

Breaking News

HIGH SCHOOL 101- BOOK #4

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FIRST EDITION

Dedicated to my mother, Sandra

*Save a seat for me at the table, right by you and Dad, and we'll
catch up on all the details.*

Chapter 1

The Story

It's all storytelling, you know. That's what journalism is all about.

-Tom Brokaw, journalist

I rang the doorbell and stepped back from the ornate wooden door, turning around to take in the perfectly manicured front yard. Mom was sitting in her car in the circle driveway, waiting to make sure this was really the right house before she drove away. I gave her a little wave, but she didn't notice since she also was busy checking out the colorful but formal landscaping.

I couldn't blame her.

Masses of purple and pink blooms looked festive in the curved flowerbeds, and a majestic modern stone fountain bubbled with water, looking refreshing on this sticky, humid Friday afternoon. The fountain was centered in the yard between two massive oak trees.

Picture. Perfect.

Who knew we even had a neighborhood like this in our

town? My friend Reese's house was elegant and pretty, but not like *this*.

This, this was *serious* money right here.

I heard the front door open and turned back around quickly. I halfway expected a uniformed butler to open the door, but instead I faced a tall, dark and extremely handsome hunk of teenage boy.

"You're early," the hunk said, disapproval in his voice. He held the door open for me to enter, a little reluctantly, it seemed.

Nicolas.

My editor, Nicolas Navarro.

I thought his parents had done well with his name-Nicky Navarro, a good boy-band name, how cute is that? But from what I had seen so far, Nicolas was not a *Nicky*, or even a Nick. He was politely formal, socially distant, and didn't seem to have a casual bone in his body.

And as I have mentioned, he was drop dead, movie star *gorgeous*. Kind of the Latino version of the other ultra-popular, hot guy at my high school, my friend Colton. While Colton had sun-bleached blond hair and was an easygoing flirt, Nicolas had that hard-to-resist bad boy, brooding thing going on.

He was not chatty, and he was certainly not at all welcoming right now.

"I didn't want to be late," I said meekly. "Sorry! I'll just, um-" I turned back around to see if Mom was paying attention now, and she gave me a little wave from the driver's seat of her car. She waved at Nicolas too and gave him a big smile, but I guess he didn't notice because he just took a step back from the door, holding it even wider as he waited, quite pointedly, for me to enter.

So I did, and...

Wow.

The front hall opened into a large living area with huge floor-to-ceiling windows in the back, and French doors that opened out to a beautiful courtyard. I could see yet another massive fountain out there, sparkling with trickling water and surrounded by huge cobalt blue containers, stuffed to the brim with colorful flowers. Beyond the containers was a pool, paved all around with vibrant Mexican tiles. Small tables were scattered around the deck area, sheltered by umbrellas that matched the blue containers.

This wasn't just a house, this was a *hacienda*, a nice chunk of air-conditioned paradise in the hot lava of life also known as Texas in August.

"Your house is gorgeous," I breathed softly, but Nicolas didn't hear me since he had apparently left the room while I was gawking and was nowhere to be seen.

Somebody else heard me, though. "Thank you, and welcome!" a cheerful feminine voice called across the room. I turned to see a pretty, middle-aged woman approaching me, a friendly smile on her face. "Please make yourself at home! Did Nico offer you a drink?" She clicked her tongue disapprovingly but never stopped smiling. "His manners are usually so good, please excuse him."

Nico? And she thinks he has good manners?

I kept the sarcasm to myself and smiled back at the woman, assuming this was *Nico's* mom. "Oh I'm not thirsty, but thank you. I'm Casey, by the way. Sorry I'm early, um, Mrs. Navarro?"

She laughed and shook her head dismissively. "You are prompt, *chica*, and that is greatly in your favor. And *si*, I am Nico's mother. Come now!" She hustled me into another large room, a sparkling clean kitchen, and insisted on giving me an ice cold water bottle which I was actually grateful for.

Nicolas had simply disappeared, so his mom and I sat around chatting about this and that until the doorbell rang and other students on the Rayburn High School newspaper staff started showing up for our first, before-the-school-year-started meeting.

“You go and hang out with your friends now!” Mrs. Navarro said, standing up from where we had been sitting around her massive, solid oak kitchen table. She sounded excited. “This will be the most wonderful school year yet, *si*? And all the kids on the newspaper staff will become the best of friends!”

This lady was so encouraging and sweet. How could she possibly be Nicolas’s mother?

Give him a chance, I lectured myself silently, as I headed back towards the main living area. Nicolas was originally supposed to be the assistant editor this year, but the girl who was appointed editor had moved unexpectedly over the summer. So maybe he was just nervous about, you know, being in charge of the paper for real, dealing with new people like me on the staff, and stuff like that.

So I squared my shoulders and entered the living room with a warm smile, which immediately froze up, for three reasons.

Reason #1- Nicolas was joking around and greeting the other students with a smile. A real one, not forced or fake, because trust me, never once had he smiled at *me* like that.

Reason #2- When he saw me enter the room, his genuine smile flipped upside down to a frown in a split second. It was so obvious than even a couple of other kids noticed and looked my way like, umm, did you kick his puppy or something?

And THEN...

Reason #3- Another girl entered the room, ignored all the

other kids, walked straight over to Nicolas and gave him a side hug. He hugged her back, whispered something in her ear, and then they both turned and glared at me. Well okay, only Nicolas was glaring. The girl, as beautiful and poised as a model, with her long silky dark hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, simply stared at me with no expression, unblinking.

My heart sank.

Miranda.

Sarah:

Wait who is Miranda again?

Me:

The girl who kissed Ben and then posted it all over social media. And she tagged me on Facebook even though we're not Facebook friends, I presume to make me jealous. Gah, how could you forget that?

I rolled over on my bed with a huge sigh. Riley, my ten-year-old sister who I shared a bedroom with, was already asleep but our dog Bonnie, who was dozing at the foot of her bed, stirred a bit.

Sarah:

Oh yeahhhhh so she's on the newspaper staff?

Me:

No I think she's just a friend of Nicolas. His mom came over and gave her a big hug so maybe she's his girlfriend now, don't know.

Sarah:

Well forget her, who cares? Ben picked YOU girl!

Lots of hearts and smiley faces followed, and I had to grin.

Sarah:

Tomorrow's the big day!!

I didn't ask her what she meant by "the big day". My best friend might live a couple of hundred miles away from me in the town I had moved from at the beginning of this year, but Sarah knew me inside and out, and we kept up with all the details of each other's lives.

Me:

Yep, tomorrow!

I put my phone on the bedside table, pulled up my covers and closed my eyes shut tightly. I willed myself to go to sleep, because maybe that would make tomorrow come faster.

Tomorrow was Saturday. The day a certain former chemistry tutor came back home from Abilene, where he had been spending his summer doing an internship with a veterinarian and helping his grandparents on their ranch.

The day we would finally, after two long, long months - okay, we did see each other on my birthday in June but only for one hour and thirty-three minutes so I'm not counting that- we would make another taco run, hold hands, and-

-maybe, probably, finally, I would officially become his girl.

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Did that sound weird? Maybe the day he would become my guy?

Or how about, the day we would take that next step in a relationship that had seemed stuck in slow motion, in my opinion.

But it was all going to be worth it. Absolutely worth it. Tomorrow.

Chapter 2

Viewpoint

In seeking truth you have to get both sides of a story.

-Walter Cronkite, journalist and editor of his high school newspaper

Or, maybe not.

Still lying in bed, I stared at the text Ben had sent me earlier this morning before I even woke up since I did, finally, fall asleep last night.

Ben:

Case, I won't be coming home today after all. Maybe on Sunday. Grandma isn't doing well and I need to stay and help an extra day.

I needed coffee.

“Trouble in paradise?” James asked, noting my glum expression. The oldest of my stepbrothers, he was starting college later this month. James worked at my stepdad Harrison’s accounting office in the meantime, but he had weekends off and enjoyed sleeping in as much as I did.

I shuffled over to the coffee pot like I was forty instead of seventeen.

“Oh dear, a two cups of coffee morning,” he observed, managing to eat his cereal, check his phone and keep an eye on me all at the same time. “Do tell, Sis.”

“I’m headed to the gym, you coming, Case?” Jackson, my middle stepbrother who was about to start his senior year, entered the kitchen jiggling his car keys. I glared at him balefully as I stood sipping my coffee.

“HOO boy, I’ll take that as a no.” Unlike James, though, Jackson showed more concern than just curiosity. “You need anything?”

I sighed and decided to suck it up, fortified now with extra caffeine. I had waited for two months, so what was one day more?

“Ben won’t be back until tomorrow,” I told them, with no further explanation.

James and Jackson looked at me, then at each other, and both shrugged. “Okay, well, see ya later,” Jackson replied, heading for the kitchen door which led to the garage.

“Wait!” I said abruptly, and Jackson stopped. “Please? Can you wait a couple of minutes for me to get ready? I changed my mind, I’d like to go if Marla is going, too. Is she?”

Jackson got that grin on his face that always showed up when Marla’s name was mentioned. “Yep, I’m picking her up, so HURRY,” he warned. “Five minutes.”

“Ten.”

“Well all right,” he said grumpily, but I ignored him as I rinsed my coffee cup in the sink and hurried to the bathroom.

Jackson was never a grouch for long,

“So what’s wrong with Ben’s grandma?” Marla asked as we halfheartedly did our mile on the exercise bikes. Neither one of us was too ambitious this morning. More accurately, neither one of us was terribly athletic or ever concerned about getting hardcore exercise. But we liked going to the gym.

We didn’t overanalyze it.

Jackson was the opposite. He had his rigorous routines, or workout schedule, or whatever he called it, to stay in top shape. He played both football and baseball for Rayburn High and took it very seriously.

“Well, remember how I told you she fell a couple of weeks ago?” I answered, panting just a little. “She broke her leg, and had to have some kind of surgery to fix things, but now her doctors are telling her she needs a hip replacement, too. I’m fuzzy on the details.” I sighed. “I do feel so sorry for her, but I just want Ben to come back home. Does that make me sound awful?”

Marla didn’t answer right away, which made me feel a tad guilty. Maybe I really was a self-centered person? I opened my mouth to moan about that but Marla spoke instead.

“It’s normal for you to want him to come home,” she said calmly. Marla was like that, reasonable and matter-of-fact. She was not a drama queen like Reese or even me sometimes. Quiet and a little on the plain side, she had been taking more care with her appearance lately. Best of all, she thought about her words before she spoke them.

“I mean, you can feel two things at once, right? Sympathy and disappointment.”

“All the time, girl, all the time,” I agreed, thinking about the crazy mix of feelings I had experienced this year, all at the same time. Excitement and fear, delight and dread - did happy feelings always come with an evil twin right behind?

I stopped cycling abruptly. “Hey, did you bring your swimsuit? Do we still have time to swim some laps?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Marla replied happily. She hopped off her bike and reached for her gym bag. “And of course we have time. Jackson won’t mind waiting if he finishes up before we do.”

“Well, he might complain to me, but never to *you*,” I teased her, grabbing my own bag. “I don’t think ya’ll are ever going to come out of your little honeymoon phase.” I loved watching Marla blush when I teased her about Jackson. They had been dating for a few months now, and Jackson still treated her like she was this delicate princess and he was her smitten subject. It was sweet though I had to admit it could be annoying, but maybe that was just plain old jealousy speaking.

Had to wonder though, would Ben ever treat me that way? Did I even want him to?

Tomorrow, I promised myself as Marla and I walked towards the athletic club’s large lap pool. Maybe tomorrow I would get a glimpse of what the relationship between Ben and I might look like.

“Tonight?” Reese’s voice sounded annoyed over the phone. “In just a few hours? Why didn’t you ask me earlier?”

“I wasn’t planning on going,” I explained. “Ben was supposed to be home tonight and I was going to hang out

with him, but since he won't be here I think I'll go to Tyler's pool party. Because you know, we only have another week left of freedom before school starts and we need to make the most of it."

"And because there are *boys* there." Reese's tone switched from miffed to decisive. "Ah'll go. Although..." she hesitated, and I knew what she was probably thinking.

And I hated it.

"Reese, I've been to Tyler's house lots of times since we saw your, um - *him*. I guess there's always a chance that he'll be there but since he hasn't been back yet, well..."

My voice faded out because I didn't know what else to say. Tyler was in my church's youth group, and his parents were generous with letting him invite friends over to swim in their pool most weekends. One of Reese's ex-boyfriends had shown up there unexpectedly earlier this summer, and it had upset Reese a lot. She hadn't been back to Tyler's house ever since.

"Oh, ah'm comin'," she said in her signature Texas drawl. "We can't let the jerks *win*. And ah have a new swimsuit that ah'm just dyin' to wear."

"Of course you do," I said good-naturedly. "Just make sure it passes the mom test."

"You know that girl you saw at Nicolas's house yesterday?" Reese responded, abruptly changing the subject. "Miranda? Ah found out she's his *cousin*."

"Oh." I mulled this over as we ended our conversation. That made sense, with all the hugging they had done, though I couldn't say I was that huggy with my own cousins. And though Mrs. Navarro had been super nice, Nicolas and Miranda certainly seemed to share other, similar genes.

For one thing, they were both gorgeous human beings with their dark hair and eyes, and flawless brown skin.

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Second, they both had superiority complexes.
And last-
neither one of them was very nice.

Chapter 3

Style

Show the readers everything, tell them nothing.

-Ernest Hemingway, journalist and editor of his high school newspaper

“Well, well,” Reese drawled later, as a bunch of us girls were stretched out on the lounge chairs arranged by the side of Tyler’s pool. “Would you look at that handsome, tall Texan who just arrived? My, *my*.”

We had long since put on our cover-ups and were fairly dry. The sun was setting and the pool lights were coming on, darkening the blue of the water and making it appear mysterious and inviting.

I wasn’t looking, though. My eyes were shut and I was half-asleep, tired out from the rousing game of pool volleyball we played earlier as well as the laps I had done at the gym today. I was used to Reese’s comments about cute boys, so I just ignored her.

But then Mia, in the chair next to mine, nudged me firmly on my shoulder.

“Wake up, Casey, you want to see this guy,” she whispered. Her voice was teasing, but then she nudged me again, harder. “Look *up!*”

I opened my eyes slowly and looked around drowsily to see what the big deal was. And sure enough, there was a tall, lanky guy, his brown hair a little long in the back with the ends curled just a bit, walking around the pool. He stood out because instead of swim trunks or shorts, he was wearing denim jeans, a black t-shirt that showed off some well-toned muscles, and a pair of scuffed, not-just-for-show cowboy boots. He was walking with purpose, and he looked... *fine*.

Though the light was dim, I recognized the shape of his face, the easy way he walked, and the steadiness of his gaze.

He was looking straight at me.

“B-Ben?” I stuttered. I sat up straighter in my lounge chair, shocked and completely wide awake now. Was I dreaming or something?

I’ll admit I actually pinched myself.

And then he reached my chair, looked down at me with those chocolately brown eyes, and gave me his signature half smile. He held out his hand and I took it hesitantly, still feeling a little dazed. What was happening?

I thought you were in Abilene? You came back early? Why are you here?

I must have said that last question out loud, because he just looked at me in this *way* and I thought I would melt, a happy puddle of anticipation on the still-hot concrete. “Well, stand up and I’ll explain,” he drawled softly.

All conversations had stopped, and you could have heard a leaf fall in the pool. I think every single person at this

gathering held his or her breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

I know I did.

Ben helped me get out of the chair, and once I was standing up I assumed he would ask me to go somewhere, maybe to his truck or inside Tyler's house, where we could talk privately. So he could explain.

But he didn't.

Instead, Ben took me gently in his arms, not leaving a lot of space between us, and looked down at me, his face just inches away from mine. He smelled like soap and fresh air, and I noticed his tan had deepened from spending so much time outdoors this summer. It felt so good being held in a way I had dreamed about, my senses on overload, that I almost didn't notice the question in his eyes, as he looked down at me.

Heaven. Help. Me.

I smiled up at him, feeling incredibly shy but giving my answer to his unspoken question. At least I *thought* I knew what he was silently asking. Did I still feel the same way? Was I ready to move beyond just friendship? Could we, should we-

And then, right there in front of God and everyone, he leaned down and kissed me.

He kissed me!

Right on the lips.

Soundly, properly, tenderly, gently, romantically, all the best adverbs in the whole wide world, with no negative ones tagging along, not a single one.

Ben kissed me.

And all around the pool, I could hear the girls sigh.

. . .

“Then you went and got *tacos*?” Reese was incredulous.

