

A Tale of Two Diaries

MAROONED ON PLANET EARTH
BOOK ONE

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Author's Note

Here's three chapters of the novel. I hope it'll inspire you to read the whole book, and find out how Devynn learns her true identity.

When I started to write this story, it was going to be very different from what it turned out to be. It wasn't going to be about bullying, or big issues at home. However, early on, the characters decided otherwise.

Some of what happens to her is based on my own experiences. I know what it's like to be bullied and harassed in school and out. It took years for me to stand up for myself. And once I did, I wished I had done it much sooner.

When I was in school, bullying was considered just a part of growing up. How much happier growing up would have been without that stress. Whatever form it takes, it's something that makes life difficult for those dealing with it.

Some have no one to turn to for help. I didn't. Even my mother said things like, "Well, you must have done something to make them act like that!" And a (favorite) teacher said, "Well, If they weren't picking on you, they'd be picking on someone else. You're saving someone the hassle."

Really? Kids are capable of picking on more than one poor soul at a time. And how is that reasoning helpful?

In this tale, Devynn finds there are people she can turn to. Of course, she's dealing with more than the bullies at school. Some are found in her own family . . .

Also, there are small children in this novel who do not speak like little adults. So, just a heads up: There is "small child dialect" here. I'm not apologizing for that, just letting you know it's here.

Please enjoy!

CHAPTER ONE

No Reason to Laugh

M^{ARCH 3,}

Dear Self,

Have I ever mentioned I hate my life? Well, let me mention it again. I hate my life! Okay, maybe I don't hate it, hate it, but still, I wish I could have my way for some things more than I do. Mostly for like being able to see Rodney whenever I want to. Mom keeps saying no to even letting me see him if we're with a bunch of other people. So we meet where and whenever we can. Like, sometimes I say I'm going to Cyndi's or Keighley's house, and he and I meet in the park downtown.

He's sooo good looking!—I Okay, I know—I've told you that before. But, I can't help it! Tall, with dark hair and dark eyes! He's a senior, and I'm a freshman. Not that I care about the age difference. I'm going to be fifteen in just a few weeks. So, I'll be closer to his age. It's just so cool that an older guy thinks I'm hot and worth his time.

Only, he wants to do things I know my parents would ground me for life if we did them. How do you keep saying NO to somebody you think you're in love with? And he keeps telling me that if I love him, and he loves me, then it's not wrong.

I like kissing and holding hands—but—I'm not sure I want to go as far as he wants to go. So—if I'm not sure then I shouldn't do it. Right? I'm sure that's what Mom must worry about. I keep telling her nothing's going to happen, but she doesn't believe it. Says it's not me she doesn't trust, it's him.

Then there's our principal, Mrs. Double Standards Robertson, who always says, "Boys will be boys." like it's a fine and acceptable excuse for them to do what they want to do—right or wrong. But the girl they're doing it with . . . well, she's a slut, a hussy, a whore . . . (insert other insults here), and the one that always gets the blame.

Oh, hang on . . . now what? Sounds like another argument. What's up with them lately?

Dad's yelling at Mom again. Mom rarely yells, no matter how mad she gets. She's tired of him always going off with Uncle Danny and never coming home till whenever, and who can blame her? He could spend some time here with us, fixing things. My room could use some paint and a new carpet. Other parts of the house need more than that. God knows my lazy brothers aren't going to offer any sort of help! Okay, Brady's only seven and Jon Jerard's two. But Gifford, Taggart and Wyllis are old enough to help Dad fix things and clean up after themselves!!

But all they do is eat, sleep and play video games. While they're saving virtual worlds, they're destroying ours, trashing it like a string of tornadoes! I pick up my messes—most of the time. Not picking up theirs! Heh, Jonny does better than they do! O Self, if only I could've been an only child! Alas, I am not! What would I do, my dear Self, if I didn't have you to whine to? You, my ears for my thoughts?

Okay, I can't concentrate with Dad yapping at Mom like this. Wonder if she'll find anything funny about this one. I don't know how she can see a funny side to their fights, but she does. It cools everything on the spot. He still leaves but at least it's a peaceful parting.

I'll report back later. Nothing else for me to do anyway since I'm Marooned on Planet EARTH for the rest of my life!!!!



Slipping out of my room, I dropped down upon the top step. As long as their attention was focused on each other, I could spectate between the rails. Thomasyna, my fluffy tortoiseshell cat, who'd been, as ever, my constant companion all morning, hopped onto my lap, made herself comfy there. Absently, I began petting her.

Below me was the big hallway. And there in the center of it, standing upon the large target shaped pattern on the floor, tiled in shades of blue, black, gray and white, my parents faced off.

"Why are you being so belligerent, J. E.? All I said was—"

"I know what you said! And I'm saying I'm going to Danny's. Nothing more to say!"

"I think there is. You have a family *here*! You promised the kids you'd take them ice skating this afternoon and—"

"You take them. I told him I'd help him today, Xee, so—"

"So, your promises to your brother are more important than those to your kids?" More a statement than a question.

"They're kids. They'll get over it!"

“Not if you keep breaking your promises! And you haven’t kept any lately!” She left that discussion for another. “So—what time can I expect you home? Or are you spending the night there . . . again?”

Answered Dad noncommittally, “Expect me when you see me! Patricia’s asked for my help with the—”

“Oh, yes! What *Patricia* wants, *Patricia* gets! So you stayed all night, the last two nights to please *her* and Danny while there’re things right *here* that need to be done!”

“Well, they are my family, X’Leyna!”

“So are *we*! *I’m* your *wife*! *These* are your kids! That makes *us* family, J. E.! ! The one that *should* come first!”

