

Falltime



Chapter One

I thought I was through with fairy tales, but I found myself backsliding to the happy-ever-after place when my mom got married again. What can I say — it's like brown is the new black or green is the new pink. Second marriages are the new first. There was gauze and twinkly little white lights wrapped around tree trunks and really good cake. (Not just chocolate. There was also a white cake with chocolate icing and custard and something called ganache. Do I know what ganache is? No, not really, except that it's yummy.) I blame the ganache. And the fact that I danced with Sam. He seemed about to kiss me at one point until his little brother Danny started barfing from eating five pieces of cake and from being chased by his other brother Henry. (Expect to see Henry's face on a Most-Wanted TV show one day.) But mostly I backslided — or backslid, whatever — because I let myself. I thought I'd figured some things out: *change was inevitable; ergo, change was okay*. Not exactly quantum physics, but it was a leap for me.

So, these days, I'm feeling cautiously optimistic. I have a prospective boyfriend (Sam: boy next door,

lifetime friend). I am back in my best friend Dell's good graces after a summertime feud (regarding ex-boyfriend, Marshall, and how I saw him making out with my prospective — now official — stepsister, Angela, in a cornfield and felt the need to report). My mom and new stepfather (Cal) have returned from the honeymoon and are still in love. (She had to make a point of letting me know, with overly arched eyebrows, that “the honeymoon went well. Really well, if you know what I mean.” I knew what she meant.) What else? My dad started renovating houses, which is better than sitting around in his sad little apartment reading sad, gigantic Russian novels. Oh, and I grew two inches this summer so that means I'm almost five feet, three inches. Considerable by any standard, except maybe my new stepsister Angela's — who is tall and blond and beautiful, but I've decided not to hold this against her in keeping with my new optimism. That's about it, except that I started school a couple of days ago and have, consequently, found my true calling. That was a bonus, I have to admit.

I was a little nervous because I'm going to a bigger school and starting eleventh grade, which is a big deal due to the need to get good grades in order to get into a good college in order to have a good and productive life. (That little commercial was sponsored by my mother, who has been saying this for the last fifteen years.) I really have nothing against

leading a good and productive life. Besides, even though my attitude has improved greatly toward Angela (whom, until quite recently, I knew only as a psychotic, shoplifting, boyfriend-stealing phony) I am realistic enough to know that since she is beautiful, I am going to have to be the smart one. Well, except that Angela is also smart ... and thin, and ... yeah, I'm definitely going to have to be the optimistic one.

Every once in a while I have a mental movie-montage of my life thus far. It starts with a mom and a dad, a me and a baby sister. Cut to an accident that takes baby sister away. Cut again to the divorce. Dad gets depressed; Mom gets a boyfriend. Mom gets engaged. New guy comes with über-beautiful daughter, Angela. Players struggle to shift their seats, make room for the new. Plot thickens. Freeze. The *me*-character (that's me, Jes) must decide whether to tell Dell about Über-Angela and creepy Marshall. It's a long freeze-frame because it's about telling the truth. *Me* decides to tell. *Me* is confused. *Me* doesn't know what happens next. *Me* decides that if she doesn't want to become extinct, like a dinosaur or dodo bird, *me* will need to evolve. End of montage.

So, I signed up for Psychology 101. I thought it might help. Also, I thought it would be an easy course because my mother is a therapist. I've picked up a bit of stuff over the years — mostly body language: involuntary grimaces, averted gazes, tense toes, that kind of

thing. I figured it would be like taking French when your family is bilingual. But I had no idea, absolutely none, of the depth and breadth of what I would learn in this course. My teacher is very enthusiastic. If I am now a cautious optimist, I think it would be fair to say that Mr. Truelove is a *raging* optimist.

To tell you the truth, it's been a few years since I was really impressed with any of my teachers. There was Ms. Batty, who dressed up as a vampire every single Halloween, but that was in the third grade. And I liked Mr. Kwong for his soft-spoken ways as well as his napping ways during reading time. But, other than that, I've been short on inspiring adult role models. Watching your parents go through a divorce will do that to a person. Anyway, that's the old me. The new one is on the verge, I'm sure, of finding a mentor who will guide me along the path of optimism and hopefulness.