“It’s their *thing*,” Mia reminded her. “It’s part of their romantic history, how they built their friendship and all that. Oh Casey, that moment last night was *epic*. Like a Nicholas Sparks novel, one hundred percent.” She gave a deep, happy sigh and stretched out on the carpeted floor of my bedroom. “Then what did ya’ll do, huh?”

It was Sunday afternoon, and Reese, Marla and Mia had all shown up at my house about twenty minutes ago, giggling and demanding information. After our epic kiss, Ben and I hadn’t stayed at the pool party much longer, which was fine with me since we sure had plenty of questions to ask, and answer, and *not* in front of an audience.

And now I was the one being grilled, but I didn’t mind. I was in a perfect little bubble of happiness right now, and so far that bubble seemed to be made of steel, and nothing could pop it.

“We talked. A lot! We had the whole summer to catch up on, you know, and...” I sighed and thought for the thousandth time about how easy it was to be with Ben. He felt comfortable and safe, and yet all the tingles were there, make no mistake about it.

“As frustrating as it has been for me, we agreed to still keep taking things slow,” I admitted. I was sitting cross-legged on my bed, and now I stretched my legs out as I looked at the faces of each of my friends, who were hanging on to my every word.

Here was Marla, in that starry-eyed phase of her own relationship with Jackson. Next was Mia, who had a crush on Tyler though he didn’t seem to feel the same way.

And then there was Reese, who attracted boys like bees to honey, but who already, at only seventeen, seemed jaded about relationships. With good reason, since she had been let

down by previous boyfriends, and abandoned by her own dad years ago.

“I mean, we’re official now- Ben is my *boyfriend*” – we took a few seconds so we could all squeal and dramatically swoon – “but we’re going to set limits. Not get in any hurry in any way, physically or otherwise. Just get to know each other better. Like you and Jackson,” I said, nodding at Marla. She nodded back, her eyes understanding, and smiled shyly.

“That’s exactly what I want,” Mia agreed solemnly “Now if only I can get Tyler on board with that, right?”

Reese didn’t say anything, but just studied my face. “Why did he show up last night? Wasn’t he supposed to come home today?”

“The plans changed again after he texted me yesterday morning,” I told them. “Something about his mom deciding to drive out to Abilene to take over with helping her mom for awhile, so that Ben could go ahead and come home. And then he decided to surprise me and drove from Abilene straight to the pool party, without stopping to change clothes first or anything. I’m not clear on all the details. I didn’t focus on that too much- I was just glad he got home.”

I paused again, reliving that moment when I saw Ben walking towards me around the pool, looking like a rugged cowboy on a romance novel cover, minus the cowboy hat, with *me* on his mind

“Help!” I squeaked with a deep, dreamy sigh.

And we all dissolved again into giggles.

Chapter 4

Conflict of Interest

Newspapers should have no friends.
-Joseph Pulitzer, newspaper publisher

Yeah, it was a giggle a minute around here. That's the way the beginning of school always was, when your mom was a teacher.

Only this year, not just three of us were starting a new school year- me, Mom, and Riley. Oh no, now our numbers had doubled with the addition of three stepbrothers, so even though we had a week left of summer break, it was pretty much *over*.

It was Monday night dinner, though since Mom had to start back to work the next day with meetings and inservices, it might as well have been a council of war. She had assignments for all of us and was in full army general mode.

"Jackson, we'll need you to drive Jefferson to his therapy session tomorrow morning, and double check with Dr. Allums about changing his appointments to the afternoons

starting next week.” Ten-year-old Jefferson, the youngest of my stepbrothers, had started counseling a few weeks ago to help him deal with his anxiety, which we all started to notice when his real mom came back into his life earlier this year.

Jackson looked uncomfortable. “Sorry, but I have football practice all this week in the mornings, remember? I guess I could ask Coach to let me off tomorrow though.”

“I’ll do it!” I offered helpfully, but Mom didn’t even glance at me. I couldn’t get my full driver’s license until September, and we all knew that.

“James can do it,” Harrison decided. “I’m sure his boss will be okay if he takes off a few minutes to drive Jeff to and from his appointment.” He winked at James, since Harrison *was* his boss.

“Who’s gonna stay with me?” Jefferson piped up, and we all fell silent. It was true that an adult, meaning someone over eighteen, had to stay at the therapist’s office while Jefferson was having his session.

“Just take a couple of hours off, James, or I will,” Harrison responded, sounding a little less cheerful. “We’ll make it work.”

“Casey, you’re in charge of the younger kids during the mornings this week, and Jackson will take the afternoons,” Mom continued. “The fridge is stocked. Jackson can get Casey to her newspaper staff meeting on Wednesday afternoon, and Jefferson and Riley, you need to double-check your school supply lists tomorrow and see if anything is missing. And I was just thinking”-

We all groaned, every single one of us except for Harrison, though his expression did show a flicker of concern. When Mom had been “thinking” that usually meant work for one or all of us.

Mom looked offended. “What? This is a good think, a

fun think. And now I might just not tell you about it, so there.”

We all looked at each other and then back at Mom, warily, especially Riley and me. She and I knew how crazy and snappy Mom got at back-to-school time. I did not trust any idea coming from her brain right now, no matter how attractive she might try to make it sound. I reached for another roll.

Jackson was the first to cave. “I want to hear! I bet it’ll be GOOD!”

Suck-up.

“Yeah, tell us!” Jefferson chimed in. “Are we getting another dog?”

“We’re getting another dog?” Riley was off and running. “Bonnie is going to be so lonely when we all go back to school and where will she stay all day, huh? Can she just stay in the house or will someone have to come home and let her out? Or are you thinking that maybe we can go to a waterpark because my friend Madyson went to one a couple of hours away and she said it was amazing and she got a sunburn because she didn’t use enough sunscreen and”-

I just kept chewing and watched Mom’s face. I knew the minute that she realized that Riley was right. What *were* we going to do with Bonnie all day once school started? Though she was housebroken, could she make it all day without a trip to the backyard? She was also still known to chew on a random shoe every now and then, and we hadn’t made her stay in her crate since the first few weeks we adopted her. She was pretty much spoiled rotten.

Mom closed her eyes, and I’m guessing she was praying for the will to survive. But when she opened her eyes again, she took a deep breath.

And she told us her good idea.

My own ideas were not so well received.

“All you need are the ‘whats, whens and wheres!’” Allison explained to me like she was talking to a five-year-old, using her fingers to make air quotes. “Easy peasey!”

It was the second meeting of our newspaper staff, held again in Nicolas’s cushy living room on this Wednesday afternoon, and the Assistant Editor, Allison, was handing out our first writing assignments. All final decisions would have to be approved by our faculty sponsor once school started, but Nicolas had made it clear that he wanted his staff to hit the ground running, prepared and ready to work hard from the very first day. As a brand-new reporter, I didn’t expect to get the juicy stories, but...

“Won’t all this information about our school club meetings be available on the school website?” I asked politely, looking at my assignment.

“Yes! One of the media classes maintains the school website, but we gather and provide them with lots of information throughout the school year! And we’ll also have the club names and schedules available in the first edition of the paper!”

“It just seems a little...” I hesitated because I didn’t want to mark myself as a complainer, but so far in this meeting all the other newbies had been offering up ideas which had led to some great brainstorming.

“Go on!” Allison always seemed to speak in exclamation marks, but at least she was encouraging, unlike Nicolas who was staring at me like I was a bug on the floor.

“Well, it’s great to have the information in different places, both online and in the newspaper,” I said diplomatically. “But shouldn’t there be something a little extra in the paper, to make students want to read it? Most kids have smartphones and get information online quickly, so

if the paper is going to get noticed we have to make things interesting, right?"

I had the attention of the group now and started warming to my subject. "For example, we could have a 'match-your-personality-to-a-club' quiz, or maybe interview kids who have been in the different clubs, stuff like that."

"I love that idea!" Tess exclaimed, one of my fellow juniors who I recognized from my English class last year.

"It's good!" Allison agreed. "What do you think, Nicolas?"

All heads swerved to look at our editor, who was leaning back in a recliner, arms crossed, with a slight frown. The room quieted. Our newspaper staff was about seventy percent girls, and I think all of them were smitten with this guy.

Except for me. I was smitten with my own boyfriend, thank you very much, so that wasn't even a factor. Instead I continued to just feel intimidated. Confused. And frustrated about why he didn't seem to like me even though we hardly even knew each other.

The brooding one finally spoke. "We only have a certain amount of space in the paper," he said in a clipped voice. "Our purpose is to report the facts, the *news*, without bias."

"Of course, but this would add some fun, some human interest"-

"Complete your assignment as it was given to you," he interrupted me abruptly, his eyes never leaving my face. "Make what you have been *given* interesting, staying within the limits of your word count. You are not here to make a name for yourself or try to get more attention than the other reporters."

I drew back like I had been slapped.

I couldn't ever remember anyone talking to me this way

in my whole life, assuming the worst about me or my motives. And to my horror I realized that I was *this* close to having tears in my eyes.

The rest of the group remained silent, and also seemed stunned.

“Nicolas!” Allison said reprovingly, and she looked at me with sympathy. “I’m sure Casey didn’t mean”-

“Come outside with me for a minute, Casey, I need help with something,” Tess said quickly, and she took my arm. I nodded at her gratefully, thankful that she recognized my need for an escape before a pesky tear could slide down my cheek, deepening my humiliation.

And that’s how Newspaper Staff Meeting #2 went down.

Chapter 5

Editorial

The fewer the facts, the stronger the opinion.

-Arnold H. Glasow, owner of a humor magazine

“The last time our backyard looked this good was at James’ graduation party,” I told Mom and Riley as we surveyed it from the patio.

“I think it’s even better, because last time we had to do all that work to decorate it with balloons and signs and stuff and now it just looks good ALL the time,” Riley added sagely.

She was right.

Mom’s great idea had been simple. This Friday night, we were having a back-to-school bash with friends, but the best thing was that we weren’t going to a lot of trouble. No balloons, no extra decorations. The twinkly lights that we had strung across our patio and wound around the trees were still there from the graduation party in May, since we had decided we liked the way it looked. Mom and Harrison had

added more large flowerpots and had done some more landscaping over the summer, too.

Instead of a catered meal like we had at James' party, we were ordering some large pizza specials for delivery. Harrison was mixing up a nice big pasta salad, and Jefferson, Riley and I had spent the last couple of mornings baking brownies and cookies, an activity we enjoyed doing together anyway.

Each of us kids invited a few friends, so there would be over twenty people here tonight, but we had different "stations" for crowd control. There was the gameroom upstairs for movie-watchers and a net strung across the backyard for badminton or volleyball. We also had a fairly new TV mounted to one of the covered patio walls, and had added more comfortable outdoor seating and cushions.

"Are we ready to PAR-TAY?" Jackson roared joyfully, carrying a big cooler full of ice onto the patio. Marla trailed behind him, along with Lauren, James' girlfriend, Reese and Mia, and one of Jefferson's friends from next door, Tyrone.

I called out to my friends but still looked beyond them impatiently, waiting for my own personal reason for partying to show up.

And when Ben finally walked onto the patio a few minutes later, scanning the gathering crowd to look for me, I caught his eye and he smiled, holding my gaze even when he bent over to scratch Bonnie's ears as she excitedly greeted all of our guests.

I grinned back at him.

When he was around, my private planet just seemed to spin more smoothly.

"Navarro is a jerk," Ben said, looking disgusted and pulling me a little closer. I was okay with that, and snuggled against

his side. We were in the game room upstairs, supposedly watching the first episode of *Star Wars* since Ben had- gasp!- never seen it, but mostly we were talking and cuddling. And yes, a kiss or two may have been involved, whenever we had a few precious moments of privacy, which was rare.

It was late, a few minutes after midnight, and Ben was the only guest left at our house after a successful back-to-school bash, judging by the quantities of food eaten and the amount of laughter heard. James and Jackson had just left to drive their girlfriends home, and Jefferson's and Riley's friends had long since been picked up by their parents except for Tyrone, who was spending the night. I was telling Ben all about the newspaper staff meeting a couple of days ago.

Of course, it's not like Ben hadn't heard most of this before. He and I had spent every minute we could together the last few days, figuring out what being a couple was going to look like for us, and soaking up the last few days of summer break.

But I still hadn't recovered from that dreadful scolding at the last newspaper meeting.

"Maybe I should focus on his good points, or what we have in common," I mused, my head resting against Ben's shoulder. "Let's see, Nicolas is very efficient and he likes lists, so he's similar to me in that respect. I've read some of his articles that were in the paper last spring, and he's a good writer. Ummm, his mom is nice." I hesitated, reluctant to bring up this next particular name but knowing I had to.

"And, did you know that Miranda is his cousin? Maybe that explains why he doesn't like me, since Miranda hates me. Like a solidarity cousin thing, you think?" I tilted my head so I could see Ben's expression.

He frowned. "That's a strong word, Case. Why would

Miranda hate you? I know you think she has a thing for me and well, who could blame her, right?" He snickered and I slapped his arm jokingly but hard enough to let him know I meant business.

"Ow! But seriously, I just don't see Miranda as a mean girl. She knows I'm with you now, or at least she will once school starts. I have zero interest in her, other than as a fellow FFA member and as a friend. And maybe not even as a friend anymore, if she doesn't call old *Nico* off your case. *If* that's even the reason why he's being such a snot."

He hesitated and looked at me steadily. "I'll tell you one thing, though, Campbell," and his voice deepened. I met his eyes, warmed by the sincerity that I always, always saw there. "If I need to have a word with Navarro, I'll do it. But honestly, I believe he's met his match in you. You're smart and you don't give up. If this is some kind of mind game he's playing to intimidate you, he won't succeed. I would bet all the cattle in Texas that you'll win."

I stared at him, a little surprised. This was, wow, the nicest compliment anyone had ever given me. I started to tell him that, but he wasn't finished yet.

"And you'll look like a hundred million dollars when you do it." He kissed me on my forehead, lingeringly.

"Time to go, Ben," I heard Harrison call from downstairs. "Come on down, Casey. *Now.*"

Ben winked at me. I grinned.

Then Ben went home, and I got ready for bed.

And while I couldn't say that what I felt for Ben was the real, everlasting, true love kind of feeling- I mean, how could I even know that yet? - I did make a promise to myself as I brushed my teeth slowly, staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Breaking News

Whenever I *did* fall in love, it would be with a guy who saw the best in me, even if I couldn't recognize it myself.

Someone who believed in me, and took the time to tell me.

A guy like Ben.

Chapter 6

Hard News

You may alter an opinion, but you cannot alter a fact.

-Charles Spurgeon, minister and author

I tried.

I looked for examples online, I asked anybody who would listen to me, and I typed and sketched out ideas.

But I just couldn't find a way to make a list of Rayburn High's club schedules and times more interesting, at least not within my given word count. Of course, I wouldn't even have all the club information until a couple of weeks after school started, so I still had time to think. But once I did gather all the data, I would have to submit my article almost immediately to meet the deadline for our first edition of the school year.

After Ben's words of support last night, I was determined to turn all of this boring information into the most amazing, dazzling article our students had ever read in their lives. I was dreaming big!

But my girls were yawning.

“Can we talk about somethin’ else?” Reese said impatiently, wiping more green goop on her face. “You’re stressin’ me out and ah’m not even on the paper.”

It was the Saturday night before school started, and Reese was hostessing the fifth and last of her summer sleepovers. Ever since her first one back in June, she had become the slumber party queen, keeping things simple, clean and fun. Her guests varied a bit from week to week, but certain activities did not.

List of Things We Had To Do At Reese’s Slumber Parties Or We Got Cranky

1. Do each other’s hair and/or make-up.
2. Talk about guys.
3. Watch our favorite rom-coms with plenty of snacks and zero judgment. I was also introducing my girls to some favorite alien and sci-fi movies.
4. Give ourselves facials with Reese’s special green goop recipe
5. More talk about guys.
6. Play Truth or Dare, with all kinds of laws and by-laws added that we actually wrote down, like some sort of constitution. For example, you had to be honorable and tell the truth but you could also pass on a question if it was just too personal, and the dares couldn’t be risky, stuff like that.
7. Reese’s grandma had to fix us waffles for breakfast.

There were some ideas we had ditched after her first slumber party, like freezing our bras, but the things that remained were now comforting, no-stress rituals.

“Yeah, let’s talk about the first day of school,” Mia agreed, smearing her own face with the goop. “What are ya’ll wearing?”

“And speaking of clubs, what is everyone doing this year? I was actually thinking of running for Student Council Vice President!” Abby announced, looking around to see our reactions to this news. “But I don’t know, would ya’ll vote for me?”