“So, I’m supposed to quit being a part of my family, Xee? Stop visiting my parents? My brother and sisters?”

Mom make a sound of annoyance. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it! You make that argument, yet you make a big stink over my spending time with *my* family! If I want to spend a night with X’Lohna, you whine! But if I come home at your designated time—you’re gone!”

Mom had a valid point. Well, she had many valid points. He *had* promised to take us all ice skating over at Nystrom’s Pond. I’d made plans with my friends to meet them there. Usually there was a bonfire on the shore, and we’d roast hot dogs and marshmallows. Yup, even in the cold. Made it special. Probably Mom would take us. But we were all excited to think Dad would be spending the day with us for a change.

She was also right about Dad not liking her older sister, Aunt X’Lohna, or her younger brother, Uncle Xavion, all that much. They try to be nice to him if he stays home when they come over. Try including him in discussions and things. But it usually flops. He acts annoyed and bored the whole time. And if we decide to go to Aunt X’Lohna’s, he whines like it’s a crime. We always have to be back when he says. If he does go with us, he rushes us out the door right after supper.

Once, when Mom objected to Dad breaking a promise to us, his youngest sister, Aunt Coralei told her flat out, “John Edmond was *my* brother way before he became *your* husband, X’Leyna. So *I* have first claim on him! Goes for all of us!” And that was the last time we visited her. Or any of the others. Aunt X’Lohna and Uncle Xavion are our favorites, anyway.

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing, Xee!”

“Am I? So, will *our* place get some of your valuable attention after this? I opened that account at McCloud’s so we could start fixing *this* place up. Noticed you’ve used it recently. Must have been for someone else’s projects. Danny’s as well? Or Coralei’s? Junia? Your Mommy’s?”

Ignoring her dig, Dad threw a hand up in an impatient gesture. “Fix *this* place? You’re cute, you know it? Look at this place! What’s the point in fixing it? You sit at that computer of yours, once you’re done playing lunch lady, wasting time with your little decorating games! Like that’s actually going to give you experience! Meanwhile, the kids trash the place!” A pause, then disgustedly, “Cat hair everywhere! Face it, Xee, even if we did manage to make the place better, they’d wreck it within the week—if not the day! Where’s the point?”

Fixing up our house was only one of Mom’s dreams. Becoming a professional interior designer was her very biggest one. If Dad bothered to pay attention, he’d recognize those programs weren’t games. That, in fact, she was studying online for her certification in interior design.

I know because I happened to walk in on her while she was working out an assignment. By the look on her face when she turned to see who’d come in, I knew she wasn’t ready for anyone to know what she was doing with her time on her computer. I’d flashed her a thumbs up and left her alone, impressed that she’d decided to keep at it despite Dad’s lack of support.

Once Mom tried bringing up the idea of them starting a business together—with him doing renovations and construction, and her doing the interiors. Rudely, he told her he hadn’t any intention of ever going into any sort of business with her. He hadn’t the time to teach her, always supposing she had the brains to learn. If she couldn’t get a few kids to listen to her, what made her think she could run a *real* business? In any case, he was happy at Shelby’s, and he’d be foreman there until he retired with his pension or dropped dead by his machine.

She told Aunt X’Lohna about what he’d said. She hadn’t cried exactly, but pretty close to it. I felt bad for her. Aunt X’Lohna’d hugged Mom as if she were a little kid, her own expression sad and regretful.

I always dream that’s how it would be if I had a sister. We’d be best friends like Mom and Aunt X’Lohna were—a united front against the machinations of our brothers. Gramma Jess used that word *machinations* whenever she talked about the Devil’s schemes. But it worked for describing those of devilish brothers just as much!

Annoyance verging upon anger now, Mom flung back, “So, you saying I should quit my job at the school cafeteria? *You’re* the one who told me to find a *real* job. So I did! One I like as much as you like *yours*, by the way! In case you’ve forgotten, these kids are as much *your* responsibility as they are mine!”

“Your point?”

“Why do you get to ignore that? And why is it that *only* you are entitled to *your* hopes and dreams? Which I’ve never shot down, J. E. Yet, on the

rare occasion I mention mine, you're sighing and groaning about them as if I'm expecting you to make them come true that very second! Or, more often than not, making me feel too *stupid* to even try!"

"Well, it's going to take a lot to do what you're dreaming—"

"Oh, and driving a Porsche *isn't* going to take money? Buying land for a golf course *isn't* going to take money? Running it will be *free*, will it? Or have you decided you want *that* and land for storage units?" A look crossed her face, and she said accusingly, "Oh, wait! Is that why I've suddenly found all the bills dropping onto my lap? You've started the ball rolling on *your* dreams?"

Dad couldn't seem to look her in the face. He cast an irritated look left, then his gaze traveled up the stairs. Catching sight of me sitting there, he made an impatient gesture, saying angrily, "Look, I've had enough of this! I'm going now!" And turning, he strode out the front door, grumbling to himself as he went.

Mom watched him go, sighing resignedly. As she went off into her workroom to the right of the stairs, she cast me up a brief look, and I glimpsed the mixture of emotions in her face. Quite a bit more regret and sadness mixed in with the hurt and anger then I'd seen in it of late.

Usually, I didn't even come out of my room when they argued. Kept the door closed. Played some tunes to drown out the drama. Now, while I'd intended going back to my room and getting back to the book I was supposed to be doing a report on, my legs took me down into my mother's domain.

In it, mismatched bookcases housed volumes on interior design, decorating, carpentry, room plans, and such. Her desktop computer tower took up space on the floor beside her rather small glass and metal computer desk. A TV/PC monitor sat on top of it, and an all-in-one-printer perched on the too small glass shelf to its left.