The guy is not much to look at, but that name — how can you ignore that name? Mr. Truelove. It's like Mr. Right, but so much more satisfying. Dell noticed his mismatched socks right away — not a surprising observation when you consider that she is an aspiring writer; but, still, I told her she was being superficial. He has that almost painful look of fervor that comes with new teachers the way fries come with a burger, where you just know they can't wait to rhapsodize about *following your bliss*. And he was wearing

the corduroy blazer with the patches on the elbows that must come free with every teaching degree.

I admit I was skeptical at first, especially when he looked around the class making eye contact. Straight out of my mom's bag of tricks: *how to establish connection*. But then he opened his mouth and began to speak in a husky, sexy, deejay voice: "Should an introductory course in psychology lead you to a better understanding of human behavior and thus to improved insight into yourself and others?" He paused, established more eye contact and smiled. I waited, still skeptical. Anybody can make an opening statement, right? But then he bellowed, "By and large, yes!" and slammed the front desk with his hand, which unfortunately was the desk of Jumpy Kate, who then did what she does—jumped and squealed. He apologized and said, "I just get so excited."

This could have been the kiss of death for Mr. Truelove. In fact, it should have been. Troy and Flynn—notorious milk-money stealers in second grade, infamous guinea-pig terrorizers in fifth grade—leapt on the comment like cats on mice. They started saying stuff about Mr. Truelove "getting so excited." (As my mom would say, *if you know what I mean*.)

Mr. Truelove walked to the back of the room, opened the door and, with a courtly gesture, told

them to go visit the principal, Ms. Blanchard. Flynn sputtered; Troy said that he couldn't send them to the principal's office — not yet. I liked the “not yet”; it was like Troy knew it was inevitable, but still — not yet. Mr. Truelove, unblinking, said, “Yeah, I can.” And off they went, shaking their heads at this unexpected display of zero tolerance from the new guy. When the door closed behind them, Truelove turned to the rest of us. “Being here is optional. Paying attention is not.”

Dell whispered to me, “He doesn't even look the least bit discomfited,” which is the kind of thing she comes up with at times like this, and I laughed out loud, causing TL (as I now thought of him) to turn his piercing green eyes in my direction. Funny how a person becomes more attractive when they're being masterful.

“Something you would like to share with the class, Ms. ... er ... Miner-Cooper?” he asked, glancing quickly at the seating chart.

Too soon to tell who this guy was, but not too soon to see that he was pretty quick when it came to dispatching people to the principal's office. I didn't even know where the principal's office was. I made a quick judgment call. “Well, my friend was saying,” I began, but Dell coughed discreetly. “I mean, I was just saying ... to myself” — I tossed an equally discreet glare at Dell — “that you didn't look in the least discomfited by that, um, little thing ...”

“Exchange,” Dell stage-whispered, while giving

me a dirty look for saying anything. It doesn't matter how judgmental she is being—she can't resist a word. (A word in need, she says, is a word indeed.)

“Exchange,” I said, nodding. “And I would have to agree.” He was looking curious now. “With myself.” Now he looked amused. “So, to sum up ... nicely done.”

Some of the kids laughed, in an appreciative way, I thought. Most seemed uninterested.

“Thank you for the affirmation,” he smiled. “You might want to keep an eye on that whole talking-to-yourself thing.” He twirled his finger near his ear—the universal sign for crazy. But he winked at the same time and it wasn't creepy or smarmy.

“I'll do that.” (I was impressed by the gesture. My mom would never do that. She doesn't use “crazy” or “nuts” or “wacko” to describe her clients. She prefers “work in progress.”)

“You have shown the insight, not to mention vocabulary, that I will expect from the students of this class,” he continued. Then he went on to say that during this year it would be reasonable for us to expect to understand and eliminate some of the inconsistencies, insecurities, conflicts and unacceptable impulses that are part of life. This, he assured us, would assist in making our relations with others smoother and more rewarding and should enable us to better understand the puzzling responses we often observed in our families, friends and even casual acquaintances.

As I wrote all this down, word for word, I thought you really couldn't get better value than that out of a class. Who needed to spell when you could eliminate inconsistencies, insecurities, conflicts and unacceptable impulses? Who needed to add and subtract when we could have smoother and more rewarding relations with others? And how was Earth Science going to help us to better understand the puzzling responses we observed in our families, friends and even casual acquaintances?