“Well, of course!” Mia said loyally. “I think that’s great, but why not go for president?”

“I figure the job of Vice President is a lot easier,” Abby admitted, grinning. “Probably less competition and I wouldn’t have to give a speech. Only those running for President have to do that.” She shuddered. “I hated doing those debates in English last year, gag! But I need to get involved more somehow, you know? It looks good on college applications.”

“It sure does,” I agreed with her. “I’ve been thinking about that myself. Maybe I need to join some clubs, or volunteer for some community work.” My facial was already starting to harden, and I tried talking without moving my mouth too much so it wouldn’t crack. “Or I could try out for a sport.”

Marla busted out laughing and I pretended to glare at her, but I couldn’t keep it up and just tried not to laugh, too. “S-sorry,” she said, although clearly she was not, “but I’ve seen your volleyball skills. And your tragic basketball skills in P.E. last year.”

“What about the swim team?” Reese asked, re-doing her pony tail. “Ya’ll go swimmin’ all the time, don’t ya?”

Marla paused. "That's actually a really good idea, Reese." She cocked her head at me. "Casey, you *are* a good swimmer. You could totally do that."

"I love to swim," I said thoughtfully, still trying not to move my mouth much. "But I'm not fast enough."

"You could be if you worked at it," Mia said encouragingly.

"Just try out and see," Abby shrugged. "You have nothing to lose!"

"Nothing to lose," I repeated slowly. "Nothing... to lose. You're right, Abby!" And I gave her a huge smile even though I knew it would crinkle up my facial mask.

The others probably thought I was talking about trying out for the swim team, but my mind was still focused on my boring writing assignment. Would I win over Nicolas's tiny little heart if I wrote the article strictly by the book, with just the facts and nothing more? Probably not.

Would he be impressed if I blinged it up- still sticking to the facts, of course- and managed to make it a more interesting read? Not likely.

So either way, Abby was right- I had nothing to lose. Her words had also given me an idea. Not a big revelation like *whoaaaa*, why didn't I think of this before? Just a tiny idea, but it was a start.

And who knows? Maybe I really would try out for the swim team, too.

I didn't see it coming.

It was Sunday evening, and me, Ben, Jackson, Marla and James were at Ziti's, one of our favorite hangouts. We were doing the usual groaning about school starting the next day except for James, of course, who was done with high school.

He still had a week or so left at home before he went off to college.

“Where’s Lauren tonight?” Jackson asked, between bites of his calzone. “Did she have to WORK?” Lauren had a job at one of the clothing stores at our local mall, and it wasn’t unusual for her to have late shifts.

James didn’t answer right away and I glanced at him, thinking that maybe his mouth was just full.

It wasn’t.

“So I need to let ya’ll know,” he said, staring down at his plate. “Lauren and I broke up again.”

Marla and I both gasped, and James looked up and shook his head warningly. “Now before you two start speculating, you’ve got to know that this decision was mutual. Well, mostly mutual.” He held my gaze steadily, and then looked at Marla.

“Lauren left today for Austin, to participate in rush week for the sororities at UT. Our colleges are hours apart and I decided it was best for us to take some time again solo, and see how things go.”

“So, *you* decided,” I said slowly. “Does Lauren feel the same way? You broke up with *her*?” James and Lauren had dated steadily for two years until last spring, when Lauren had ended their relationship and broke James’s heart.

But then they got back together this summer, and I thought things were settled between them, maybe even better than ever. Apparently I was wrong.

“I guess it was my turn this time,” James said wryly, but his voice was sad. “And it’s tough, but we talked it out and Lauren agreed, too.”

“That’s rough, bro,” Jackson told him, his voice softer than usual. “Hate to hear that. I hope things work out.”

I reached for Ben’s hand under the table, and he clasped

his fingers around mine and gave them a comforting squeeze. And that's when I went from being stunned to a little scared.

Was this typical? Would Ben want to break up with me if we went to different colleges? Or would we last that long? Could our relationship even survive this semester? Or the rest of this *month*?

I felt Ben give my hand another squeeze and I looked at his face, as he sat next to me in the booth. He smiled that half smile, but it was the look in his eyes that made me relax. I turned back to James.

"I'm so sorry, James. I want you to know..." I hesitated, seeing both the pain and the resolve on his face. "I know you did what you thought was best, not just for you but mainly for Lauren, because you're like that. I mean, I haven't known you that long, but you're a good guy."

I caught Marla's eye, who was sitting across from me, and she nodded in agreement, her expression serious. I noticed her shift a little closer to Jackson, too.

We were pretty quiet for the rest of the meal, each a little lost in our own thoughts, Even Jackson didn't try to joke around and make us laugh, like he usually did. And it was okay.

I guess every new beginning means something else is ending. The happy with the sad, walking new paths with a little bit of dust from the old ones still on our shoes.

When I set my alarm that night, I thought about that look in Ben's eyes, when he squeezed my hand the second time. It wasn't an "I want to kiss you" look, or even a "don't worry we'll never break up" look.

It was just a look of kindness.

And somehow, for right now, in this particular moment- it was enough.

Chapter 7

First Editions

We have it in our power to begin the world over again.

-Thomas Paine, Revolutionary pamphlet writer

“Holy schmoley, would ya look at *him*,” Reese purred, as she took a seat at the desk next to mine. I followed her gaze and grinned, because even though Ben had stolen my heart, I wasn’t blind. This new guy in our AP History class was a Tom Cruise lookalike, from his younger Top Gun days.

Too bad this Tom was also our *teacher*.

It was the first day of my junior year and despite the ineligibility of the cutest guy in school (just being real here) life was great. Why was I so happy today?

So glad you asked!

Why Was My First Monday Back at School So Amazing?

- A.** I was not the New Girl anymore. Praise. God.
- B.** I had friends in every single class so far.
- C.** The Campbells and Findleys all managed to get out of our house on time this morning, to different work places and schools, without any tears or death threats.
- D.** I was wearing the perfect outfit, a pink t-shirt with a flirty-but-not-too-short skirt, paired up with some cute white tennis shoes that kept things casual and fun. Hopefully I looked like I hadn't tried too hard, even though I totally did. I had tried. Really. Hard.
- G.** All of the stinkin' above.

Things were humming along. I had some hard classes this year, like this AP History I was currently sitting in with Reese, and also AP English which I shared with Ben and Mia during third period. But I also had my Journalism class at the end of the day, which would hopefully be a lot of fun if I could just deal with Darling Nico, as I was starting to call him privately. I was hoping for the best.

"Cammmp-bell!" a familiar voice said loudly, drawing out the first syllable in my last name, and I grinned, watching Rayburn High's tall, cute basketball star swagger up to the desk behind Reese and plop his backpack down loudly. "And who is this pretty young thang just waiting for me to get here?" he said, leaning over to talk in a sultry voice in Reese's ear.

“In your dreams, Dixon,” Reese drawled, not even turning around.

“Don’t break my heart on the first day of school, sweet Reese,” Daniel Dixon said sadly, and he sat down at the desk and put his head down.

“You are such a drama queen, Dixon.” I observed, half serious. “You’re worse than any girl I know.”

“Aww Campbell, the bitterness, the bitterness,” he shot right back, lifting his head up, a gleam in his eye. “Still haven’t recovered from that debate beat-down I gave ya, I see.”

I turned my head so he wouldn’t see me stifle a laugh. Daniel Dixon was not only a star athlete, but also a straight-A student who had trounced me last spring in a class debate. I had worked so hard to win that thing, but even I had to admit that Daniel had worked harder.

Plus, he seemed to have a natural gift of pouncing on his opponent’s weaknesses, both on and off the basketball court. Intimidating, yet admirable.

I’d never let him know that, though.

“At least the view in front of me is going to be fine this year,” Reese murmured, as the cute teacher, Mr. Langham, cleared his throat and started the class.

“Yep, my view is fine too, sweet Reese,” Daniel whispered, leaning forward to tug gently on her beautiful, wavy auburn hair. “And your hair smells good.”

“Shut *up*,” Reese whispered back, jerking her head away.

But I saw her smile again, and I don’t think she was smiling at the teacher.

Me:

So he's new?

Sarah:

Moved here over the summer and have mercyyyyy I am in love!!

Me:

No you're not.

That's all I had time to text before I entered my next-to-last class of the day, Physics. Sarah and I had agreed to text each other a play by play of our first day of school, as best we could. Her high school, the smaller one I attended before Mom and Harrison got married, had also started classes today, and so far she was obsessed with this new guy. Typical Sarah.

I smiled as I scanned the classroom. Most of the desks were already taken, since I had lingered in the hallway a little too long, checking Sarah's messages and chatting with another friend from my P.E. class last year. There were a few seats left, mostly in the front, and one of them was right next to... Miranda.

That was a great big NO.

To my relief, I saw Colton waving at me from a seat near the windows, still near the front, and I walked over to the empty desk behind him, avoiding all eye contact with Miranda. The bell rang as I sat down, so I didn't have time to say much more than a "hey" to Colton.

“I saved that seat just for you, Casey”, he whispered back, flashing me that movie-star grin.

I shook my head and smiled, guessing that he had no clue that I would be in this class. Colton was just like that, flattering and flirty to all the girls, no matter what they looked like or how popular they were.

He liked girls and boy, did they ever like him.

But as the teacher started passing out the syllabus and talking about quizzes and projects, I wished fervently that Ben was in this class with me instead, and not just because we were dating now.

Ben was *smart*. I mean I was smart too, but I would much rather research and write an essay than solve a math problem or figure out - I looked down at the syllabus and gulped- the laws of thermodynamics.

I've got this, I reminded myself. I tend to get stressed quickly when something looks hard, but once I can break it into smaller parts and take my time, I usually calm down.

And I could always get a tutor.

I smiled to myself, remembering how Ben tutored me in Chemistry last semester. Who knew it would lead to friendship and then... more friendship... and then, *finally*, some good old romance. The memory of Ben walking around that pool and giving me that first, you're-my-girl-now kiss... gah!

Snap out of it, I scolded myself firmly. *Focus*.

So I sat up straighter, opened my new lime green spiral notebook- my favorite color that I always chose to help me get psyched up mentally for a hard subject- and wrote today's date on the first, fresh clean page.

And I drew a great big smiley face.

Chapter 8

Managing Editor

I don't know how to run a newspaper, Mr. Thatcher; I just try everything I can think of.

-From the movie "Citizen Kane"

"Newspaper class must be regarded as a real job, not just an elective," Ms. Singleton emphasized. "We have a budget, which has to balance at the end of the year. We have equipment which must be mastered and cared for. Each one of you will be responsible for learning every aspect of the process of putting together a newspaper, such as text layout, graphic art, some clerical duties, and so much more."

I sat on the edge of my seat, ridiculously excited to be in this class despite the presence of Darling Nico, who hadn't even glanced at me once since I walked in the classroom door. I already knew about the demands that our instructor was talking about right now, since everyone who was accepted into this class had to sign the syllabus last semester so we'd know ahead of time what we were getting into.

Too bad the syllabus hadn't also included "Put up with a crabby editor", or I might have reconsidered.

Ms. Singleton paused. I don't think she had smiled at us once since she began talking, but now she relaxed a little, leaning against her desk, and took a moment to look at each of our faces one by one.

"One of our responsibilities will be to create polls and surveys, some serious and some fun. So, let's start with a fun one today, and get to know each other. Nicolas, as our new editor, give us a question."

Nicolas looked a little surprised, but he recovered quickly. "Okay, um- what's your favorite food?"

Boring. But, he didn't have time to think of a better subject, I acknowledged to myself. I immediately started thinking of a good question to ask the group, that wouldn't be too personal. I hadn't spent all this summer playing Truth or Dare at Reese's slumber parties for nothing!

We were all sitting around at tables, and Nicolas was sitting at the one closest to Ms. Singleton's desk, with me as far across the room as I could possibly get. So we went table by table with each person answering the question- pizza, chocolate, sushi, tacos – that was me- blah, blah, blah.

Then Allison asked a question, which was a little better. "Who is your favorite teacher at this school and why?"

That got us talking more, since certain names came up more frequently than others, such as Ms. Thomas, my English teacher from last year.

When it was my turn to answer, I had to join her fan club. "I know I should say my own mother since she teaches here, but I've never been a student in her class so I'm going with Ms. Thomas. She made English fun, and she was also really nice to me as a new student. I just started here at Rayburn last January," I explained.

Most of the others nodded and smiled, and I turned to Tess, sitting beside me, since it was her turn to answer. Before she did, though, she asked curiously. “So who’s your mother, Casey? What does she teach?”

“She teaches the senior Honors English classes,” I explained. “Mrs. Cam- I mean, Mrs. Findley,” I corrected myself laughingly. “I’m still getting used to her new last name.”

“Wait, any relation to Jackson Findley?” a senior girl asked, all interested. “I heard his dad remarried.”

“And *James* Findley?” another girl asked with a dreamy sigh.

Before I could even answer, though, I heard another, unexpected voice carry across the room.

“Mrs. Findley is your *mother*?”

I looked at the speaker, and he looked back at me. I have no idea why he looked so shocked, or why he even cared the least little bit who my mother was. But I took some satisfaction in seeing confusion on his face. And maybe a little fear?

Darling Nico had a weak point, and like my former debate partner, Daniel, I was going to sniff it out and find it.

“So what was your question?” Ben asked as he pulled his truck into my driveway. He had driven me home since Jackson had football practice after school today, and I was telling him about the journalism class.

“We ran out of time and I didn’t get a turn to ask a question.” I shrugged. “I had a good one ready, though. Several good ones actually, like ‘what is your greatest fear’, or ‘if you could time travel where would you go’, stuff like that.”

“Always thinking, Campbell, always thinking,” Ben said, nodding. “You’re scary.”

I moved over closer and snuggled up to him in the truck cab, knowing that he needed to leave so he could go to his job at a vet clinic. Ben usually didn’t work on Monday afternoons, but he was taking extra shifts until his FFA club meetings started in September. He hadn’t even turned off the truck engine, which was good because it was a really hot day and we needed the air conditioning on.

Then he leaned in for a kiss and suddenly, the AC was just not enough.

“Do you usually kiss scary people, Ben?” I asked, leaning my head against his shoulder, not wanting him to go.

“Only the pretty ones,” he said in a deadpan voice. “And the ones who make me cookies.”

We bantered back and forth and then I had to let him go to work. I watched him drive away, waving, and wondered if it would always be so hard to let him leave, which made me think of James and Lauren, which made me wonder if Lauren was missing James at all, which made me sad , and...

I tried to turn off my brain and walked slowly toward the house. The little kids would be hopping off of their school bus soon, and I would be in charge of their snacks and homework until Mom got home. Then she and Jefferson would be off to his therapy appointment. Fortunately, Harrison and Mom were paying me for my babysitting services this year. Because really, what would they do if I wasn’t here right after school? And Bonnie...

Bonnie! I should have let her out as soon as I got home, I remembered with a groan. I jogged the rest of the way and opened the door, bracing myself for a disaster.

. . . .

It was the best part of Mom's day.

"Good job!" "You are so *smart!*" "You deserve an extra big smooch for that!"

"I think she would prefer a chew toy," James commented dryly.

It was family dinner, and we were going around the table sharing the highlights of our day, as usual. Mom's highlight was short and sweet.

"Bonnie held it. Praise God, praise God," she breathed, closing her eyes in what seemed to be heartfelt worship, as the rest of us showered Bonnie with compliments.

It seemed a bit much, though. "Uh, mom, so the fact that Bonnie didn't pee or chew in the house was truly the best part of your entire day? Really? That's kind of sad. And you know, Mrs. Wynn is coming over and letting her go in the backyard at lunchtime, so it's not like Bonnie has to hold it *all* day."

"I'm adding our awesome neighbor to my blessings list", Mom agreed serenely, opening her eyes. "And it's the little things that sometimes mean the most." She reached for more salad. "Your turn, Case."

I pondered, swallowing my bite of spaghetti. The little things, huh? "Okay, so one thing that was terrific about this first day of school was that I have friends in all my classes, even though I still don't have the same lunch as Ben. Oh, and he gave me a ride home, which isn't a big deal really, but yeah, I love that."

It was James's turn next but Harrison interrupted. "So you and Ben were here alone at the house? Before Jeff and Ry got off their bus?"

I looked at Harrison, sitting across from me. It was a casual question, so why did it bother me so much?

“Yes.” I said slowly. “Although he never came *inside* the house.”

Harrison switched his gaze from me to Mom, and I guess some silent message was exchanged because Harrison nodded, though his expression remained serious.

