect, feminine, soft and beautifully decorated in pristine white and pale blue.
- B. Marla’s mom is an older version of Reese, same auburn hair, same hazel eyes, and even twangier Texas accent. She looked Marla up and down when we walked in the house, obviously assessing the challenge of turning this ordinary girl into a

prom-ready beauty, and for a few minutes I was a little worried that she might hurt Marla’s feelings by being too critical. She turned out to be pretty nice, though, regaling us with funny stories about some of her customers when she used to be a hairdresser at a salon.

- C. When all was said and done, Marla and Reese both looked amazing. Marla’s transformation was more dramatic, since she was wearing far more makeup than she ever usually wore. But the look was fresh and natural-looking, and brought out her best features. Reese’s mom curled Marla’s hair in soft waves, and I knew Jackson would be speechless when he saw how beautiful she looked.

But he already thought she was beautiful, even when she was sweaty and wearing her sweat pants, without any makeup, hair in a ponytail...and that made everything even better.

Big, swoony sighs.

- D. D. All of the above

5. And, how did prom and post-prom plans go?

- A. A great time was had by all.
- B. A great time was had by all, though Marla developed blisters on her feet from wearing the heels and swore she would never wear them again.
- C. A great time was had by all, Marla swore off heels, and Reese swore off Robert.

**ANSWER KEY: B, D, A, D,C**

“Robert’s pretty stuck on himself, not my type. He didn’t *try* anything, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Reese told us at lunch the Monday after prom. “He said *somebody’s stepbrother* told him to treat me *right*, because ah’m like a *sister* to him.” She looked right at me when she said it, and while she didn’t look happy about it, she didn’t look upset, either. I think

“bemused” is the correct word.

“Jackson told him that?” I smiled at her, tentatively. “That’s actually kind of sweet, Reese.”

“He cares about what happens to you,” Marla said quietly, which was a nice thing for her to say. “He told me he considers you a good friend.”

Reese looked at Marla, mulling over her words. Then she took an extra-long sip from her water bottle, and when she was done, she still didn’t have anything else to say.

You know how you think you’ll remember everything, the highs and lows, the nerves and stress, the thrill of getting something you really want, the faint sadness of recognizing a “last” moment? I don’t think you can ever *fully* remember.

It’s like a rainbow that catches your attention in the sky, and never fails to amaze you because really, how often does a rainbow happen? You point to it and smile, and even take a picture. But the rainbow disappears, not all at once, but the sun shifts a little, or you have to move on to another position. The crisp memory fades to a blur, still in your thoughts but getting fuzzy around the edges.

You look at the picture and remember the event, but the feelings you had are less intense, impossible to recapture.

That’s how I felt, at the beginning of May, a couple of weeks before James was going to graduate from Rayburn High.

We were all sitting at dinner, going around the table as usual with our highs and lows, and there was nothing that unique about it, just our ordinary spaghetti and meatball night. With perfectly toasted, buttery garlic bread, I must add, which I’ll admit does make everything special, so there is that.

Food aside, I looked at the people around our table and had a moment.

Our blended family had just gotten started, when Mom and Harrison

got married last Christmas. We were blending together pretty well, and had some practical everyday routines sort of figured out, like who-cooks-when and who-handles-what. Things were still awkward sometimes, but I was coming to accept that as my lot in life, no matter who I was with.

But James was graduating. He would be leaving for college in a few months. Everything would change. Again.

Like I just said, our new family had barely gotten started, and I did not want to lose these moments, or at least not forget them.

I was trying to explain all this to Ben the next evening, though not very successfully, as we sat in his truck cab once again, alone together for the first time that day. We had just made another Friday night taco run, this time with Marla and Jackson, which had very weird double-date vibes, by the way, though I didn't discuss *that* with Ben.

"Things change so fast," I commented. "Again, like my rainbow analogy. The rainbow is so beautiful, and then *pfffffft*, it's gone and you never see that exact same rainbow again, you know? There one minute, gone the next. Just like special moments. It's so sad."

Ben didn't say anything, sitting silently behind the steering wheel, half-turned to face me, and for a few seconds I thought he was mulling over my amazing analogy and pondering how to respond and maybe even comfort me.

Until I caught a suspicious half-smile on his face.

"Are you laughing at me?" I asked him, not mad but just a little shocked. This was so unlike Ben.

"No!" he protested weakly, but then he broke out in a big grin, and chuckled. "It's just that you've been so serious, and then you made that *pfffffft* sound, like you personally murdered the rainbow, and it was just unexpected, okay?"

I tried to act like I was offended but then I started to giggle, because yeah, my sound effect had been a bit over-the top. We both started laughing harder, and just like when Lauren and I had laughed so hard that day at the mall, after our serious conversation, the laughter felt really good.

“Seriously, though”, Ben said after a minute or two, “that was a great analogy about the rainbow. But even if rainbows don’t last, they pop up again unexpectedly, right?”

“They’re unpredictable”, I said softly.

“You can’t control them,” Ben affirmed. He looked at me, his chocolatey brown eyes all melty, almost making me forget what we were talking about. “Just enjoy them while they last. And more will come.”

“Have faith,” I agreed absently, still a little lost in his eyes, as cheesy as that sounds.

Ben looked away from me, breaking the romantic moment I thought we were almost having. He was silent, and I stayed quiet too, resigned once again to our usual just-friends mode. But then he surprised me.

“If the invitation is still open, I’d like to come to your youth group next Wednesday”, Ben said matter-of-factly, turning his gaze on me again.

I smiled at him contentedly. He knew he was welcome, without my saying so.

And then he reached over, took my hand firmly in his, raised it to his lips, and kissed the back of my hand, so gently.

My whole arm tingled. I was speechless.

“Time to go in, Case,” Ben said, his voice low, and deeper than usual. He let go of my hand reluctantly, got out of the truck and walked around to the passenger side to open my door, before I could even move.

Ben kissed me! Okay , it was on my hand, but it was a *kiss*!

And it was *perfect*.

A rainbow.

And for right now, it was enough.

Ben cleared his throat, clearly waiting for me to get out of the truck, which I did in a daze. *What do we do now?* I worried. *Will he hold my hand again as we walk to the door? Do I grab him by the shirt and lay one on his lips? Does he expect that? Do I even want to?*

*Make good choices*, I could hear Mom saying. *And relax.*

So, very awkwardly, I tried to do just that.

“First one to the door wins!” I shouted abruptly, ducking around Ben.

He caught me by the arm easily. “Wins what?” he demanded sternly. “I must know the terms, Campbell.”

I smiled at him goofily, there in the dark. “Just....wins,” I replied feebly, still feeling all bubbly in my stomach, in a nice way.

Ben grinned, took my hand firmly in his, and we walked together to the door, side by side, laughing with every step.

We both won.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this second book in the **High School 101 Series!** Be sure to look for the next book about Casey's life in Book #3, *Follow the Signs*, coming soon!

Also, if you can leave a positive review for *Just the Facts* I will make you a virtual batch of chocolate chip cookies! Mmmmm, that smell!

One last thing-as always, I am praying for you. Take your questions to Jesus, no matter how complicated they are - He can handle them.

BOOKS BY MELISSA KNIGHT

High School 101 Series

**#1 *Feelin' the Chemistry***

**#2 *Just the Facts***

**#3 *Follow the Signs - COMING SOON!***