I beamed at Dell, convinced that she would be sharing in the light of this epiphanous news, at the same time making a mental note to share the word "epiphanous" with her later and maybe check to see if it was a real word. But she was not beaming. She was scribbling on a tiny scrap of paper that she handed to me while TL gazed deeply somewhere else.

I glanced down at the short message: *So much for keeping a low profile.* On the bottom she'd drawn a version of a smiley face, only it was not smiley; it was actually quite demonic-looking. I'd already forgotten the new-school-entry policy we'd agreed on this morning. I gave her a mea culpa shrug and stuffed the message inside my pencil case. She'd get over it once the import of Mr. Truelove's words hit her. We were about to embark on an amazing journey that would enhance our understanding of self and others. And, by the end of the year, could we expect to understand everything that we, and others, did and said?

In the words of Mr. Truelove, “By and large, yes!”

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Dell and I found a table in the farthest corner of the crowded cafeteria. When I saw Sam enter the room, I stood up and waved for him to come over.

“Again, the concept of low profile seems to be one that you have absolutely no grasp on.” She slurped her chocolate milk.

“He can’t find us if he can’t find us, now can he?” I asked. She didn’t reply. I looked around the table of people who looked more or less as out of place as we did. “Was anyone here discomfited by my waving motion?”

Nobody said a thing. Dell had to smile. Chocolate milk wasn’t exactly coming out of her nose, but it was a genuine smile. “That comment was for your ears only and you know it. I can’t believe you got credit for it. Good vocabulary, my big butt.”

“I thought TL handled the whole thing really well.”

“TL?”

“Sure. Doesn’t he look like he deserves an abbreviation?”

“No. Not hardly. Do you have a thing for him?”

“No.” As far as Dell was concerned, there were two types of males in the world: guys you had a thing for and guys you didn’t. “But I feel strongly about this.”

She thought a moment. “Okay. But LT, okay? It’s less conspicuous.”

“Less discomfiting?”

“You’re wearing out the new word.”

“Fine. LT.”

“Hey, Sam,” she said.

Sam had found his way to us with his lunch tray intact. He had a shirt on that screamed first day of school. It was crumpled in exactly the same way it must have been pre-crumpled by the kind marketing people at American Eagle. No matter. He was looking very cute. One day I would tell our kids about how cute their dad looked on the day our love affair became public. “Hi, Sam. How are you?” I could feel Dell’s hot stare on my face.

Sam returned the smile and put his tray beside mine. He climbed onto the bench beside me. So this was what it felt like to have a boyfriend: somebody automatically sat in the seat next to you without even asking. Maybe I was letting him take me for granted? Maybe this was presumptuous? No, it was too soon for second thoughts. We hadn’t even had our first date yet. Only one dance — interrupted by his barfing brother.

“I am fine,” Sam said. “How are you?”

“Good Lord,” Dell said. “It’s happened. Why is the best friend the last to know?”

“You were out of town until last night,” I said. “And nothing’s happened,” I added, overwhelmed with guilt that I hadn’t at least e-mailed to tell her that Sam and I were an about-to-happen situation, in keeping with our “withhold nothing” friendship policy.

“*She said*, apparently unaware that he was sitting right beside her,” said Sam.

“I’m so not unaware of that,” I said in a very sexy kind of way. For me, that is. This whole boyfriend thing is virgin territory for me, if you know what I mean.

“Good Lord,” Dell said again. “When did this happen?”

“Nothing happened,” I insisted again, trying to balance the whole sexy if-you-know-what-I-mean thing with Sam along with the you’re-my-best-friend-I-tell-you-everything with Dell. “That’s it. I suck at this. I give up.”

Sam smiled. I have seen that smile in so many places in my life: across a playpen, a stroller, a sandbox — in a drama class when he was Aladdin and I was somebody in a veil. I’ve seen that smile encased in a set of plastic double blocks so he couldn’t talk properly, and then in braces when I had to turn away for fear of losing my lunch after looking at the remains of his. I’ve seen that smile my whole life. It just never, ever did to me before what it was doing to me now.

“So we’re breaking up?” Sam said. “Before our first date?”

“I could give you another chance.” I said, clearly getting better at this whole seductive-sexy thing. Must be the two inches I grew during summer. Not to mention my bust line, which had gone from a hint to a definite suggestion.

Gayle Friesen

“I have to go,” Dell said suddenly.

“Don’t,” I said.

“Yeah,” Sam said.

“See you later,” I called to her retreating back.