“My turn,” James said cheerfully, taking the attention off of me. “Something funny happened at work today.” And he started telling some story that I totally missed, because I was trying to figure out what Harrison was thinking when he asked me that question.

I mean, I could *guess* what he was thinking. Spending time alone with a boy was supposed to be a danger zone, right? But this was Ben we were talking about. And me. We were both incredibly responsible almost-adults.

I still felt uneasy as I cleared my dishes later and took them to the kitchen. “Thanks for saving me,” I muttered to James, who was on dishwasher duty.

He grinned. “Get ready”, was all he said, and just shook his head when I looked at him questioningly.

Get ready?

For what, exactly?

Chapter 9

Ads

*There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about,
and that is not being talked about.*

-Oscar Wilde, writer

Trying out for Rayburn's swim team was not for the casual let's-play-in-the-pool swimmer.

"This is a big fat NO", I announced to Marla and Mia at lunch the next day, holding out my phone so they could read the Swim Team Tryouts Information sheet I had pulled up. Even though Ben had First Lunch and I was stuck with Second, I was grateful that at least I had Marla and Mia to sit with in the cafeteria this semester. Plus, I had spotted Colton and Daniel over at what seemed to be the cheerleader table, laughing and flirting.

One of the girls looked vaguely familiar from the back-oh yeah, was that the girl from my Spanish class last year, the super sweet one with the long dark hair? What was her name again? Jessica, or maybe Jackie?

The girl with the long dark hair stood up and turned around, and I immediately recognized her. Well no, this wasn't Jessica, or whatever that sweet girl's name was.

Nope. I was sharing a lunch period with none other than Miranda. Alrighty then.

"Earth to Casey," Marla was saying impatiently. "Do you even hear me? I've been asking you stuff."

"Yeah, like what's the problem? You can handle everything on this list! What is it that concerns you?" Mia asked, like she was confused.

Seriously? I took a bite of my hummus and spinach wrap, taking some time to think out my answer. I swallowed and sighed.

"Okay, let me spell it out. For one thing, tryouts are next week. Next *week*! I don't have proof of a sports physical which is required, and I'll be expected to do four different strokes! Fast! And I don't have any experience on a swim team, which that form clearly says is recommended."

"Recommended, not required," Mia pointed out. "Everyone has to start somewhere. And you can get an appointment for a sports physical this weekend at that pharmacy on the corner near your house. That's what my stepsister does every year."

"But I'm not fast, or at least not fast enough," I admitted honestly. "I mean, I know all the required strokes but I've never timed myself. It would be so embarrassing to come in dead last every time."

"So you come in last." Marla shrugged. "You would let being humiliated keep you from trying something new and fun?"

I opened my mouth to tell her yes, I absolutely would avoid humiliation at all costs, but Marla wasn't finished.

"Besides that" - she lowered her voice, and looked around

to see if anyone else was close enough to hear her next words. “I’m pretty sure that Rayburn’s swim team isn’t really that big a deal. I never hear anything about them, and you would think if they were winning swim contests and bringing in trophies, it would be all over the announcements.”

“So what you’re saying is that they’re not very good?” Mia broke into a smile. “Well, there you go, Casey! I bet you could make the team!”

“You realize that is not a compliment, right?” I scrunched up my face at both of my friends and frowned, but actually they had given me some hope. If the swim team was really that bad, maybe they would let me have a chance!

The bell rang just then and it was time to head for Physics, but I managed to get the last word.

“And Marla, they’re not swim contests, they’re called swim *meets*,” I informed her haughtily.

If eye rolls were an Olympic sport, Marla would have won the gold.

Sarah:

So, how is Rayburn’s cutest couple doing, girl?

Me:

Ummm, you mean Ben and me?

Sarah:

Who else would I mean?? Was it fun to start school with a boyfriend this year? I wish it was me!!

Me:

Well, yeah, it's fun but I don't know if most people even know we're together, honestly.

I frowned. Other than my immediate, rather small circle of friends, and those who saw Ben kiss me at the pool party, who would know that Ben and I were dating? Should I make some sort of announcement, or should Ben? Did anyone at school even care? Didn't I want them to know?

Of course I did! I was proud to be Ben's girlfriend, and I wanted everyone to know he was my guy!

So even though I was sitting at the desk in my bedroom, trudging through algebra homework, with a history assignment next in line – and yes, it was only the third day of school- I put it all on hold to deal with this immediate concern.

I opened the Instagram app on my phone, and then paused. I didn't even have a cute picture of Ben and I to post!

What was wrong with us?

Me:

We need a cute couple picture.

Ben:

Don't we have one? Or four?

Me:

Not since we became official!

Ben:

So we'll take one tomorrow.

Ben:

In fact, I know the perfect place. Meet me at school ten minutes early.

Me:

I'm always early. Teacher's kid here.

Ben:

That's my girl!

My girl. I grinned and went back to my homework, but it was hard to concentrate. I couldn't *wait* to change my relationship status on Facebook, and why on earth hadn't I done it yet? And oh yeah, wouldn't it be fun to tag Miranda on that announcement, just like she had tagged *me* when she posted that horrid kiss picture this summer with Ben?

Revenge would be awfully, truly, big-time *sweet*.

My pencil lead broke, and I realized I had been clenching the mechanical pencil and pushing it down really hard on my paper. I relaxed my grip a little and took a deep breath. A faint warning bell was going off in my brain.

And I was going to ignore it. Yep.

For right now, I would put all my revenge dreams aside and power through this homework. Assignments mattered, and I wouldn't let Miranda or social media distract me. Good grades were one of the keys to that great future I dreamed of.

As for that warning bell, well... it could wait its turn.

“You like any of them?”

My smile was enough of an answer. I scrolled through the pictures on my phone, totally charmed. The images were just about perfect, not too staged or sappy, and they captured Ben and I, and how we felt about each other, in a sweet way.

Standing in the deserted hallway with our arms around each other, we looked happy. Content.

And the setting was so meaningful, at least for us.

“Brilliant idea, standing in front of our old chemistry classroom,” I admitted, and Ben smirked, before pulling me in for a kiss on top of my head.

“It's where it all began, Campbell,” he murmured. “Where the course of history was changed, where chemical reactions became”-

Someone coughed, and there was Mr. Voss, our old Chemistry teacher, looking gruff as usual as he approached his classroom door, which we were blocking.

Ben and I jumped apart even though we weren't doing anything even remotely wrong. I mean yeah, there was a no PDA rule at Rayburn, but surely a little kiss on my hair didn't count?

“Good morning, Mr. Voss,” Ben said politely, perfectly composed. “Sorry, we were just leaving.”

Mr. Voss nodded and looked pointedly at Ben. “Are you still tutoring Miss Campbell, Mr. Edwards?”

I felt a giggle coming on, and did my best to squelch it. Ben squeezed my arm and I could tell he was trying not to laugh, too.

“I think we’re actually learning from each other now, Mr. Voss. And, uh, thank you for suggesting me as her tutor last semester.”

“It seems to have worked out,” Mr. Voss said dryly, still not smiling, but I’m pretty sure there was a twinkle in his eye. I nodded up and down and gave him a great big grin, not trusting myself to speak.

Ben and I made it all the way down the hall and around the corner before we busted out laughing.

Chapter 10

Edit

My life needs editing.

-Mort Sahl, comedian and writer for his school newspaper

We had our couple picture!

It was cute, sweet, swoon-worthy.

My Instagram page was open, and Facebook would be next. I had the perfect caption, simple and clever. My fingers were poised on the keys, ready to post.

And that same warning bell just kept going off in my head. Only now, it was more like a voice.

Why do you want to post this?

“There’s nothing wrong with posting this.” I told the voice aloud. “This is no big deal!”

But why do you want to?

Why indeed?

“Aaaaghhh,” I flopped on my bed, thoroughly exasperated. I had been over-thinking this for two days now, and here it was already Saturday morning and I *still* hadn’t

announced to my social media world that Ben and I were a couple.

I went down my mental list. Was I happy to be Ben's girlfriend? Check. Did I want all my friends, family and acquaintances to know? Check. Did our relationship need to be kept a secret for any reason? Nope, so I could eliminate that as a concern.

Was I proud to be Ben's girlfriend? Of course! Double, triple check!

And yet, there it was. Why *did* I want to make this announcement? Lots of good reasons were there, but at least for me, one of my motives was all too familiar, and made me feel uncomfortable. And that steady, inner voice was reminding me of that motive, not in an accusing way but like a good friend would do.

I needed to talk to Ben.

"So, here's the thing about my old boyfriend, Davis," I told Ben later that night, as we laid back on our patio lounge chairs, hands linked, staring up at the stars.

We had just watched an alien movie – my choice- in the game room upstairs while eating Chinese take-out - his choice. It was getting late and Ben would have to go home soon, but when I asked if we could talk alone outside in the backyard, the air much cooler now since the sun had gone down, Ben had readily agreed. Even Harrison hadn't objected, since maybe he was just happy that we had spent a date night here at home where he could keep an eye on us.

Who knows? Harrison and I hadn't had any kind of "talk" yet, and there had been no more uncomfortable questions.

Right here, right now, the stars seemed close, the night

was quiet, and I was holding my best friend's hand, who also happened to be my boyfriend.

Ben hadn't replied yet, and I squeezed his fingers. "I'm not bringing him up in an ominous way, of course. It's not like I'm thinking about Davis at all, really. But you know how I was so anxious to take our couple picture and put it on social media and change my relationship status and all that?"

"You might have mentioned it once or twice," Ben said teasingly, rubbing the top of my hand with his thumb in this really distracting way.

"Well, with Davis, that was a big deal. Putting all of that online was a big rush for me, a status symbol. I was so proud to be the cute jock's girlfriend. With him, that's what it was mostly all about, I realize now," I admitted, rolling over on my side to face Ben.

"I think I liked all the attention more than I actually liked Davis as a person. But with you?" My voice grew softer. "You are so much more to me. Yeah, I'm proud of you and so happy to be your girlfriend, and I want everyone to know that. But you and me, *we're* more than just some social media post, or a way for me to make other girls jealous."

With that admission, I silently ditched my Miranda-revenge idea.

I grimaced. "I'm not explaining this very well, am I? Bottom line, I want to wait a while before putting anything on social media. To give us more privacy, more space, time to just let things be. Does that make sense?"

Ben rolled over on his side to face me, too. "Well just to be clear... so you don't think I'm some troll you have to hide in a closet?" He sounded completely serious, but I knew he was trying to make me laugh.

"No, I promise," I said just as seriously.

"And you're not secretly married and trying to hide our

relationship from your military husband who's serving overseas?" he asked sternly.

I punched him in the arm and sat up straight. "Busted," I moaned, covering my face with my hands. "What gave it away?"

Ben sat up then too, tugging me gently to my feet and over to his chair so he could wrap his arm around me. He put his forehead against mine and I could see that half-smile. He still smelled like soap and fresh air, and I nuzzled my head against his neck.

"It's okay, Campbell, I get it. I'm hardly on social media anyway, and I'll just wait to post something whenever you're ready. All of that doesn't mean that much to me. But your thoughts do, and your opinions. Always tell me what you're thinking, okay? Not that guy overseas."

I answered him in the way I thought best, stifling a laugh.

Wrapping my arms around his neck and lifting my face to his again, I gave him a solemn promise. "I'll burn all my letters to him tonight, okay?"

The kiss he gave me just about curled my toes.

Chapter 11

Purpose

A writer's job is to tell the truth.

Andy Rooney, journalist

Jackson was in full-on coach mode this morning.

“Goggles?”

“Check.”

“Suit and towel?”

“Check and check.”

“Copy of physical and signed waiver?”

“Uhh... ” I peeked in my gym bag just to make sure. “
Yep.”

“Positive attitude? Can-do SPIRIT?”

“Now you’re being ridiculous,” I retorted, hoisting my backpack onto my shoulder. “Let’s just get to school already.”

I usually caught a ride with Mom to school in the mornings, since Jackson had to leave super early for football practice. But this week, I had been going *with* him to

practice, believe it or not, to carry out the exercise routine he had devised for me. No, I wasn't practicing *with* the team.

While the football players were all outside on the field before school doing their thing, I had been given permission to be inside the gym doing what Jackson called dryland training. From pull-ups to dumbbell bench presses, last Saturday my middle brother had given me a crash course in how to prepare for the swim tryout. He had even driven me to the pool at our family's fitness club a couple of evenings this week, timing me as I practiced my strokes.

He was excited for me, and shoot, my whole family was cheering when I made my announcement at dinner last week. *You're trying out for the swim team? Go Casey! You can do this! What can we do to help? I admire you for trying something new. We're rooting for ya!*

I wished I had never mentioned it.

Clearly they were far more excited about this moment than I was. Jackson had practically rubbed his hands with glee, and promised to get me into the best shape as could be expected with just a week's preparation. He continually sent me encouraging texts, and had even enlisted Marla's help as his assistant coach. We had been picking her up too on the way to school, and she patiently stood by and kept me company in the gym as I exercised. I suspected Jackson wanted her to make sure I actually did everything on his list, though I didn't think Marla would rat me out.

It didn't matter, though.

Because as Jackson, Marla and I drove to school on this early Friday morning, the day of swim try-outs, I was certain I was going to let everyone down.

"Made a playlist just for YOU," Jackson announced, turning up the volume of his phone, since the trusty brown

Dodge we shared was too old to have Bluetooth. I heard the “Rocky” theme music come on and despite my gloomy thoughts, my mouth quirked upwards a bit and I snorted, very unlady-like.

“Seriously, bro?”

“It just gets better,” he grinned, nodding his chin to the beat and keeping his eyes on the road.

One “Eye Of The Tiger” and “We Will Rock You” later, we pulled into the school parking lot smiling and singing along at the top of our voices in the pre-dawn quiet.

I felt a little better. I might not make the swim team, but I was pretty sure I would survive. Yeah, Marla had made Jackson put that on the playlist, too - “I Will Survive”, disco style. Look it up.

“Just ignore all the parts about the guy who did her wrong, and then the song fits,” she explained as Jackson jogged off to join the other football players, and the two of us entered the gym. “I mean, the message is good. Toughen up, Campbell.” She took my hand and squeezed it, giving me a knowing look. “Even if you don’t make the team, you... will...”

“Survive”, we finished together, solemnly.

I sighed and headed for the pull-up bars.

Later that night after try-outs, I opened the Bible app on my phone for my daily visit with God. To be honest, it was more like an every other day or two visit lately, since school had started.

I settled back against my pillow, my mind racing a whole lot faster than my actual swimming had been this afternoon. I was reading in the book of Philippians now, taking my time

as usual, and tonight I was fervently hoping to read something that would make me feel better about try-outs, or at least get my mind on something else.

I wouldn't know any results until Sunday night when the team list was posted online, but I was so hyped up and anxious right now- how would I ever make it until then? All these feelings from a girl who honestly didn't know if she even *wanted* to be on the team!

If I was looking for a distraction, I got it. But I wouldn't say it was exactly encouraging.

Don't be selfish. Don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

I mulled it over and started a mental list, checking things off like I did with Jackson's list this morning when he made sure I had everything ready for try-outs. I wouldn't call myself selfish, check.

I certainly didn't impress anyone today! Check. And speaking of not trying to impress, I was keeping my girlfriend status with Ben fairly quiet, right? That should get me bonus points. And sometimes I took way too *much* interest in others, undeniable!

Right! But before I could become too smug, I made myself read the verse again. Look out for the interests of others?

So whose interests would *those* be? My family, check.

Ben, check.

Sarah, Marla, Reese and Mia? Sure! I think they would each consider me a thoughtful friend. I hoped so, anyway.

I sighed and closed the app, feeling less tense but more exhausted than when I had opened it.

My mind was calmer now.

Melissa Knight

Calm enough, still enough, to hear that quiet voice again.

Nico? Miranda?

I drifted off to sleep with their faces in my thoughts.

Chapter 12

Human Interest Story

*Human-interest stories may be "the story behind the story" about an event, organization, or otherwise faceless historical happening...
-Wikipedia*

The Swim Team Tryouts Quiz

1. So, how did my times compare with the other kids who tried out?

- A.** Middle of the pack.
- B.** My times were the worst in everything except the butterfly stroke, in which I was the third best.
- C.** My times were the worst in every. Single. Stroke.

2. *What was the whole experience like?*

- A.** The other swimmers were encouraging and nice.
- B.** I didn't know a single one of them except this girl who's in my AP English.
- C.** I found out the swim team will practice every day at the YMCA before school from 6 to 8 in the morning. Holy. Batman. How come no one informed me of this sooner??
- D.** All of the above.