Four different types of sewing machines sat on a long wooden table by the windows. There were a couple chairs for people to sit on, one beside the desk and the other by the bookcases. A couple of totes of fabric were stacked along the wall down from the door a little bit. Smaller totes contained samples of wallpaper and paint chips.

This room needed a redesign itself or at least some serious reorganization. Maybe one day she would. And we'd see what she'd learned from her online studies in design and decorating. I hoped it'd be so impressive Dad's eyes would pop out of his head in amazement!

Mom's two cats, Elijah and Ezrayia, gorgeous Himalayans, sprawled upon the top of the tallest bookcases, taking a nap as if nothing had happened. Thomasyna, who'd followed me in, promptly deserted me to hop upon Mom's lap.

Mom sat staring at the computer screen, an elbow on the arm of her chair, kind of biting her finger. Usually that meant she was in deep concentration on whatever project she was focused on presently. If not an assignment, then her hopes for the bathroom or the kitchen . . . a new patio out back. She let Thomasyna make herself at home, absently petting her. By the look in her face, I had no difficulty guessing that it wasn't any of her projects messing with her mind right then.

She didn't tell me to leave or even show she knew I existed, so I quietly sat in the chair next to her desk and tried to think of something to say. Something that would make her forget her argument with Dad. Erase that look from her face. Nothing came to mind right off. Be stupid to bring up her issues with Rodney right then. He was on her black list around the same place Dad was at the moment. Very bottom.

Before I could find some safer topic to engage her in, Dad came back with Brady. He leaned in and rapped on the doorjamb to get her attention.

"Xee, I'm taking Brady with me."

Mom turned her head to look at him. "If I'm taking the kids skating, John, I'd like to have him with—"

"Take the others, Xee! Brady's going with *me* today!" He said it with enough belligerence to warn her not to argue the matter.

She didn't. Just kept looking at him. No forgiveness lived in her eyes for him. Only hurt, anger, and disappointment, some accusation.

Pushing away from the doorjamb, Dad started to walk away.

"Wait!" Mom called, and he turned back to her. "We need cat food, milk, and bread. And I promised to rent the kids a movie tonight. Get that, would you? Brady knows which one. And some snacks! We're out of soda, too."

Dad made a sign of acknowledgement. "Anything else?"

"How long *are* you going to be today?" She drummed the fingers of her left hand on the desktop. Rapid and nervous like, yet, a pretty cool rhythm just the same.

Dad shrugged. "I don't know for sure. Expect us when you see us! I'll run into Northfield Super for this stuff here. They've got a sale going for soda and beer."

Couldn't mistake the *Oh, yes . . . don't forget the beer* look in Mom's eyes. She said, "There's school tomorrow, remember. Don't be all night!"

"I know, don't worry about it!"

"Mmm. You're not the one who has to face Mr. Frye whenever Brady falls asleep in class! Like about every day last week! You sent him home

with Merek, but it would've been nice had *you* brought him home *yourself earlier*. You know . . . *suppertime!*"

"Xee, he'll be in bed and sleeping by eight. So back off!"

For a second, I thought it was going to start all over again. Over more issues than just Brady's bedtime!

Geez, have I mentioned—I *hate* it when they fight?

Not that it's always been this way. A few heated discussions—but nothing major. Seemed like it turned ugly all of a sudden a few weeks ago. Yeah, things get pretty intense until Mom finally sees some sort of humor in the situation! If only she would laugh now. But, today, she hadn't even cracked a smile.

The yelling and the arguing were over, but there was no real peace in the house. You could feel the tension like a thick blanket on a sweltering summer night. Dad's eyes still wouldn't meet Mom's for more than an instant while hers seemed to impale him to the wall. Nope, this argument wasn't settled yet!

Brady kept bouncing all around Dad, chanting urgently, "Come on, Dad! Let's go, Dad! Let's go! Come on, Dad!"

When Mom didn't say anything more, Dad pushed Brady ahead of him, saying, "All right, let's go, Bud!"

"Oh, wait!" Brady, in his usual exuberant fashion, twisted away from Dad and ran back in to throw himself into Mom's arms, squishing poor Thomasyna. "Bye, Mom!" Kissed her and hugged her like he wasn't ever going to see her again. He always did that. He's the mushiest kid I've ever seen! He'll be fifteen one day and still have to run back to get hugs and kisses from her, I bet!

She hugged him back and kissed his whole face. He giggled and squirmed away, calling, "I love y', Mom! See y' later!" as he ran back to Dad. "Bye, Dev! See y' later, too!" Then he ran back to me and gave me his tokens of affection too. "Love y'!"

"Love you, too!" *Sometimes!*

Dad didn't come to kiss Mom. Nor did she call him back for one. Just called, "I love you, too, Brady!" and let them go out the door.

Three seconds after the front door closed, Mom rose up quick and started to go out. At the same time, we heard another hot discussion start up out by the driveway. My half-brothers, Gifford and Taggart, Dad's kids by his first wife, waylaid him in the driveway, all mad about something.

Mom exchanged a look with me, and we both moved to stand at the windows together. We couldn't hear many of the exact words, but the boys' expressions, their gestures and tones certainly came off as extremely accusing! Dad's back was to us, so we couldn't see his face

or understand a thing he said. We tried to open the windows, but both stuck fast. Dad kept promising he'd do something about them so she could have some fresh air in here, but so far they remained stuck.

Shoving past the boys, Dad opened the car door for Brady to climb across the driver's seat and get in. He got in after him, and in a few seconds, he backed out and drove off. Could hear him gun the motor as he raced downhill. Heard the screech of brakes when he got to the stop sign three houses down.

