

Wherever you are

Chapter 1

Susan looked around and shook her head. Everything about Mr. Sink's fourth period trigonometry class screamed, "This is every high school in the world." Students bored cross-eyed by the endless repetition of "sine," "cosine," and "tangent," passed notes, whispered like spies, stared blankly at the white board, or slept and hoped they did not snore.

There were exceptions. Tommy Hayes, the meanest eleventh grader on the planet inspected every student one by one with the bloodthirsty interest of a sociopath searching for his next victim. Tommy's cruelty had reached such legendary proportions by the time he was nine years old that his parents sent him away to military school – only because he was too young to qualify for federal prison. After three months, the Commandant of the Hillgerness Military Academy sent Tommy home with a note: "Never in my thirty-five-year career in the Armed Forces have I witnessed an individual so totally depraved." A total refund was enclosed.

Tiffany Ann Elliot, head cheerleader (whose pet Schnauzer, Smoochie, understood math better) occupied the center seat because – well, because Miss Tiff insisted on being the focus of everything and had since she appeared in the delivery suite of the area's most expensive private hospital with a full head of luxurious hair and a full-developed pout. In a pattern as old as puberty, Tiffany Ann and Susan had been "besties" until the magic age of "womanhood." Then, Ms. Elliot drifted away into the rarified air of a blossoming bust line and the accompanying hormonal male attention.

Suds Truesdale slumped in a chair by the door. Susan had been in every one of this classes since the first grade and despite whatever seating chart or “get to know each other” scheme that sprang forth in exuberance from the mind of an invariably new teacher, Old Suds claimed the seat closest to the exit. He never made an excuse...never claimed to suffer from claustrophobia or a weak bladder. He never commented on how he liked to watch the messengers shuttle notes from the Office or was fascinated by the intricate oil pattern made by janitors as they slapped their oil-drenched antediluvian mops up and down the cracked and crumbled tile checkboard that was the hall. Suds, no one knew his real name – apparently not even the Board of Education because the role always declared “Suds” at the commencement of every academic tour – just liked to be the last one in and the first one out of every class he ever bothered to attend.

Susan’s attention wandered to the window. The sun was shining, and she could hear the birds calling to her. They spoke in chirps and trills, they click-clacked, and whoop-whooped, and she focused on every syllable even though she did not comprehend the ornithological language. She preferred to imagine their conversations – and in her mind, they were always about her – and the accompanying invitations. “Come out to play.” “It’s fun out here.” “Let’s go look for worms.” And her personal favorite, “Why don’t you fly with me.” Yes, there was a message concealed in the titters and trumpets; she only needed to crack the code. Then she could be one of them and soar into the sky. She could escape from the stench of Axe Body Spray, cafeteria food so full of chemicals it would remain in landfills until the next millennium, and questions about, “Have you started your period yet?”

There was a commotion in the corner – books scattered across the floor accompanied by the sniggers of someone who found amusement in knocking copies of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *As I Lay Dying* off of desks. The noise signalled the presence of one particular student: Carson Fielding – pastor’s kid, shy, skinny, saxophonist in the band. Never mind he was the one of the smartest kids in the class and mildly good looking in a sort of “ten years from now we’ll all think he’s hot” sort of way. He spent every second of every day defending himself against the onslaughts of brutish mouth breathers who apparently believed the more they humiliated him, the manlier they might become. Most of the time he disarmed them with humor, but every so often someone had something to prove, and poor Carson was subjected to ridicule to which he never responded, assaults against which he never defended himself, and psychological torture from which he would probably never recovered.

The window offered more entertainment and less carnage. Squirrels cavorted in the trees, chasing one another and chattering away. Susan could not tell if they were angry or just enthusiastic, but she loved to watch them race around the bases of the trees with the tails flowing behind them like gray contrails from a jet engine.

Alarm bells erupted in Susan’s head. Mr. Sink had asked a question, and the class withdrew into its shell like a frightened turtle. Notes paused mid-pass. Tiffany Ann stopped reapplying her lip liner. Tommy (who had meticulously fashioned weapons of individual destruction out of fourteen paper clips and was preparing to commence a barrage) postponed an all-out assault on an unsuspecting and innocent neighbor. Susan turned from the window and feigned attentiveness.

Everyone breathed a little when Rebecca Ricketts, *genius mathematicus*, raised her hand and proffered the correct response. The students all nodded in agreement as if to say, “Yep, that’s what we thought,” but Mr. Sink was far too smart – and too cynical – to believe this bunch of Troglodytes knew enough to get out of the rain, so he went to the next problem while simultaneously calculating how much longer he had to endure this torture before he could afford to retire.

The sun sneered from outside the window, daring some brave student to raise a hand and request the first outdoor class of the semester, a suggestion doomed to fail but one worth making just in case some weary teacher caved and said, “Sure.” Spring, though close, still cowered just out of sight like a crazy cousin held captive in a linen closet.

It was a typical day at Josephine R. Estes High School. A day just like the one before it – and just like the one destined to reoccur tomorrow.

Susan surveyed the scene – the mean kid – the pretty girl – the slacker – the preacher’s son nerd – the brainiac who always rescued the class by knowing all the Trig answers – and realized she’d lived this day of school every single minute of her academic life.

She sat at her desk in the same pair of jeans she wore every day. She looked at her feet, at the tired toes of the high tops she’d once been so proud of owning. They’d been in style for about a minute and a half after she’d spent every bit of her babysitting money on them. Then, at a moment known only to kids in the popular group, someone decided they were no longer “on fleek.” The very next day, Susan was the only student still wearing Chuck Taylors (all of a day old). That was when she recognized the frailty of fashion and the futility of chasing the dream of popularity.

She heard something from the front about “secant,” and tried to steer her fading attention back to the slightly pudgy man at the front. But he was inexorably drowning in the self-induced boredom of someone who had taught the same irrelevance for decades to an ever-shifting sea of faces who were just as disinterested in his life’s work as he was.

The impending doom of high school life dropped into Susan’s reality like the legendary apple that propelled itself onto Sir Isaac Newton’s unsuspecting head. And like the father of modern science, Susan came to a life-changing decision.

I gotta get the hell out of here.