3. *What did Coach Dossett, the girl's coach, have to say?*

- A.** You have such promise!
- B.** So glad you tried out!
- C.** The swim team's not for everyone, honey.
- D.** That Campbell girl? How can that be? (After I came in third for the butterfly)

Answers: **B, D, D**

"She didn't say that directly to me, but I heard her mutter it as I walked by," I clarified to Ben as we walked up the driveway to his house. "One of the other kids told me the butterfly is the hardest stroke, so I guess Coach Dossett was surprised that I was decent at it, when I was so slow with the other strokes."

I shrugged and grinned. "Who knew? Kudos to the cute YMCA instructor who taught me the butterfly the summer I turned twelve. I paid *really* close attention to him in those lessons, let me tell ya. I wanted to impress him. "

“Oh, yeah?” Ben said, looking amused. “Looks like it paid off!”

“We’ll know tonight,” I agreed. “I’m nervous, but mainly because I don’t really know if I even want to make the team or not.”

I was also nervous about meeting Ben’s parents, which was happening for the first time in about ten seconds. So I changed the subject abruptly.

“Do I look okay?” I whispered to Ben, smoothing my skirt and fluffing my hair, as he put his hand on the front door knob. Ben had gone with my family to our church this Sunday morning, and his parents had invited me over for lunch afterwards.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered back, pulling me in for a hug. “They’re going to love you, I guarantee it. No stress, Campbell.”

A dog started barking inside the house, probably hearing us on the front porch, and I remembered then that Ben’s family had three dogs. Or was it four? And a cat?

Other dogs started barking as we opened the door, and I relaxed. Chaos was familiar. How formal could his parents be, with all this noise in their house?

I could deal with this.

Ben’s parents were wonderful. His dad looked like an older version of Ben, tall with dark hair, thinning a little at the top. He seemed a bit reserved, but he asked me some teasing, funny questions like “what makes your little sister mad?” and “out of all the boys at Rayburn High, how did a pretty girl like you end up with *Ben*?”, that sort of thing.

Mrs. Edwards kept us laughing over our lunch of chicken and rice casserole. Also tall and slender, she was a nurse who

worked night shifts at a local hospital's maternity ward, and she seemed to have endless "new dad" stories. I asked her about her mother's health, and Mrs. Edwards sighed.

"Mom really needs full-time help," she admitted, glancing at her husband, who nodded soberly. "I'm sure we'll need to make some big decisions soon about how to best deal with her situation. But let's talk about more pleasant things right now, please."

"Oh, I've got some pleasant stories," Mr. Edwards said slyly, smirking at Ben, and started sharing some of the crazy things that Ben and his older brothers did when they were growing up, like filling all the bathtubs with frogs one summer morning, and dropping water balloons out of trees on unsuspecting people as they would walk down the sidewalk.

"Hey, I was the innocent party," Ben protested, as we all laughed. "I just followed them around and did whatever they told me to do. I didn't know any better and they took advantage of me!"

"I miss those days when my boys were all here at home," Mrs. Edwards admitted. "Our older sons are on their own now, and the house seems so quiet." Of course, about that time their three dogs all started barking again and I giggled. "Quiet" wasn't a word I would choose to describe their house.

Or my house either, and I decided I felt comfortable here, with Ben's parents. They seemed to like me, and I liked them, and for some reason that boosted my confidence level a thousand percent.

And then, the weirdest and best thing happened, just as I was taking a long sip of my iced tea.

"You know, I might have gone to college with your mother, now that I think about it," Mrs. Edwards said

suddenly. “You said her name is Karen? Karen Campbell? And she’s a teacher?”

“Her new married name is Findley now, but yeah, she was married to my dad Austin Campbell before that. He passed away a few years ago,” I said, not wanting to go into all the details.

Mrs. Edward’s eyes, brown like Ben’s, grew round. “Austin Campbell?” she squeaked. “Casey, I *did* know both your mom and dad in college! Karen and I went to the same community college and even the same church for a while! I was a year or two older than Karen and we weren’t that close, but we had mutual friends and we all hung out together most of the time. I remember when she and your dad started dating, and I was even invited to their wedding shower years later, although I was expecting my first child at the time and couldn’t make it. We exchanged Christmas cards for a few years, and then we just lost touch, like people do.”

She started explaining how even though she grew up in Abilene, she decided to attend the community college that Mom went to since she had a cousin who lived in that area, she wanted to live away from home, and all this other stuff that I barely listened to.

Instead, my attention was riveted on one thing, and one thing only.

She had known my *dad*? When he was in college, just a few years older than my age right now? It was cool that she had known my mom, of course, but my dad, too?

Sitting in stunned silence at Ben’s dining room table, it felt like someone had opened a door to introduce a person I had deeply loved, but knew so little about. I mean, I knew Austin Campbell as my father, but not what he was like as a friend, or even how he came across to just a casual acquaintance. This was incredible.

Melissa Knight

I looked at Ben while Mrs. Edwards kept talking, still in shock, and he grinned and shook his head, like he couldn't believe it either.

Once my brain unfroze and I could collect my thoughts, I would ask Ben's mom to open that door wider. To introduce me again.

To my father.

Or, to the single guy he was before he *became* my father.

Chapter 13

Read All About It

If you don't hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one.

-Arthur Brisbane, newspaper editor

You are NOT my father.

“Casey, your mother and I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page. As the father of boys, dealing with a daughter is new to me”-

I am NOT your daughter.

-“and you’ll have to be patient with me as we establish reasonable rules.”

We?? I don't recall being consulted.

I looked at Mom for support as she sat on the couch beside Harrison, and she gazed back at me intently, sympathetically, but she didn't say a word. And in that moment I recognized just how much my world had shifted.

Always before, Mom and I had been a team, us against the world. I could tell at a glance what she was thinking, and

she knew me inside out as well. But now, finally, months after she had married Harrison, I had to accept the facts.

Now it wasn't just me and Mom, and Riley for that matter, doing life together, fussing every now and then but always leaning on each other. Now, it was me and Mom and *Harrison*.

He was her husband now, her partner in life, and all big decisions, including the dating rules for her daughters, would now include *him*.

I liked Harrison. We had a good relationship, he kept Riley out of my hair a lot, and he even taught me to parallel park last summer.

But *this* whole conversation annoyed me.

I sat up straighter in the chair next to the couch. "Ben is a perfect gentleman," I stated calmly, trying to remember my debate skills. "He has a curfew, too. And we've been alone together lots and lots of times over the last few months, you know that. Well, maybe not *alone*," I acknowledged. "We hang out here mostly, and somebody's always around. And on dates we just do simple things like go get tacos or pizza, stuff like that. Ben is amazing. Honorable."

"You and Ben are very responsible, Casey," Harrison replied. "But he's still a teenage boy, and you're a teenage girl. Hormones can get out of control pretty quickly, this I know from experience."

From experience? *Eewwww*. I did NOT want to have this conversation.

"So, just keep doing what we're doing?" I asked abruptly. "I don't see the need for any more restrictions."

"The two of you can't be alone in your bedroom, or in any other room in the house without the door open. Ben can't be here at all when nobody else is home. And you can't be

alone at his house either. I'll talk to him about all of this as well."

Oh-kay, none of this was a problem. I don't know why I was feeling so contrary, or why it bothered me so much that Harrison was taking the lead in telling me what I could and couldn't do, tonight.

My thoughts strayed to my real dad. What would he have said? Would he have been strict? Stricter? Would he have let me date at all? My irritation seemed to morph to anger, of all things, but not with Harrison.

It was anger with my dad, who wasn't even around to defend himself. He would never be around. I knew they weren't rational or fair, but I let the thoughts linger anyway.

Why wasn't my real dad here?

Why is God allowing me to grow up without him?

"May I be excused?" I asked politely, tightly.

Harrison looked like he was going to add something else, but Mom finally spoke up before he did. "Of course, honey," she said softly. "Go check the swim team website and see if anything's posted yet. We'll discuss more about this later."

I avoided her eyes, feeling relieved, sad, and unsettled, and left the room.

As I was brushing my teeth and getting ready for bed, the swim team roster was finally posted.

And although I was still mad at him, it made me miss my dad even more.

I wondered if Darling Nico had a personality transplant over the weekend, because he actually wasn't scowling at me right now.

Admittedly, he wasn't smiling either. Or talking. He was studying the computer screen in front of him, which he had been doing for the last five minutes which was odd considering my club schedules article only took about three minutes to read, if that. Looking over his shoulder, I scanned it for the millionth time, looking for any mistakes.

"It's clean," he finally said. "No fluff. Readable format."

"Thanks," I said quietly.

Don't look out only for your own interests.

I had put aside my own interests, and wrote what my editor wanted. I felt good about my boring article. Although...

"You don't mind the extra sentence under the title, then?"

"You came in under your word count. And..." he hesitated, and I waited for a rude remark.

Or had I won him over? Would he compliment me for ditching the paragraphs I had wanted to write about taking risks, trying new things and expanding horizons, and paring it all down to just one short sentence?

Rayburn HS Club Schedule, Fall Semester

What do you have to lose?

"It will work. Your next assignment will be an interview, which we'll discuss later." He stood up dismissively and walked over to Ms. Singleton's desk.

Well.

This was by far the most pleasant exchange I'd had with Darling Nico so far, and it felt amazing. Tess noticed my

expression as I walked over to our table, and her eyes widened.

“He liked your article?” she whispered, leaning over so nobody else could hear. “He was nice to you?”

I nodded. “And I get to do an interview for the next issue!”

We high-fived, although I was still cautious. “Who knows, he might make me interview his cousin Miranda, though,” I said wryly.

“Who’s that?” Tess asked, but we got interrupted then by some other classmates. When the final bell rang, though, Tess got my attention again as we got ready to leave. “Hey, I want to say that you actually inspired me with your article. Honest! You know your subtitle, about what do you have to lose? I think I might join a different club this year, one I’ve never tried before. I could be brave and do it all by myself, unless you want to join me?” She kind of laughed, but I could tell she was serious.

Her compliment was like a popsicle on a hot day. “Wow, thank you for telling me that, about how that one sentence inspired you. And actually, I’m already trying something new. Not just a *little* new but a great *big* new. I made the swim team!”

Tess gasped and broke into a wide smile. “Congratulations, Casey! Wow! I didn’t even know you were an athlete! I mean, you’re in great shape, I didn’t mean...” She fumbled a bit and I took pity on her.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I said, laughing and turning to the door. “My ride awaits. And I’m not an athlete, at least I don’t feel like one. Yet. In fact, my biggest concern is to not screw things up for the team or get yelled at too much. Also, practice starts tomorrow before school and I’m mainly

stressing about how to keep my hair looking good,” I admitted sheepishly.

We were making our way down the crowded hall by then, but Tess stayed by my side, listening carefully. “Understandable,” she told me, raising her voice a little so I could hear over the noise. “I would feel the exact same way. But go for it, Casey! What do you have to lose, right? Seems like I just read that somewhere!”

I grimaced, and she waved me on as she stopped at her locker. I kept going, heading outside towards the parking lot, and tried to push down the deep uneasiness I still felt about what I *did* have to lose. Maintaining my own pride and good hair days was obviously critical, but I was now part of a *team*.

A team whose members depended on me to do my best. A team I could very easily let down if I didn’t improve and give one hundred percent.

And, that feeling of dread in my stomach was warning me- what if my one hundred percent was *still* not good enough?

Chapter 14

Entertainment Section

The only real risk is being too afraid to take a risk at all.

-Taylor Swift, singer/songwriter, writing for The Wall Street Journal

“Girl, you need some de- stress time. Pamperin’.” Reese studied me critically before AP History started on Thursday morning, and I automatically touched my hair. The swim cap I wore each morning during team practice was a godsend, but not conducive for the best of hair days.

Getting up at five every morning was an issue, too, so maybe that was why I looked like I needed pamperin’. But yikes, did I really look that bad?

“You look *fine*, don’t worry. Rockin’ that messy bun,” she reassured me, her voice gentler, “but I think a bag of M&Ms and some girl talk wouldn’t hurt.”

“Movies? Facials?” I breathed, hoping she was suggesting a Girl’s Night Sleepover. Forget the fact that sleepovers

didn't mean we *slept*. Sleep, or laughter? More time in dreamland, or talking about those dreams? The choice was obvious.

"Mmm-hmmmm, tomorrow night after the football game. We'll ramp up the menu this time- mah grandmother makes a wicked tortellini *a la rosa*."

I didn't know what that was but if it was in carb country, I would love it.

Take me there.

I slumped at my desk and closed my eyes. "Thank you, Reese, from the bottom of my heart. With swim practice and homework, and... I'm just so, so tired."

"Better open those eyes, Campbell," Daniel remarked cheerfully. He had been listening to our conversation since he was, after all, sitting right there behind Reese.

The bell rang and the class settled down as Mr. Langham cleared his throat. But Daniel got one last whisper in. "Don't worry, I'll keep you awake!"

I felt a paper wad hit my cheek.

I glanced at him with a sneer. *So middle school*, I mouthed, but he was already staring innocently at the teacher, like the A plus student he was.

Dinner that night was the same as ever, almost. Mom made James' favorite meal, barbeque pork tenderloin in the crockpot, with a couple of his most-requested sides. The little kids and I had mixed up his favorite snickerdoodle cookies when they got home from school this afternoon. We were all munching on some now for dessert and the rest were stored in a plastic baggy, ready for James to take to his dorm room tomorrow.

There was enough to share with his new roommate, whoever that would be.

We had taken turns reporting our daily highlights as usual, and then the conversations dwindled. This was usually when Jefferson and Riley were anxious to leave the table, and then the rest of us would scatter and get busy with clean-up, homework, free time if we were lucky- all the things.

But it was different tonight. We lingered, even the little kids, for just a few minutes more. This was the last time James would sit with us at this table for, I don't know- weeks, maybe? Or would he be the kind of guy who would make the four hour round trip to and from home pretty often? Would he be homesick, missing his brothers?

I didn't think Riley and I had been his stepsisters long enough for him to really miss the two of us, though we all got along and had our little inside jokes by now. It was James who had introduced me to coffee. He had sat by me on the front steps and told me all his messy feelings about his real mother. He saved me from awkward conversations at this very dinner table, every now and then.

Maybe he wouldn't miss me too much, with new friends to make and all those college adventures you hear about.

But I would miss him.

"I got this for you," I told James a little later when I found him upstairs in the game room, sprawled out on one of the sofas and talking to Mom and Harrison. "It's kind of dumb. I'm not the best at brother gifts, and I figured you don't want a cute little plant for your dorm room, but you'll have text books, so..."

James chuckled, fingering the Star Wars bookmark featuring Chewbacca. "The best character! I'll think of you every time I see his hairy face."

“*Not* the best character,” I corrected him automatically, continuing our ongoing debate. “And thanks a lot for that non-compliment. But yeah, think of me once in a while.”

My voice wobbled a little on that last sentence even though I kept a smile on my face, and I was annoyed with myself. I was not going to do this whole sentimental thing. Nope, no time for that!

“C’mere, Sis,” James said, and he stood up and gave me a side hug. “I’ll be home in a few weeks, maybe sooner. Let me know when your first swim meet is and I’ll try to make it, okay?”

I nodded, knowing that might not really happen, and escaped to my room.

And by the time I got home from school on Friday, James was gone, no longer living in our house, and no longer sitting with us at dinner.

It was truth or dare time, and Reese cut to the chase.

“Are you in love with Ben?” she asked, and all the other girls grew silent, waiting for my answer and looking at me with avid interest.

Fortunately, it was just Reese, Mia, Abby and me sitting cross-legged in our pajamas on Reese’s bedroom floor. None of the other regulars could make it, including Marla, who was at an after-game party with Jackson.

I didn’t try to dodge the question, as I had given this a considerable amount of thought. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “We haven’t said those “I love you” words to each other because we both take it so seriously. What I do know is that every single day I like him even more. Like, a *lot*.”

“You two are so good together,” Mia said with a sigh. “And oh man, that look on his face when he’s watching you!”

“Really?” I asked, perking up and feeling pleased. “How does he look at me?”

“Like he’s in love,” Reese said simply, and she gave me a little smile. “Ah wouldn’t say it if ah hadn’t seen it myself.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled, holding my friends’ words in my heart. Did Ben love me? The thought was exciting and scary at the same time, but mostly exciting.

“Have you had a fight yet?” Abby asked, breaking the mood. She giggled. “Sorry, but it’s gonna happen sometime.”

“No fights,” I said, and thankfully Mia changed the subject.