"Wow! What was *that* all about?" I wondered aloud.

Didn't have long to wait to find out. The boys, who could see him driving like an Indy race car driver from where they stood, gazing down and across those three lawns, turned then, and tore across our lawn. Hopping over the three steps to the porch, they burst through the front door.

Taggart hollered, "*Irvey! Irvey!* Dad's *leaving!* You have to go after him, Irvey! Don't let him get away with it!"

Gifford pushed by him, bolted into the office, and shook Mom's shoulder urgently. "Momma! No kidding! He's running out on us just like he ran out the first time!" Out of breath and super excited, they stood before her, expecting her to take their word and hop to it instantly.

Mom sucked in a breath, letting it out slowly. She looked as if she actually believed them. But she didn't move right away. Just stared at them. Kind of like she didn't really know *what* she should do. Or *could* do. Or maybe even *wanted* to do.

Tag joined Giff in trying to drag her out of her indecision, pulling at her arms. "Irvey, come *on!* It's not a joke! He's *not* coming back! *And he's taking Brady with him!*" Tag's sixteen but he looks twelve. Small, but don't cross him! "Come on . . . do you *want* that?"

"Momma—" Gifford called her Momma most of the time because he liked her better than his own mother. Other times he called her *Irvey* as Taggart did because that's what she actually preferred to be called. It was a form of her middle name which was Irvette.

"Momma, He stole money from your cedar box in your dresser. Heard him mutter something about replacing it—if his lawyer insisted. It got us suspicious, so we went snooping while he picked that fight with you." He jiggled the spare keys to Dad's car. "All his stuff is in the trunk of his car! More stuff in the backseat. *Go after him!* Make him tell you the truth! And if I were you, I'd check your bank account!"

"And make sure Brady comes back with you!"

A glint in her violet eyes banished the hurt there. "Ah, I knew I should've—" Not finishing her sentence about what she should've, she moved to go out.

In that instant, something in me snapped. This wasn't true! How could they *say* those things!

Fathers—or at least *mine*—wouldn't do those things. If he said he was going to Uncle Danny's to do whatever, then *that's* what he was doing! He promised to have Brady in bed by eight, so that meant he was coming back! Just because they'd had the worst fight of their history together—the worst I knew of, anyway—didn't mean they were breaking up. Further, just because he'd left *their* mother, didn't mean he'd be leaving *mine*.

You couldn't compare Mom to Bernice May. Bernice May was taller, older, weighed three hundred pounds, wasn't that pretty, and dressed mostly in drab, sacky looking house dresses. She wore her hair in a tightly pulled back ponytail, smoked like a line of factory chimneys—and she drank as much as Dad did. More, maybe.

Everyone in Northfield knew Bernice May Scoville loved herself more than anyone. She'd driven Dad out of her house and her life with her bad temper, her nagging, her squandering of his money, and her constant demand to be first in everything with everybody! That was the talk around town, and probably at Gramma Jess' dinner table.

Mom's about five-seven or so, neither thin nor fat. She was pretty. Some would say beautiful. Her hair was of a gorgeous silver blonde, like mine. But hers was fuller and longer. Way longer. I didn't care to have my hair dragging on the floor. Okay, it wasn't anymore. She'd finally gotten it cut a week ago to just above her waist. Sold it to get money for the new laptop she wanted.

Mine's almost to the middle of my back. I wish I was taller like her. But—I'm not.

Mom didn't smoke and only drank a wine cooler once or twice a year—which lasted her a week when she did have one. *Literally!* She never nagged anyone much and tried to be careful with her money. Walked that fine line between getting some of the things she needed and wanted, and making sure we kids had all we needed and most of what we wanted. Until today, she'd tried to make sure Dad was happy too.

So—*why* would he want to leave? Who could he find that would be better than her?

Besides that, because of her ready acceptance of Giff and Tag, they lived with us full time. Bernice May got tired of them running away to our place every day after school and during school vacations that she finally gave them their wish. I remember that because I was about five when it happened. I might not've understood exactly what was going on, but I'd been pretty excited about them staying with us.

I was excited now too—but not in a good way.

Ducking quickly past Mom, I halted before them all, glaring, challenging them to prove it beyond all shadows of doubt. “He never left before just because of a stupid argument! He *is* coming back! That’s *it*!”

“We’re talking *now*, Devynn! *Today*!” Giff answered impatiently. Reaching out, he hauled me out of Mom’s path. “He left us the same way! Well, he didn’t take anything with him *then*. She told us he just got in the car and never came back. Didn’t even say he was going anywhere. ‘Course, Mom’s a b—well, I won’t say it. But she is! I don’t know what his problem is now! I thought everything was great here! Thought everything was like—well, like it’s supposed to be.”

Giff’s seventeen, but just then he seemed like a kid who needed a hug himself. Not that he’d get it from me. Not then!

“You wouldn’t make us leave, would you, Irvey?” Tag asked Mom anxiously. “You won’t ship us back to our mother, will you?”

“No,” Mom said, squeezing between us and heading for the stairs. We all followed her up to her bedroom.

The duffle bags Mom used to pack their stuff in on the rare occasions we went camping were gone. All of his clothes—except anything Mom had gotten him. Those things were still there or in his dresser drawers.

She went up the hallway to Brady’s room. We trooped in with her, forgetting that Jon Jerard still napped in there. Guess he was really tired for he didn’t stir the whole time we checked things out. Most of Brady’s clothes were missing along with some of his toys. But his favorite teddy bear sat on his pillows. I could swear he looked hopeful of my little brother’s return later on.