“Your turn, Abby! First of all, congratulations on starting your campaign for Junior Class Vice President! I’ll help however I can!”

“We all will,” Reese declared. “But let’s get to the good stuff. Are you crushin’ on anyone?”

Abby went on and on about her latest crush, some guy on the football team who totally ignored her, and finally it was my turn to ask Mia her question. Before I could even open my mouth, however, Mia surprised us.

“I want a dare this time,” she said, rubbing her hands together, eyes sparkling. “You know all my truths, so let’s change it up. Remember, nothing risky!”

She was right, we did know all her secrets, and because of that I knew exactly what dare I would give her. I glanced at Reese and Abby, wiggling my eyebrows up and down mischievously, and Reese giggled. I think she guessed what I was going to say.

“Call Tyler and ask him out,” I told Mia. “That’s your dare.” Abby squealed with delight.

Mia’s eyes still sparkled but she crossed her arms defensively. “No way! Give me another dare.”

“Nope, that’s it, there is no other one. Come on, Mia,

you've talked about Tyler all summer long. It's time for some action!"

"How about just textin' him instead of callin'?" Reese suggested. "You can keep it simple, like hey, want to hang out after school some day?"

"Hang out how exactly?" Mia demanded. "Nope, I won't do it. If he likes me the way I like him, then he should take the initiative. Maybe that's old-fashioned, but I stand by it."

"Well, as mah mother says, maybe you can't lead a horse to water and make him drink, but you can salt his oats," Reese said sagely. "You can make the horse *want* to drink. How can you make Tyler want to call you?"

"A question for the ages," Mia moaned dramatically. "But hey, I'll do this. I'll text Tyler a question to answer. Nothing romantic, just a question to maybe start a conversation. Help me think."

"He has a pool, he likes to swim... you could ask him if he wants to go with you to my first swim meet," I mused, verbalizing my spur-of-the moment idea before giving it enough thought.

My girls looked at me like I was a genius. "That's actually perfect," Abby said admiringly. "We can all go as a group so it's not like Mia would be asking him on a date."

"Yeah," I managed to say, already regretting the plan even as the girls chatted excitedly about it. "You know, I don't know how many spectators are actually allowed at a meet. There's not a lot of room. Maybe I need to ask first..."

"Oh, we'll figure that part out," Reese said dismissively, and before you know it Marla had completed her dare, sending Tyler a short, extensively-thought-out-and-approved-by-the-group text before we moved on to our first rom-com movie.

Breaking News

By the middle of the movie, Mia's phone pinged.
Tyler had texted her back!

Chapter 15

Planning

If plan A doesn't work, the alphabet has 25 more letters – 204 if you're in Japan.

-Claire Cook, writer and daughter of a newspaper employee

When life gets overwhelming, make a list. That's my strategy.

Casey's September List

- 1. Take my Driver's Test!*
- 2. Find a Homecoming dress!!!*
- 3. Gift for Jefferson's birthday on 12th??*
- 4. Interviews due on 15th!*
- 5. Help with Abby's student council campaign somehow.*
- 6. Get in extra practice laps at the club on Saturday mornings*
- 7.*

I hesitated, deliberating whether to put my next item on the list or not. Mom, Riley and I had celebrated a certain birthday, in a certain way, for years now on the 19th of September, but this year was different.

We lived far away from my old home town now, Mom would have to take off work, Ry I were in school, and Mom was *married* again. There were lots of reasons to leave this item off the list, or at least to celebrate this birthday in a more practical way.

Should we continue our tradition? Was it manageable anymore?

I typed it in anyway, slowly, so I could see the words in black and white, no emotion attached to just an item on a page.

7. Visit Dad's grave on 19th

I called Ben.

He listened patiently to everything I had to say. When I finally took a breath, he interrupted me gently. "Hold that thought, Case. I'm coming over."

And even though it was a school night and Ben had just gotten home from his job, was tired and still had homework, that's what he did. He came.

And I let him.

"I'll take you to put flowers on his grave, and all the other things," he said, his voice low and steady. He held me close as we sat on the front steps of my house in the twilight, crickets chirping. "If your Mom can't, I'll drive you there and back, I promise. It's important."

"Thank you," I whispered.

We sat there for a while, no words needed, watching the stars, until he finally got back in his truck and went home.

I was assigned two interviews, not just one!

The first one would be fun - interview a member of one of our school clubs. I would find a cool angle and run with it, and I. Could. Not. Wait! And oh yeah, didn't this idea seem *familiar*, as in wasn't this *my* idea a month ago to interview a kid in a club? Add some human interest?

But I kept my mouth shut and happily accepted the assignment. Darling Nico was treating me with some civility now, though it was obvious that he still didn't like breathing the same air as me.

I questioned my other interview assignment, however, during our weekly newspaper staff meeting.

"Um, I really don't know much about football," I admitted. "Just the minimal basics. Somebody else would probably come up with better questions to ask the players."

Allison leaned across her desk and smiled at me encouragingly. "Isn't your stepbrother Jackson on the team? He can help you with the details, I'll bet!"

"We're all taking turns with the sports write-ups this year," Nicolas said in that cold manner he had perfected. "We've discussed this. If you're unfamiliar with a subject, do your research like a decent reporter."

I will not let him get to me, I reminded myself. I couldn't bring myself to smile, but I held his gaze steadily. "True. I'll do my best."

Nicolas was the first to look away, and maybe it was petty but that made me feel better.

He was right, though. I would just have to suck it up and work harder on the football interview, or actually a set of quick interviews getting the coach's and main players' comments right after Rayburn High's game this Friday night. I wished I had paid more attention the last two years at my old high school, studying the game itself under those Friday

night lights instead of chatting with my friends on the bleachers and admiring the way the players looked in their uniforms.

I moaned about it to Sarah in a text, who set me straight pretty quick.

Sarah:

No regrets, girl, no regrets!! How hard can it be anyway to look up at a hunky player and bat your eyes and ask him how he feels about the game?? Seriously!!

I rolled my eyes and started texting a lecture to her. She had insulted female sports journalists everywhere!

Sarah:

I see you typing and know exactly what you're going to say and just stop. Lighten up. RELAX.

Sarah didn't often take the time to text in all caps, so I decided to heed her advice. For right now, I would relax.

And later, I would beg Jackson for help.

Learning relaxation techniques was apparently not a component of Rayburn's swim practices. Drills and skills, practicing our kicks and strokes, remembering to count our laps, breath control, sprints, always being aware of our speed... it was a *lot*.

If Rayburn's swim team was not that great, as Marla had

suggested, then I shuddered to think what our competition would look like at a real meet, because everyone else on this team seemed pretty amazing to me. Their form and technique put mine to shame.

I still wondered early each weekday morning as I got dressed, bleary-eyed and wishing with all my heart that I could just go back to bed, why on *earth* I had wanted to do this. All this stress just to put something on a college application?? I could have joined the Spanish club and called it good! (No offense to my Spanish club friends, of course.)

And yet.

“Looking better, Campbell!” Coach Dossett barked as I finished a set.

And there it was. Those three words. Four words sometimes, whenever she hollered “You got this, Campbell!” at me.

I only heard those words a few times a week, sometimes only once. But earning them had become alarmingly addictive.

I loved hearing her praise, I guess like a little first grader might feel if her teacher complimented her artwork. You would think I had cured the common cold, instead of just increasing my time on the breast stroke by half a second.

“Way to go, Casey,” the team captain called as I climbed out of the pool. She walked over, smiling, and handed me a towel. “You’re getting better!”

I practically glowed, and stood a little taller. Just give me a Nobel prize right now, thank you very much.

So this is why athletes put up with all the hard stuff, I mused as I took off my swim cap a little later in the locker room, fluffing out my messy-but-dry hair. The strenuous practices, the early mornings, the sacrifice of free time...

I sighed as I looked in the mirror, dabbing on makeup

frantically like Coach was timing me in that, too. *The wreckage of my normal morning beauty routines*, I added ruefully.

“You ready, Casey?” another member called out to me. A school bus was waiting to take us from the YMCA, where we practiced each morning, over to Rayburn High. Then it would be a rush to get to my locker and hustle to my first class on time.

“Ready!” I called back as cheerfully as I could, grabbing my backpack and already planning to fix my hair on the bus, like many of the girls did as we chatted back and forth.

And the friendships. There was that.

I was still a little uneasy, still nervous about hurting the team, but I had to admit that once I dragged myself to practice and actually saw the teeny tiny improvements I was gaining already, witnessing for myself the small steps on my become-a-better-swimmer-to-do list being accomplished, it felt surprisingly good.

And not just because of my coach’s sparing praise, or the encouragement of my team members, either. I was seeing results. Nobody was making me work hard- okay, Coach expected a lot but she couldn’t make me *stay* on the team, after all. It was my choice. I could control how hard I worked for this, and see results.

I was kind of proud of me.

Chapter 16

Developing Story

A reporter is always concerned with tomorrow.

-Edward R. Murrow, journalist

“Ready?” Mom asked.

“I was born ready,” I replied with more confidence than I actually felt, but I hung onto the words Mrs. Cordova spoke to me this past summer, when she told me I would probably pass the driver’s test the first time I took it.

Just don’t get “cocky”, she had warned.

Mrs. Cordova was my former driving instructor, and I clutched the tiny metal angel she had given me in a death grip. I wasn’t at all superstitious, but this angel? She had been with me every single mile I had driven since that last lesson. I clipped Mrs. C, as I now affectionately called her, to the sun visor and started Mom’s car.

Mom was silent as we drove to the DMV office, but I took note of her pale face and tense shoulders whenever I glanced at her during stop lights. She had promised to not

talk to me on the way to take my test, since her “encouragement” always backfired when it came to driving.

“You’ve got this!” she said in a strained voice, when we climbed out of the car to go inside the building. “I’ll be praying for you the entire time you take the test. And for your evaluator. And for all the other people on the road so they will drive carefully too, and” -

“Mom!!” I groaned, closing my eyes and bringing my fingers to my temples in exasperation.

I should have listened to Jackson, I realized. He had offered to come here with me after school and let Mom stay home with the little kids, and why on earth hadn’t I agreed to that? I guess passing my driver’s test seemed like a rite of passage thing that mothers should be involved in, but nope, no more. When it was Jefferson’s or Riley’s turn to take their drivers tests, as a good sister I would make absolutely sure Mom was in no way involved.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said as we settled onto the hard metal chairs in the lobby, waiting until my name was called by the evaluator. “I’ve decided to get my pilot’s license next.”

The not-so-soft punch on my arm was worth it, and so was the slow, wry smile that finally appeared on Mom’s face.

“Let’s do this.”

It was lunchtime, and Tess, Marla, Mia and I were poring over my Club Schedules article in the Rayburn Review. We had about twenty minutes left to decide on a club that we would all join together.

“We can rule some out right away,” Marla said, crossing out Dance Team and Cheerleading.

“I need a club that meets after school, and no Mondays,” Tess said apologetically, so Marla crossed out a few more

clubs. Tess had Second Lunch too, and had started joining us at our table every now and then. When Marla and Mia found out about Tess's desire to join a new, fun club, they wanted in, and I had reluctantly agreed as well.

Although how I would fit another activity into my filled-to-the-brim schedule, only the good Lord could know.

"It has to be a club where I don't have to think that much," I stated firmly. "And it has to be a Thursday since that's the only day my neighbor can watch Riley and Jefferson when they get off the bus. Sorry, I should have said that sooner. That rules out a lot of clubs, so maybe I should just drop out of this plan."

"No!" all the girls said in unison.

"We're doing this together!" Mia reassured me. "All for one and one for all!"

"Fortunately, a lot of clubs meet on Thursday after school," Marla remarked, examining the schedule. "So alrighty, no Chess Club, Mathletes, or Photography,"

"Some of us are already in the National Honor Society, so take that one off, too," Mia said. "And no Debate Club! I would die."

Marla sighed. "That leaves Drama."

"Drama," Mia said excitedly. "Let's join the Drama club! That's the one that sounds the most fun out of all of them anyway!"

Marla looked uncertain. "I would be a disaster. Can you honestly see me acting on a stage? Not happening!"

"But there are other things you could do," Mia argued. "Like painting sets, or being a stagehand, stuff like that."

"Maybe we could just try it for a couple of weeks and see what it's like," Tess suggested diplomatically.

"Try what?" Colton leaned over Marla's shoulder, examining the crossed-out clubs and quickly catching on to

what we were discussing. “Are you lovely ladies joining the Drama Club?”

“No!” Marla answered even as Tess and Mia said “Yes!” Colton looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I shrugged.

“Whatever ya’ll decide,” I conceded. “I’ll try anything as long as I don’t have to sign any contract committing to it.”

“Nice,” Colton said admiringly, nodding his head. “Casey, you should start a Future Lawyers of America Club. And hey Mar, never fear. I’ll go with all of you to Drama Club. Why not? I need something to keep me off the streets.”

“That’s supposed to be motivating?” Marla’s voice was sarcastic, but she smiled. She and Colton had been friends forever. “Let me guess, is Brittany in Drama Club this year?” Colton had been dating Brittany, one of the cheerleaders, last spring, and I had wondered if they were still together.

“Brittany who?” Colton answered innocently, and winked at us. I guess I had my answer.

“Drama Club it is!” Mia declared, just as the bell rang to end lunch.

“Want to go dress shopping on Saturday?” I asked Marla as we threw away our trash. “We only have what, three more weeks before Homecoming?”

“Oh, I only buy my dresses under pressure,” she joked. “Like the week before.”

“We’ll go back to that consignment store where we found your gorgeous prom dress! Maybe Reese can go with us. And *I’ll drive*,” I said, lifting my chin proudly.

Marla grinned at me and we fist-bumped.

Because yes, I had passed my driver’s exam. One hundred percent, baby!

Including, under Mrs. C’s watchful eyes and with my mother’s desperate prayers, the parallel parking test.

Chapter 17

Sources

*My sources are unreliable, but their information is
fascinating.*

Ashleigh Brilliant, author and cartoonist

The drama teacher clapped her hands together twice to get our attention. “Okay now, my dears,” she said, beaming while she jiggled up and down on her toes. “What a turnout! Welcome to all of you who are attending our wonderful Drama Club for the first time!” She spread out her arms to the group of about thirty or so students sitting in the auditorium seats in front of her, as if to embrace each one of us.

I watched the middle-aged lady in front of me, intrigued. She wore a bright purple, flowy shirt over neon yellow pants, which oddly enough looked pretty good. Combined with her bouncy, energetic personality, she certainly lit up the school auditorium. But it was her name that fascinated me the most.

Jane Rochester. Get it? Jane as in the old novel “Jane

Eyre” and Rochester as in Jane Eyre’s love interest? Was Rochester her maiden name? Or had she married someone whose last name was Rochester in some fluke of fate? What were the odds? And she was teaching *drama*, sheesh!

“So let’s divide up into groups of five! Stand up, form your groups and I’ll pass out the cards!”

Oops, guess I had missed some instructions. But I stood up and followed Marla, Mia, Tess and Colton over to a spot in front of the stage. I hoped we weren’t going to do anything embarrassing.

I surveyed the other kids in the school auditorium while our group waited. Most of them were chatting and laughing, though a few seemed shy and even a bit wary like me. Was anyone here because of my article? The thought made me smile inside. It would be cool to think my little “what do you have to lose” question had nudged someone else to be here this Thursday afternoon.

“Our icebreaker today is called Family Portrait. Quite simple,” Ms. Rochester announced, enunciating each syllable clearly. “Each group will strike a pose to imitate a certain type of family portrait. Two minutes to plan once you get your cards!”

I waited for further directions, but apparently our teacher was done. She started handing out index cards to each group.

We huddled around Tess, who was given our group’s card. “Friends Taking a Picture in the 1960’s,” she read aloud. “So a hippie look, right?”

“Peace out,” Colton agreed, nodding and flashing us a peace sign. “Long hair, ladies. I’ve already got these vibes down.”

I undid the clip holding my messy bun and arranged my long hair over my shoulders. “I’ve got a headband in my

backpack, hang on," I told them, starting to feel a little excited. I dug in my pack. "I've got two, so somebody take the extra one and put it around your head."

"I'll be the Doris Day type," Marla said. "Have any of you seen those old movies? Super perky." We just looked at her blankly and she shrugged. "My mom and I are fans."

"I wish I had some go-go boots," Mia said, giggling, and then we all started really getting into it.

"Thirty seconds!" Ms. Rochester barked, and we hastily arranged ourselves as best we could, trying to look hip. Or groovy? Far out?

When Drama Club was finally over after two more rounds of Family Portrait, I had to admit it was fun and fairly non-threatening, and my friends and I made a pact to come back the next week.

I lingered a little after most everyone else had left the auditorium, since I was catching a ride with Jackson and had to wait for football practice to be over with anyway.

"Ms. Rochester?" I asked the energetic instructor. "Is Rochester your maiden name?"

"Ah, a fellow lover of English Literature!" she responded, smiling broadly. "I'm delighted you came today, Miss-?"

"Campbell, Casey Campbell," I supplied helpfully. "I've actually never read Jane Eyre, but I've seen the movie."

"I must confess I have not read it either. SHOCKING since I bear one of the most famous names in romantic history! And to answer your question, I *married* a Rochester. I simply could not resist, darling. The chance to snag that perfect last name was too appealing!"

Ms. Rochester went on and on about how she and her husband met, and I nodded and smiled, all the time half wondering if her story was really true or if she was simply

entertaining me. How could I be sure? She taught drama, after all!

The next day in Physics, Colton and I were laughing before class started, with him turned around in his seat so he could face me. He showed me several pictures of our group on his phone that someone else in Drama Club had sent him.

“Family Picture Ruined by an Over-Energetic Child’. You look like such a dork, Colton,” I teased.

“Who’s the dork?” he retorted, scrolling to the next picture. “Check this one out. I’m posting this one for sure.”

It was our “Family of Cats” pose, and I looked intensely uncomfortable and awkward on my hands and knees, my mouth open in a “meow” and not at all capturing the feline look. In all fairness, Marla looked even worse and I could *not* stop giggling. The bell rang and Colton and I high-fived, our hands intertwining for a few seconds simply because we were laughing so hard.

He turned around in his seat to face forward again, and I took a deep breath, composing myself and looking towards the front of the class. I must have sensed somebody staring at me, because when I shifted my focus to the side of the room just a tad, there was Miranda, turned around in her own seat and watching me intently.

We held gazes steadily for a few seconds, enough time for me to catch the expression on her face. For the first time, she didn’t look haughty, unfriendly or cold, as usual. It was another expression that I recognized, since I had felt the same way many, many times.

It was an expression of relief. Even approval.

And I wondered why.

I figured it out, though. Because at the football game that night, while I was on the sidelines near the players, taking notes and doing my reporter gig for the Rayburn Review, Miranda got down to business.

Me:

I'm hanging out at the drama table next Monday during lunch. I found my person to interview for the paper! She was amazing yesterday at drama club and has been in several school plays!

Ben:

Great! I'll miss you at lunch.

Me:

Umm, we never eat lunch together.

Ben:

I guess that's why I always miss you. Pizza later with the gang?

By "gang", he meant half of Rayburn High, who headed for Ziti's most Friday nights after the football game.

Me:

Only if you can wait awhile since I'm interviewing the football players, remember? I'll try to hurry!

Ben:

No rush. I'll come find ya.

Smiling to myself as I waited at the kitchen table for the little kids to get home from school, I scanned my football notes one more time, willing myself to remember the terms and their meanings. *Pass rush, trick plays, split backs formation...*

Aaaaghh.

Chapter 18

Retractions

I'm going home now. I apologize for what I said. I hope you can forget it, but I'm going home right now.

-Benjamin Day, newspaper publisher

Jackson made it so, so easy for me.

When I had explained earlier this week that I was covering Friday's game for the newspaper and asked him for a crash course in football, he had seemed pleased but doubtful.

"Sure, Sis, I can give you the basics, but... how are you going to know what questions to ask? It takes a real grasp of STRATEGY to ask a decent question."

I made a face. "Can't I keep the questions simple? Like, how did you feel when you made that touchdown? Or I don't know, how could the teamwork have been better? I've read some of the interviews other reporters did last year, and some of their questions were like that." Okay, these were the kinds of questions Sarah had teased me about, but it was the truth.

Jackson looked thoughtful. “Yeah, but you can do BETTER, Sis.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I would settle for good enough, but Jackson continued.

“Tell you what- I’ll talk to the team and tell them the situation, and they’ll HELP you. Leave it to me.”

“What do you mean by the *situation*?” I asked, a little worried. “As in I’m clueless and don’t know what I’m doing?”

Jackson grinned. “Naw, the situation is that you’re my sister and they better treat you RIGHT. That’s what I mean. Gotta bounce,” he said, and left the room.

That was that, and I had wondered all week how exactly this would work out. I went ahead and did some research and prepared a list of general questions, just in case.

But at halftime that night, after the coach’s pep talk to the team which I dutifully recorded, awkwardly standing as close to the players as I dared while still trying to remain unobtrusive, I found out what Jackson had meant.

In the few minutes left before the second half, before the team took the field, a few of the key players approached me. I recognized most of them and knew their names already, since they were Jackson’s friends.

“Hey Casey, I’ve got a quote for you,” the sweaty quarterback started in, giving me a wink. “You ready?”

I got my phone ready to record. “Ready!”

In a few words, the quarterback told me about the team’s strategy in the first half which earned them two quick touchdowns. Then it was the next player’s turn, who told me his full name and position and gave me his perspective of the game. By the third player’s turn, I relaxed and was thanking God for Jackson Findley.

I hadn’t said a word and didn’t ask a single question, and yet the team had apparently been coached to serve me the

information and quotes for my article on a sparkling, silver platter.

After the game was over, the trend continued. Players sought me out before heading to the locker room, giving me high-fives since thankfully Rayburn had won the game, and proceeded to tell me things they thought I needed to know. Jackson never approached me, but he grinned and gave me a little wave before jogging off the field. Finally, the head coach himself sauntered over to me.

“It’s Casey, right?” he asked cheerfully.

“Yes, sir!” I responded. This guy was huge and a little intimidating, and since he didn’t say anything else, I cleared my throat. “Um, I’m with the Rayburn Review. Would you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

He looked at me assessingly. “Sure! Or maybe I could tell you my thoughts about the game?”

Oh, sweet relief. “Yes, sir! Please!” I held out my phone, the coach gave me a quick summary, I thanked him, and he gave me a mock salute, grinning.

“Easiest. Interviews. Ever!” I called over to Ben, who was sitting patiently on the bleachers, observing my interviewing “skills” with interest. Most of the noisy crowd had exited the stadium by this point.

“I can see that,” he said, standing up and stretching. “You worked your tail off, Campbell.”

“Yeah, it was rough, all those guys lining up just to talk to me,” I said teasingly. I wrapped my arm around his and drew in close to his side. “You can feed me now, I’m starving.”

Ben hugged me, but instead of starting to walk with me to the parking lot, he sat down again on the bleacher, tugging me gently with him. “Just a sec, Case. Before we go, I need to

tell you something.” He hesitated and seemed to be searching for the right words. “It’s about, well...”

I felt a flicker of concern. I had never seen Ben flustered. “Are you feeling okay?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “It’s just that, you were right. About Miranda. When you said that she likes me? Well, apparently she does.”

My concern turned to alarm, and I scooted a few inches away from Ben so I could turn and examine his face more closely. “Okay... keep going. Did something happen?”

“You could say that.” Ben sighed. The stadium was almost empty by now but the lights were still on. “I was sitting with some of the guys from FFA, and Miranda came over during half time and asked me to go to the Homecoming dance with her.”

I was proud of myself for remaining calm, though I felt a slow burn beginning in my chest. “You mean she asked you privately?”

“Well no, she asked in front of everyone. And she brought donuts.”

“*Donuts?* Why on earth?”

“It was a box of a dozen. With icing letters on the tops to spell out HOMECOMING.”

I fell silent, contemplating this bombshell news.

“They were good,” he added, and reached for my hand.

I snatched it away and narrowed my eyes at him. “Let me get this straight. Miranda asked you to Homecoming, knowing that”-

And then it dawned on me. Miranda *didn’t* know that Ben and I were officially together. It wasn’t on social media, by my choice. She didn’t hang out with my circle of friends, who would have informed her. And her expression in Physics

this afternoon when Colton and I were laughing and high fiving... she must have thought we were flirting.

"She didn't know we were together," Ben said, echoing my thoughts. "I told her, though."

He explained that once he opened the donut box and realized Miranda's intentions, he asked to talk with her privately.

"We walked over behind the concession stand and I told her that you're my girlfriend and I'm taking you to Homecoming. Even though I haven't officially asked you yet," he admitted. "Sorry. She took it well, but... maybe she read too much into things when we went to Homecoming together last year."

"Wait, *what?*"

I was totally, completely astonished. "You and Miranda went to Homecoming last year? She was your *date*? How come you never told me this?"

Ben looked at me steadily, alarm starting to grow in his eyes. "Not as my date, just as friends in a big group. I never bought her a corsage or anything, and didn't even pick her up or take her home, nothing like that. Honest, Case, it was no big deal, at least not to me, and we've never hung out together since then except at FFA meetings. Besides, it doesn't relate to this situation anyway."

"You don't get to tell me what relates to this situation," I replied, standing up abruptly. Workers were beginning to pick up trash around the bleachers and we needed to leave.

Ben stood up too. "Still hungry?"

I started walking down the steps to find the exit from the bleachers area, trying to collect all my thoughts that were swirling around like leaves in a windstorm. There was no need to find fault with Ben. So why was I so angry? Did Ben deliberately keep this little dynamite of a fact from me on

purpose, that he and Miranda had gone to a dance together, even in a group? Could he truly not understand that I would want to know about this?

Ben followed me as we made our way to his truck, each of us silent until he opened the passenger side door for me. Before I got in, I had one more question.

“You actually ate the donuts?”

Ben took a step back from me and lifted his hands, palms out like people do to show that they’re unarmed. He eyed me like I was a time bomb waiting to go off at any moment. “Well, Miranda left the box there on the bleachers by my friends, and when I got back from explaining things to her, the guys had eaten most of them anyway. So I grabbed one. Hated to waste them.”

It was at that point that I felt genuinely sorry for Miranda.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” I told Ben quietly. “Please take me home.”

Chapter 19

Rough Draft

Life, on the other hand, is one big messy rough draft.

Harlan Coben, Writer

I stretched out on the bed on my stomach, my arms propped up with a pillow, studying the September List.

#1 *Driver's test* - done!

#5 *Help with Abby's Student Council campaign* - done!

Reese, Mia, Marla and I had baked cookies to hand out on Rayburn High's "Meet Your Candidates Day" and put up posters in all the hallways. We didn't know what else to do, and privately I suspected that Abby wouldn't win. She was up against some tough competition, a senior guy from the Mathletes and a really peppy senior girl who was chatty and popular. I was crossing my fingers for Abby, though.

#6 *Get in extra practice laps at the club on Saturday mornings* - done and done and done and done.

Oh yes, Coach Jackson was in charge of my Saturday morning regimen now, and he didn't cut me any slack. Our first meet was in October, and while I wasn't as nervous about it anymore, I still wasn't hopeful that I would be much of an asset to the team. As Marla kept reassuring me, at least I knew I would survive.

#3 *Gift for Jefferson's birthday on 12th* - done, and it was a hit!

"How did you know I like Corvettes?" Jefferson asked in wonder, after he ripped off the paper and saw the box containing the plastic car model kit. "It's red, too! Awesome! So I have to put it together?"

"Yep," I told him. "You follow the directions and there's this special glue you use. And remember when I interviewed you and Riley a few months ago? You said then that you wanted a red Corvette when you grow up. Well, why wait until then?"

I grinned at him and he came over and gave me a hug. "I love you, Casey," he said in my ear, softly so nobody else in the room could hear, and my heart absolutely melted. He had never said that to me before.

"I love you too, kid," I whispered to his back as he hurried away to open his next gift.

That kit was worth every penny of my hard-earned money.

#2 *Find a Homecoming dress!* - done!

I wound up going dress shopping with Mom, and we had a long overdue catch-up session afterwards.

"Nicolas is in one of my classes," she remarked as we

both sipped our drinks at the mall food court. “He’s an excellent writer, and a polite young man.”

“I’m sure you’re the reason he’s been nicer to me,” I told her. “Once he realized you were my mom, I bet he backed off since he probably needs you as a reference for his college apps.”

“He’s only a year older than you, Casey. He still has things to learn. And Ben?” she probed gently. “Things are okay between you and Ben?”

“Yeah...” I replied, and she waited. After my initial annoyance that Ben hadn’t told me every single piece of his past history with Miranda, I decided to let it go. Ben would never deliberately lie to me.

“We just don’t see things the same way sometimes,” I confided. “Like we can look at the exact same situation and see completely different things, and have different feelings. Does that make sense?”

Mom leaned back and smiled wryly. “Welcome to relationships, hon. Part of real love is the decision to work through those differences.”

Don’t look out only for your own interests.

Soft and clear, that voice.

I lifted my Styrofoam cup, and Mom lifted hers, and we “clinked” them together in a silent toast to figuring things out.

#4 *Interviews due on 15th* - done, as of today!

My interviews passed editorial inspection, and all deadlines had been met for the second edition of the paper. I had given a certain situation a lot of thought, however, before this particular Friday afternoon. I had a plan.

A few minutes before Journalism class was over, I

approached Nicolas. “May I talk to you a few minutes after class today?”

He kept his gaze on his computer screen. “If you make it quick. I have work to do.”

“I’m aware,” I said politely, and he must have sensed the change in my tone, the shift in my confidence that I didn’t even understand myself.

I wasn’t afraid of him anymore.

“I’d like to talk to you as one human being to another, not as a reporter to an editor,” I told him once most of the other students had cleared out. Allison was still working on her computer, but she sat clear across the room and paid us no attention.

I waited for Nicolas to respond. And waited.

Okay, I could wait here all day. Jackson was getting a ride home with one of his football buddies and would be there to meet the little kids’ bus, since there was no after school football practice today, and I was driving myself home.

Nicolas heaved an exasperated sigh and scooted his chair away from the computer, crossing his arms.

“Fine,” he said, though clearly it was not fine. “Go ahead.”

I skipped a whole bunch of things I could have said, about my feelings and what-not, and got right to the point.

“You seem to dislike me. That’s your decision, and I can live with that. But if it has anything to do with your cousin Miranda, I’d like to clear some things up.”

Nicolas looked at me, startled. He frowned, his arms still crossed.

I waited him out. Again.

I could hear the clock on the classroom wall ticking.

“We’re close,” he said finally, slowly. “I look out for her. And you hurt her. You stole her boyfriend.”

I took a deep breath and released it. “Ben was never her boyfriend.”

“But he might have been, if not for you.”

“Fine! Maybe that’s true. But I never, ever would have stolen him from her. That’s ridiculous. I’ve been angry with Miranda, but I don’t want to be a mean person. And Ben wouldn’t lead her on or treat her in a bad way, either. He’s a good guy.”

I stopped talking, trying to regroup my thoughts. We were both quiet for a moment.

“She was embarrassed. Last week, at the game. The donuts and everything.” His voice was low, and I could tell he carried Miranda’s hurt. He stared at his computer screen again.

I looked at Nicolas, that fine specimen of a teenage male, and saw a guy who was protective. Maybe over the top mafia-type protective, but still. He loved his family.

“All I’m asking,” I said carefully, “is that you stop seeing me as this boyfriend-snatcher. I’m sorry if I hurt Miranda, but I never, ever meant to. Maybe if you get to know me better, you’ll believe me.”

I hesitated. “Miranda’s gorgeous. She’s...” I couldn’t think of any other adjective just then, so I hastily went on. “There are tons of guys out there who would love to be her boyfriend, I bet. And I admire her actually, for having the guts to invite a guy to Homecoming. Just, not *Ben*,” I finished with a little smile, hoping enough ice was broken so that Nicolas might smile back at me.

He didn’t, but he didn’t frown either. He just studied me, his arms still crossed.

I sighed and stood up, grabbing my backpack. “Gotta go, but thanks for listening to me, Nicolas. See you later.”

I was opening the door when I heard his soft response. “Bye, Casey.”

There was one last thing on the list.

#7 Visit Dad's Grave

Ben had just arrived at the house that night to watch a movie when Mom called out to me, before we headed upstairs.

“Come in the kitchen, Case!” When we did, the whole family was in there, except for James, of course. Even Marla was sitting at the table, hanging out with Jackson.

“We’re ordering pizza, usual orders?” Mom asked cheerfully. “Also, we need to talk about next Tuesday.”

Next Tuesday?

I knew good and well what date that was. The 19th of September, Dad’s birthday.

“Your mom was just telling us about how you remember your dad on his birthday, and it’s a nice tradition,” Harrison added.

I settled onto one of the bar stools at the counter. “It’s a school day,” I reminded Mom as if she didn’t know.