“See that?” Giff pointed at the mostly empty closet. “If he was bringing him back, why would he take all his stuff?”

“Mr. Bear is still here! He’s bringing Brady back!”

“So, why are his clothes gone?” Tag tapped Mom’s arm. “Don’t forget to check your cedar box, Irvey. If all the money is gone—”

Mom shot a look over at Jon Jerard to be sure he still slept, then she eased past us to go back to her room.

“That would just prove he’s a thief!” I countered crossly, following the party out the door. “Or he needed some extra cash.”

“He doesn’t need hers! He started that fight on purpose, Devynn! And if you were down there at the time, you’d know it!”

“Okay, all right! But he’s never gone and taken her money—”

“Yes,” said Mom in rather a calm tone which cut off my hot retort. “Actually, he has.”

Okay . . . she would know that. No reason for her to lie about it. But in my determination to believe that nothing had changed in my world

since I got up that morning, I wouldn't let it go. "Okay. Okay, it still doesn't prove he's gone for good!"

We streamed in behind her, our gazes seeking out her dresser top. There sat the cedar box, the hinged clasp pried off and the top open. How did we miss that before? Reaching out a hand to it, she tipped it slightly to look inside.

Empty. Not even a wood chip or a lint ball.

Gifford growled. "I knew it! He robbed you and left us, Momma!"

"How come you didn't stick it in your bank account? That was kinda stu—" My accusation suddenly turned into amazed awe. "*Ohhh! Whoa!*"

For she'd taken a small pen knife from her pocket and slid the blade in at an edge. With a deft movement, the bottom of the box popped out to reveal a false bottom. Very cool!

And, there, safely hidden away was a wad of cash, some letters tied with red ribbons and an old diary.

"Oh, wow! Nice play, Momma! So, what he got wasn't what he was hoping to get?"

"No, probably not. But now you all know about this, I hope I can trust you to mind your business!"

We will! Tag promised, "We always have! How much did he get?"

"Enough," she said noncommittally. Then, suddenly, she let out a deep sigh and buried her face in her hands. Just stood there without crying or anything.

My anger surged up like a red tidal wave. Drowned my brain. Then, it turned into a thick rope that tightened around my chest. I couldn't think straight, and I couldn't breathe. While Giff had said Dad had started the fight earlier, my mind carried off just one thought.

I wanted *two* parents. *Together! Forever!*

It didn't matter who started the fight. If Mom hadn't let it go on for so long—if she had just healed it with her laughter like she had all those times before, it would've been all okay. She had such an infectious laugh you couldn't stay mad at her. Now, because she'd held it back, held back the peace and forgiveness that went with it, she'd driven him off the same way Bernice May had done.

"So, is this it? You're taking *their* word for it?" I pushed her a little. "Don't you think you should go find him? Tell him you're sorry for what you said to him!"

Giff whacked me upside the head. "Stop it! *He* was the one saying rotten things. Not her!"

"So, what? Mom, you *always* say sorry first! What's different today? And if he *is* leaving—well, is that what you *want*?" I shouldn't have

said it—not in that tone. Well, okay, I shouldn't have said it at all! But definitely, not with such a heartless, snotty attitude.

Just then, though, all I wanted to do was make her go find him and bring him home. I truly did not want to live in a split home. I wanted to be one of the lucky kids with two parents who stayed together till death did them part—after I died at about 155 years old!

She just gave me a look, the same mixture of emotions in it that I'd witnessed earlier, and then she strode out of the room. "Stay with the baby! I'll be back!" she flung at us over her shoulder.

"Oh, no! We're coming, too!" Tag followed her out, practically in her pocket. "We're gonna back you up, Irvey! That way, he can't say you're lying about anything later. Or that you misunderstood, or made it up, or heard it wrong, or however he might say it!"

She didn't argue. Just ran down the stairs. The boys clomped down them after her. I hesitated a second. If they were going to back Mom, then I needed to go. As no one else was giving him the benefit of the doubt, I, his only daughter, *would*.

Snatching my jacket off my desk chair in my room, I shot back up the hallway to the little boys' room. Grabbing Jon Jerard out of his crib, I bundled him up. Chased like a maniac after Mom, fearful she'd leave me behind if I didn't hurry.

And she would have. Especially if I hadn't had Jon Jerard in my arms. He was groggy and confused. But when he saw Mom at the wheel of her van, he came around enough to cry out for her. No one can resist that sweet angelic face with those big purply blue eyes, and headful of curls so thick and golden. His tears trembling on long eyelashes, ready to fall any instant.

She stopped backing the van and let us get in.

Barely.

CHAPTER TWO

Showdown at the Gas Pumps

L UCKY FOR MOM, NONE of the Northfield cops were patrolling the streets she chose to navigate today. She made the trip to Northfield Super in record time. Was usually at least a twelve-minute drive.

We swarmed the store. What I would say to Dad if I saw him first? My territory was the pet food aisle. Nothing. Checked other aisles as I hurried over to the bakery section where we had agreed to meet. No Dad.

“He isn’t here!” Taggart reported to Mom who for once wasn’t looking longingly at the pastries. “We went everywhere—even the men’s room.”

“Maybe he decided not to come here first!” I said icily, “Or maybe, he went home!”

Giff whacked me beside the head again. “Yeah? He hasn’t been gone long enough to do anything and then *be* home! Don’t be stupid, Devynn! He probably went to Uncle Dan’s like he said. We should go there.”

At that, Mom turned about and headed back out of the store, ignoring Jon Jerard’s fussing for a Teddy bear sugar cookie with red sugar sprinkles. Giff grabbed him from me, and we hustled to keep up with her.