“I’m taking off work,” she said simply. “I’m going. You and Riley can miss school, though don’t feel that you have to go. Traditions can be adjusted.”

“I’m going,” I said firmly, feeling a flood of relief at her words. I was glad Mom still wanted to go, and that she was already planning the trip without me having to bring it up. I looked at Ben, and we smiled at each other.

“Me, too!” Riley said, excited. “Can Jefferson come, too?”

“Please!” Jefferson said, hopping onto the bar stool next to mine. “I want to meet your dad.”

“Oh, he’s not actually there,” Riley reminded him. “He’s in heaven! Daddy asked Jesus to forgive him of all of his sins and that’s where you go when you love Jesus.”

“Well said, Ry,” Ben told her. “Hey, would you and Casey mind if I tagged along?” He looked at Riley first and then at me, warmth in those chocolatey brown eyes. “I’m with Jeff, I’d like to celebrate your dad’s life, too. My parents will understand and not mind if I miss school that day, I’m sure.”

Nobody except me knew that Ben had already offered to take me to that cemetery two hundred miles away, if nobody else could go. Riley jumped up and down, happily giving her approval. I just nodded, but I reached over and caught Ben’s hand, tugging him closer, right there in front of everyone.

“Casey?”

Ben had just left, and I was on my way to get ready for bed.

I wandered into the living room. Harrison was by himself reading a book, and he took his reading glasses off when he saw me.

“Come sit, I have a question for you. A request.”

Oh brother. “We met curfew tonight, didn’t we?”

He smiled. “You sure did. Don’t worry, this isn’t a lecture.”

I plopped down on the couch beside him and waited. Harrison and I hadn’t done a lot of talking lately, but that wasn’t really unusual. I wasn’t miffed at him anymore, but was still a bit distant when I was around him. I didn’t try to be, but things just felt off.

“Would you mind if I go with you next Tuesday, to visit your dad’s grave?” he asked. I turned to him, surprised and a bit touched.

“You don’t need my permission, Harrison,” I said, trying to keep it light. “But of course I don’t mind. It’s kind of a strange field trip, right?”

“I suppose,” he chuckled, then we lapsed into silence.

“Well, good-night,” I said finally, starting to stand up when it seemed that neither of us could think of anything else to say.

“Tell me about your dad,” was his reply.

I looked at him, and he looked at me. His eyes were kind.

I sat back down with a plop and thought awhile, as Harrison waited patiently. And then I sighed.

“Not right now. I’m not ready,” I admitted. “I’m tired and I’ll probably cry. But I promise you, I’ll tell you about him later. I promise.” For some reason I really did not want to disappoint Harrison.

He reached over and patted my shoulder, a little awkwardly. “I believe you,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be right here. I’ll be ready to listen.”

I believed him, too.

Chapter 20

Good News

Every good and perfect gift is from above...

-James 1:17, The Bible

Dad's birthday celebration was one of the best we ever had in the last few years. Let's face it, cemeteries are kind of creepy, but there was nothing morbid about this gathering at Dad's grave, nothing at all. Mom, Riley and I did our usual things while Ben, Harrison and Jefferson watched, like putting sunflowers near Dad's grave marker, his favorites, and releasing one solitary red balloon into the air, watching it float up, up into the sky.

"Do you think Dad can see it, Casey?"

"I don't know, Ry," I said, wondering that myself. "Maybe. Jesus sees it, though."

"Then that's okay," she said, and she came and held my hand. I squeezed it, she squeezed back, and we watched the red balloon drift away until we couldn't see it anymore, both lost in our own thoughts.

We all walked back to the car, ready to leave the cemetery and grab a late lunch at Dad's favorite restaurant in my old home town, another way of remembering him, when I made an abrupt decision.

"Come with me," I said, tugging on Harrison's sleeve. "Do ya'll mind waiting a few more minutes?" I asked everyone, though I was looking at Mom.

"We have time," she said, nodding. "Plenty of time."

I led Harrison back to Dad's grave. I bent down to readjust the sunflowers, which had shifted a bit in the breeze, then straightened up again, crossing my arms in front of me like I was cold.

"I might cry," I warned Harrison, jokingly. "Are you prepared for that? Big ugly tears?"

"I'm ready," he said. "Bring it."

I started telling him what I could remember about Dad, his nickname for me, how he would push me on the swings at the playground, how he would make faces to make me laugh, how he taught me to swim, anything and everything I could remember.

I told him how it worried me that my memories were getting fuzzier, how I couldn't remember the sound of his voice that well anymore. How I felt angry with him sometimes for being in that wreck, angry with him for leaving me even though that didn't make sense.

Harrison listened carefully. When I was done talking, he gave me a side hug and handed me another tissue.

Then he just stood there with me, quietly, until I was ready to go.

“I have an assignment for you,” my editor told me the next morning as I worked at my table. “Another interview. Very specific this time.”

“Sure,” I replied, continuing to type out a sentence while I had just the right words in my mind. I wondered why this assignment hadn’t been delegated at our regular Monday meeting, when topics were discussed and assignments handed out. I was already covering the Student Council Elections this week.

“You will interview a member of the Future Farmers of America club. A female who also attended their state convention last summer.”

I looked up and met Nicolas’s gaze. He stared back at me, a challenge in his dark brown eyes. And also a teeny, tiny bit of warmth.

What?

“I suppose this female has to have long, dark hair?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“That is correct. And her name must start with an ‘M.’”

I hesitated. “It might be a disaster,” I told him honestly.

“It might. Or it might not.” He turned as if to walk away, then paused. “Come on, Casey- what do you have to lose?”

I watched him as he sauntered across the Journalism classroom. Did he really just use my own line on me?

Yes. Yes, he did.

And even though I already dreaded this assignment, interviewing a hurt and possibly livid Miranda, my lips curved into a reluctant smile.

The “How-Did-The-Rest-Of-The-Week-Go” Quiz

1. *Did Abby become the Student Council Vice President?*

- A.** Yes, by one vote!
- B.** No, the Mathlete won.
- C.** No, the popular girl won by a landslide.

2. *How did the next Drama Club Meeting go?*

A. Great! But I decided to drop out since I felt over-committed with homework, swim practice, and newspaper responsibilities. And I didn’t want to lose that babysitting pay on Thursday afternoons, let’s be real.

B. Great! Ms. Rochester informed us that auditions for the school musical would be held soon, and that our Drama Club meetings would become rehearsals. Colton and Mia decided to try out for a role!

C. Great! Ms. Rochester pulled me aside privately and said that I showed signs of tremendous dramatic ability. She asked me to try out for the upcoming school musical! I was flattered yet stunned.

D. Both **A** and **B**.

3. *Speaking of swim practice, how was all of that going?*

A. I was still improving, and actually having fun.

B. I decided that Swim Team was ultimately not for me.

C. All of my hair fears were coming true- split ends, anyone?

4. *And the biggest surprise of the week?*

A. Nicolas invited the entire journalism class to his house for a post-Homecoming party!

B. James came home from college for a weekend with- surprise!- a new girlfriend.

C. Colton invited Miranda to Homecoming, and she accepted.

D. Both **A** and **B**.

Answers: C, D, A, C

He wouldn't let me see where we were going.

"I don't like blind-folds," I complained. "Can't I just cover my eyes with my hands?"

"No, because you'll peek," Ben replied matter-of-factly. I crossed my arms, sitting there in his truck, and muttered under my breath. But he was right.

I would totally cheat.

Ben had showed up at my house this Friday evening, a littler earlier than planned, and chatted with Mom and Harrison a bit while I finished fixing my hair. Once I was buckled up in his truck's passenger seat, he tied a silky scarf around my eyes, which he said belonged to his mother, and told me the ride wouldn't take that long.

It sure seemed long, though, and the road was feeling bumpy.

"We're out in the country somewhere," I guessed. "On a

gravel road? So we're out of town? Should I be concerned? Call 911?"

"Harrison knows where we are," Ben chuckled. "If I was going to kidnap you I would have thrown away our cell phones by now. And changed vehicles. Hmm, and it would be a good idea to tape your cell phone under another car going the other direction, as a red herring."

"How nice that you think about these things," I said sarcastically. "I'm wondering what the people in the other cars passing by are thinking when they see that I'm blindfolded."

"Actually, nobody seems to notice. Rather concerning. But hey, here we are." Ben slowed down, parked the truck, and came around to my door to help me out.

"Not much longer now," he promised, and held my arm, guiding me carefully over what felt like spongy grass. Soon the grass changed to what seemed to be hard pavement, and finally Ben stopped. "Our dinner awaits," he announced dramatically, and untied my blindfold.

My jaw dropped. We were on somebody's covered patio, overlooking a stream that rushed merrily just a few yards away, at the bottom of the sloped yard. A small table was set with a pristine white linen tablecloth, gold-rimmed china plates and a bouquet of pale pink roses mixed with lime green flowers. A newspaper was folded neatly by one of the plates.

But best of all, there was a sunset.

"Oh, Ben," I breathed, taking a few steps into the yard for a better view. "It's incredible." The sunset, obviously to the west of the patio, was unobstructed in its glory, the reds, oranges, and even hints of purple setting the sky on fire.

Ben came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me from behind. "I had to get you here at the right time," he said

softly in my ear, “and that’s why I blindfolded you. I wanted your first glimpse of something so beautiful to be just right.”

I let his words sink in, and we just watched the sky, me safe in his arms, for a long time.

I thought about sunsets and rainbows, and Ben and I taking things slow in our relationship, and our decision to set boundaries even beyond the rules Harrison had given us. Ben’s words resonated.

For many things to be at their most beautiful, the timing does indeed need to be just right.

The house and patio belonged to Dr. Gary, Ben’s boss at the vet clinic, and he and his wife had helped Ben plan every detail. They came out of the back door to greet us with wide smiles, and Mrs. Gary gave me a welcoming hug before Dr. Gary excused himself. “I’m putting the finishing touches on your desserts,” he informed us with a wink. “Chocolate cheesecake with my famous raspberry sauce. This young man told us that a bag of M&M’s would be just fine, but I told him we could do better than that.” He shook his head, giving Ben a look of disdain, before disappearing inside of the house.

“Hey, M&M’s are Casey’s favorite,” Ben called after him, obviously not offended. “But yeah, I guess cheesecake might be an improvement.” He smiled at me. “Shall we sit down to dine, my dear?” He escorted me back over to the beautifully set table and pulled out my chair.

At this point I couldn’t think of *anything* about this evening that needed improvement.

“My favorite color,” I marveled, touching the lime green blooms in the flower arrangement as Ben sat down across from me. “Do you know what kind of flowers these are?”

Mrs. Gary overheard me, since she was apparently our decorator and waitress for the evening. “They’re a type of zinnia, dear,” she said. “I grow them from seed and I love them, too.” She placed a basket of yeasty, buttery rolls on our table.

“This is amazing. *You’re* amazing,” I told her sincerely. “Thank you and your husband for- well, for everything.”

“Oh, we’re having fun, dear,” Mrs. Gary assured me with a chuckle. “And don’t worry, Ben did a lot of the work, like setting the table and the grocery shopping. He’s like a son to us and we’re honored that he wanted to bring you here, to our home. Now, you two relax and I’ll be right back with your drinks.” She started lighting lanterns that were strung around the patio since the sun was disappearing fast, before she went back inside the house.

I touched the newspaper near my plate. “Is this for me to read?”

“It’s for you,” Ben said with a grin. “Better read it while there’s enough light left.”

I unfolded the paper- our first issue of the Rayburn Review! - and saw immediately that the front page had been taped over, rather awkwardly, with another page.

““Breaking News”, I read out loud, and giggled. “Benjamin Edwards anxiously awaits a response from Casey Campbell concerning this question- will she attend the Rayburn High Homecoming Dance with him?””

I pretended to think about it. “Well, let’s see. A guy who arranges a sunset dinner by a stream? Who’s smart and handsome? And who’s a pretty decent kisser?” I couldn’t resist that one.

“Don’t forget that I provide you with tacos on a regular basis,” he pointed out.

Melissa Knight

“There is that,” I admitted. *And you respect my stepfather’s rules, you make me laugh, and you believe in me.*

“Deal,” I said, and held out my hand across the table. He shook it solemnly and didn’t let it go, his hand warm and strong.

Maybe not every moment in life can be perfect. And sometimes when those moments do come, we don’t recognize them.

But this moment, this evening –

It was.

And I did.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

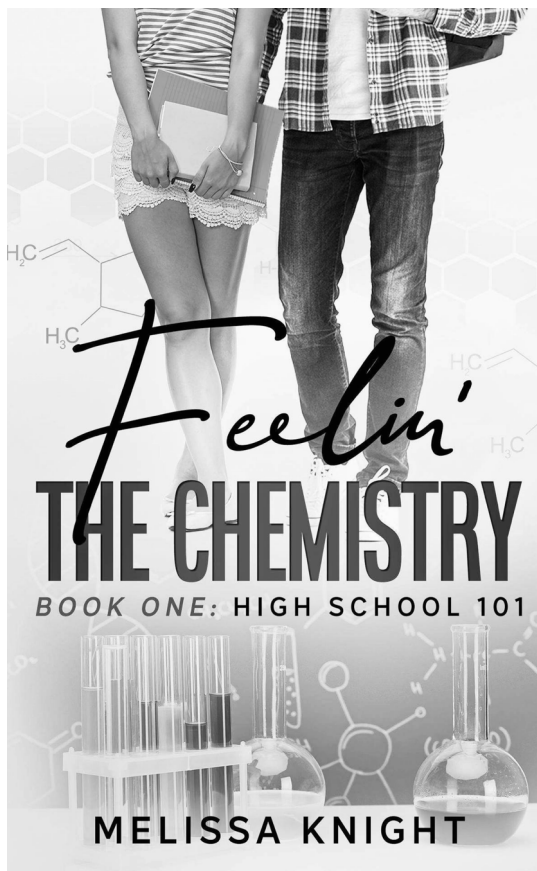
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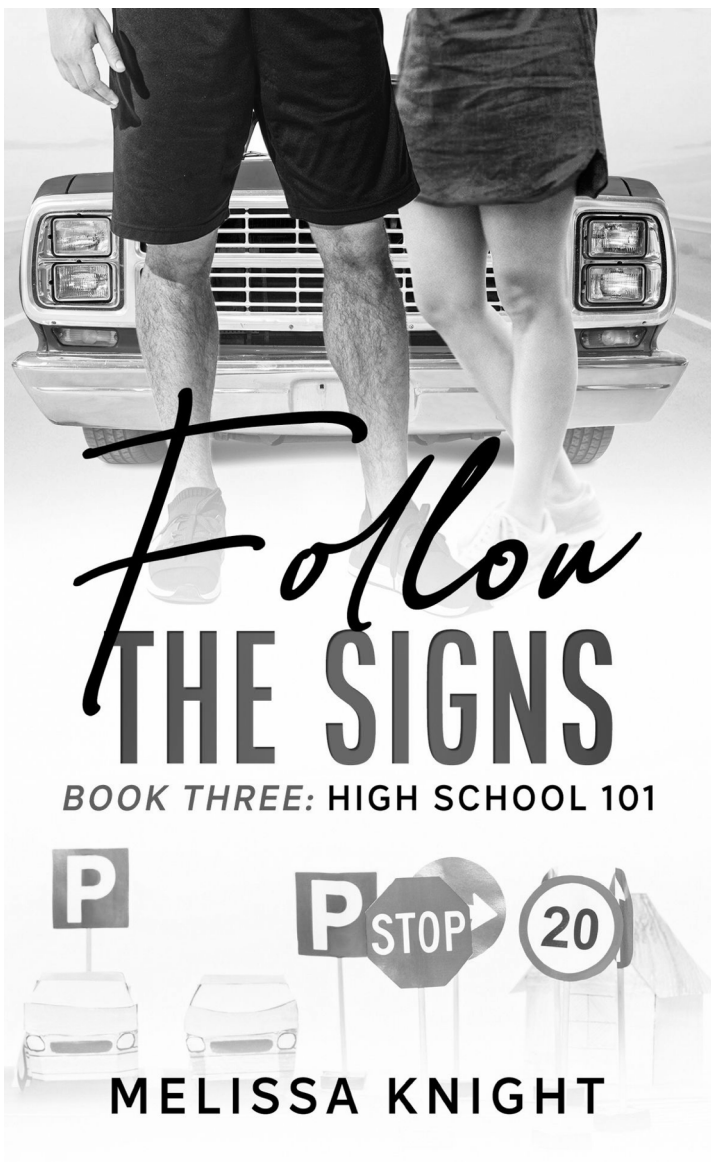


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