Leaving the parking lot, she headed for the quickest way out of town. It dawned on me that Gramma Jess could very well be at Uncle Danny’s with everyone else, besides. They were that close knit. Or, since it was Sunday, they all could be at Gramma’s for Sunday dinner. Either place, this wasn’t going to be pretty.

Mom and Gramma Jess didn’t get along. Gramma’s opinion of Mom wasn’t secret. She seemed to consider her white-gold hair a flag of stupidity, immaturity, and ignorance. Incompetence, too, for she shared Dad’s doubts of Mom ever putting together a business that would fly. Maybe when pigs did.

The only good thing I’d ever heard Gramma Jess say about my mother was that she could make plants grow in glaciers and sand dunes. That was it. She knew her way around a garden.

Pretty unfair, for Mom had other talents and good points besides getting plants to bloom! Looked like this could be the day Mom finally told

Gramma Jess—and whoever else was there—everything she'd wanted say all this time.

We were buzzing along at a good clip. Probably would make it to Uncle Danny's in way less than the half hour it usually took. The Cumberland Farms store came up on our right. Mom jammed on the brakes and stopped dead in traffic—making the guy behind us have to squeal his brakes so he wouldn't ram into us. He blasted his horn, long and loud.

"Holy Moly, Momma—" Glad I had my seat belt on!

"Geez, Mom! We've got a baby here, you know!" Gifford pushed himself back in his seat for he hadn't belted in.

"*Irvey*, there he is! *Get him!*"

Which was why she'd stopped like that. She'd seen Dad even before Tag had. Whipping into the store yard, she pulled up to the pump right behind Dad. Tossing a bill at Tag, she said, "Here, go pay for the gas. The rest of you stay in the van, and don't a one of you interfere!"

With that warning, she got out as casual as you please and unscrewed the gas cap. She glanced at Dad. "Forgot to tell you—we need eggs."

Giff, sitting in the front passenger seat, unbuckled and climbed into the driver's seat so he could better see the action. Me, I was fine where I was since I sat at the window right by Mom.

Boy, had she taken Dad horribly off guard! Pretty plain that, never in a million years, had he expected to see her so soon! He didn't even give a snide remark about her jamming on the brakes in traffic like she had.

He managed to recover his composure and in a tone almost as casual as hers, said, "All right. I'll pick 'em up."

"Will you?" she asked with unmistakable disbelief as she shot a significant glance at his rear window. "Looks like you've packed for a road trip!"

Dad looked incredibly guilty and just about as annoyed. Took him a few seconds to be able to answer her in a reasonable tone. "Look, Xee—all right, *Irvey* . . .!" For Mom's look had darkened and her lips parted to hotly protest his constant disregard for which name she wanted to be called by.

Taggart came out of the store and signed to Mom she could start pumping her gas. She pulled back the trigger, all the while watching Dad's face, waiting for him to start explaining.

Took him so long to respond that I wanted to get out and go take him by his shirt front and shake his answer out of him. Make him say he'd be home. I unbuckled my seatbelt and was ready to hop out when he finally answered her.

"I think you and I both know we need time apart. It's been . . . hectic the past few months. You working at the school—then sitting in front of that computer for hours afterwards. The baby—the kids bickering . . . disregarding every rule of the house. Like I said before, the place looks like a cyclone hit it, and no one wants to clean up the damage! What am I working for? Huh? For what?"

"For us!" Taggart answered before Mom had the chance. "Oh—wait! We're not worth it! Not *then* with Mom, not *now* either!!"

Mom, realizing he was right behind her, shot him a look over her shoulder. "Tag—!"

"I stuck up for you, Dad!" I interrupted her as I slid open my door and came to stand with Tag. "Told 'em all you wouldn't just leave like that! You've said adults don't run away from problems! You said—"

"What happened last year, Devynn, when your math teacher gave you so much trouble you couldn't deal with it?"

"What's that got to do with this?"

"Your mother got you transferred to another class, didn't she?"

I stared at him like he'd turned into a two-headed toad. "Oh, you considered me an *adult* last year? Besides," I added a tad more belligerently, "*I wasn't married* to him!"

"Yeah, okay, fine! *I'm* transferring just the same. I have my reasons just as you did!"

"*Transferring?*" Mom challenged him.

He gave her a look. "Guess I've had my fill of raising teenagers, *Irvey*." Putting bitter emphasis on her preferred name.

When she flushed a deep angry crimson, we caught on that he hadn't meant just us older ones. Her chin went up, and she returned, "You took that job willingly, J. E.! You were no saint in doing it, I might add!"

"Take care your little girl doesn't end up like you!"

"You're just blowing wind, Dad! Trying to make everyone think you're the wronged one! You didn't have the guts to say you were leaving!" Giff joined us, tossing in his nickel. "Just like with us! What've you told Brady? Bet he thinks he's coming home tonight! Is he?"

I didn't care what Brady thought just then. I wanted to know what Dad meant about me ending up like Mom. "What's he talking about, Mom? What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's an idiot, Dev!" Giff told me curtly. "Don't listen to him! He's got no real reason to leave, so he's making stuff up."

The counter on the pump reached Mom's limit and turned off. Mom pulled the nozzle out and hung it back on the pump with a decided click. Seeing Tag replacing the cap for her, she faced Dad again.

Disregarding his last statement, she flung back, "It's always about *you*, isn't it, J. E.? It was *your* decision to take the overtime, although I'm told it's not mandatory. You said we needed the extra. My job wasn't helping enough, you said. And, yet, you've dipped into my cash more than once, haven't you? Without asking! I don't know what it all went for . . . or where it's going now . . . but you took it."

She nailed him with that cold look again but didn't demand he give back what he'd stolen from her. Instead, she ordered us all back into the van, ripped open her door and got in. Then got right back out again. "Just a second. You aren't taking *my* son without telling me where you're going!"

"To Danny's," he said, his voice even. "I told you that. We'll talk—when I think you can handle it!"

"When *I* can—!" Mom stopped, sucking in a breath and reigning in her temper. While she didn't disguise her hurt and anger, she didn't threaten him or demand he tell her anything more. She shot a swift glance at all of us taking our time climbing back into the van, then looked back at Dad. At Brady, now hanging half in and half out of his window, calling hellos to us and hurry ups to Dad.

"I love you, Momma!" he called, blowing her kisses. "I love you the size of the Universe!"

Dad cast Mom a look like he expected her to start a full-fledged custody battle right here at the gas pumps of Cumberland Farms. Don't you know—suddenly, half the town pulled into the parking lot about then. Cars formed lines on both sides of the pumps. Others parked so their occupants could run inside for stuff.

My guts twisted in anxiety. What if some of my friends happened to come along right this second and notice what was happening? Or Dad's work buddies? Or, geez, any of our Scoville relatives! I decided it'd be okay if Aunt X'Lohna or Uncle Xavion did. Be backup for Mom.

Neither of them seemed to notice. I figured we'd be here another twenty minutes while this horror show played out. I got back in the van, slid down in my seat, hoping no one had seen or recognized me. Jon Jerard squirmed in his car seat, wanting to get out with Mom. Kept hitting the top of my head, crying, "Mom-Mom-Mom-Mom! Me out, now!"

"Stop it, Jon! You don't want to go out there now! There's going to be a war any second! You're safer where you are!"

He stopped whacking my head, put his fingers in his mouth, and leaned forward to stare out the window at Mom and Dad. Each standing by their vehicles facing off like Wild West cowboys on some dirt street, Dodge City. And for what? A seven year-old wiener whiner!

Okay, all right; Brady can be a fun kid most of the time. He's a natural actor and comedian. Gotten us rolling on the floor plenty of times! He can draw, he can write cute stories. He's a whiz in school for his age. And like I said, he loves to cuddle with Mom—and me too, or stop in the middle of his play just to run and tell Mom he loves her. She'd definitely miss that. Miss it a lot.

Still, he bawled, stamped his feet, and kicked and/or threw things when he couldn't have his way. Or sat sounding like a car that wouldn't start. Or, no, more like a fog horn! *Mo-oom! Mo-oom!* Could keep it up for hours. Everyone wanted to smother him after five seconds!

And he stole stuff. Stole from everyone, but from Mom in particular. Seemed to feel that whatever belonged to her, belonged to him as well. She usually let him live. I wanted to murder him. I never really would, of course. But I at least made him *pay* for what he took. Or broke. Giff, Tag, and Wyllis usually made him their slave for a day or two.

But Mom—all he had to do was smile that infamously sweet smile of his and look meltingly at her with those big deep blues and pretend to be sorry. Little weasel turd.

So, wait! This could be a *good* thing if he went with Dad. They had *that* trait in common after all.

My chocolates, my pens, my school paper, and colored pencils would be relatively safe now if he left with Dad. And I know he was the one who stole my new necklace—whatever he says—because I saw it hanging around Tammi Carver's neck the last time I went there to drag him and Wyllis home. Tammi has a deep crush on Brady. She's the same age he is. He'd do anything to win her smile!

Wyllis, who's a year younger than me, always seems to manage to be someplace else when Mom and Dad have an issue with one another. And, today, he was again over at the Carver's, spending the day with his best bud, Davey—blissfully safe from the humiliation of watching his parents officially breaking up in public, right here at the Cumberland Farms gas pumps.

I sat upright then. There definitely was a story in this . . . I felt it. And characters made sudden appearances in my head, wanting roles in this not yet fully formed tale. It'd be a dark one, full of tragic events and broken dreams. Maybe it'd have a happy ending—maybe not. Probably I'd just maroon them all on Planet EARTH, and there you go!

The mom in my story might pull out a loaded gun and take her kid by force. Or hire a private investigator to find him so she could steal him back. Or she might just—

Defuse the bomb that would escalate the war.

Which—not surprisingly, I guess—is what Mom chose to do. She didn’t even go get a last hug from Brady—which *was* surprising. She just called back to him, “I love you, too, Brady. The size of *two* Universes! Don’t let anyone tell you I don’t!”

“I won’t! Dad says we’re getting ice cream. I’ll bring you back a cone, okay, Mom? Blackberry cheesecake, right?”

Well, that proved it. Poor kid had no clue what was going on here. None that he wouldn’t be coming home tonight—or probably ever.

“That’s right, honey.” Mom nearly lost it saying that little bit, and she quickly turned to get back into the van. It dawned on me that that was why she hadn’t gone for a hug. She wouldn’t have been able to hold it together if she had. And, probably, she would’ve snaked him out through the window.

Dad strode over and caught her arm. “You’re letting him go with me? No big discussion? No fight?”

“Oh, I’m sure we’re going to have fights over it!” she returned with a hard, cold tone I’ve never heard her use before. “But, just now, that’d be unfair to these people waiting to get gas!” Using that tone somehow kept her from breaking down completely. If it was me, I wouldn’t want that to happen either.

Before he could think of anything to say back to her, she got in, started the van and drove off. Her face was set, and she kept her gaze fixed on the road. Both hands on the wheel because they shook otherwise.

No one said anything for a few minutes. Then Taggart opened his face. “You should’ve gotten your money back, Irvey. Should’ve told him he could keep Brady—for a price!”

“Shut up, you brainless idiot!” Gifford twisted round in his seat. Stared warningly at Tag. “I swear if I could reach you now, I’d cuff you harder than I did Devynn!”

Realizing how that might’ve sounded to Mom, Tag immediately regretted his words. “Ah! Sorry! I didn’t mean . . . I was just saying . . .” His words trailed off and he gave a little shrug. “Should’ve said he’d have to choose—Brady or the money.”

Well, that might’ve been interesting to have watched! I almost told her to go back and tell him that! See which it was that came back to the van with her.

Yeah, and while I said my life would go on without him, I never thought—none of us really ever thought—she’d let Brady go.

Made me wonder . . .

If I’d said I wanted to leave with Dad, would she have just waved me on? No argument? In her present mood, probably she would’ve done just that.

I found I didn't quite know how I felt about it.



My Dearest Self,

The worst has happened, and it didn't have anything to do with Rodney. That argument today was the Beginning of the End of OUR FAMILY. O, Self! Definitely, a TRAGEDY.

I don't want to go to school tomorrow

How can she—they—anybody—expect me to learn anything when my nice normal family has broken up?

How come this fight ticked him off more than any of the others? Had he hoped for her laugh to end it? Her hugs and kisses to fix it? How come he hadn't acted like he wanted that? And why would he need to fight with her? Why not just give her some hugs and kisses? She'd give them back! A million times!

Oh, but why couldn't she just have gone ahead and done it just the same? She's always done that before!

It won't be like that for Rodney and me. We'll always tell each other everything. And I'll never look at him like they did at each other—or use the tones that they used today. I won't do anything that will make him leave me for anyone else.

Oh, and now, there's something new I gotta find out. Why Dad said Mom should be careful that I don't turn out like her. Can't figure that one. I think she's great. Most of the time. She doesn't smoke, drink, beat us, or say mean things even when we're being our little lazy stupid selves. She's not happy, of course. But she's never done anything anyone can run her down for.

Oh, wait. Some people don't need reasons. Any excuse will do.

Wonder what her teen life had been like. Like mine? I should ask. If she won't tell me, I'll ask Aunt X'Lohna. And if she won't tell me, I'll try Nana Phae. Someone's going to tell me what Dad meant.

I got more to say, but I have to finish my homework even if I don't want to go to school.

I feel a gut ache coming on.

Or no, wait. It's my heart.

CHAPTER THREE

A Kiss in the Cafe

“**A**LL RIGHT, CLASS!” MRS. Ottridge called our English class to attention. She’s my favorite teacher of all time, I think. “Who doesn’t have a book report ready today?”

Several hands went up—including mine. With all that’d happened yesterday, I never got it done. Just sat in my room with my cat and moped. Was all I wanted to do now.

Mrs. Ottridge tapped her pen against her palm, deciding how to handle us. Finally, she said, “I’ll grant you a couple extra days to get it done. Those of you who will have that extra time can give it orally on Wednesday!”

Groans and protests gave way to pleas of mercy. She had none. “Get the report done on time and you’ll have all the mercy you need!” she said with a smile. “Those of you who have them done, pass them forward. Devynn, collect them for me, would you, please?”

My only wish was to just sit and veg. But I did as I was told and brought them to her desk. Discovered she’d been watching me closely. “Not like you to be late on anything,” she remarked. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh! Oh, sure! Just—well, one of my dumb brothers hid my book on me!” It came out as slick as ice on a pond.

“Well, they will do things like that!” she said. “Don’t let it get you down. One day they may turn out to be an asset to the family! Just when you have no hope!”

I smiled at that. She had older brothers herself and five kids of her own. Three were already grown and on their own. She had the experience to understand my predicaments.

But not this new one. I knew other kids had parents that’d split, but it didn’t keep me from feeling like I was the only one who knew how I felt right then. Once I got back to my seat, my smile was gone. And it stayed gone most of the rest of the day.

Keighley Doyle, one of my best friends, sat behind me in English. She poked my back. “Devynn, what’s up?”

I looked over my shoulder at her but didn't respond. Only shrugged. Urgently, she whispered to my other best friend, Cyndi Stolfi, sitting nearby, "I don't know. But *something's* up!"

Keighley, Cyndi, and my third best friend, Battista Sebastiani whom we all called Tista, crowded around me when the bell rang for lunch.

"Thought we had plans to go ice skating! Your mom told ours your dad was bringing you to the pond at one o'clock." Redheaded Keighley plopped her books on top of mine like it was punishment for forgetting her yesterday. "We called your place but no one answered."

"Yeah, so, what happened?" Cyndi shook her blonde curls accusingly at me. "You off someplace with darling Rodney when *we* had plans!"

"Sorry. Something came up is all. And it wasn't Rodney!"

That was all I wanted to say right then. Thanks to the drama between my parents yesterday, we'd all forgotten about skating. Found myself wondering if he'd just up and left like he left Bernice May, would I feel differently about it? Maybe. Maybe not.

In any case, I wasn't ready to blurt the news that my weekend had been totally trashed by my father's dumping us. Of course, if I had, they'd've changed their tune. But I just wasn't ready.

Tista grabbed my arm and waved at the others. "Come on, we'll finish this interrogation in the cafe! Sloppy Joe subs today! Your mom makes those better than anyone! You have to make her tell you the secret of her sauce!"

Since my mother had taken over the kitchen, the food's been more than just edible. It's been delicious! Her menus were varied as well as good for us which made everyone happy. There'd been a little discussion about the way she handled things at first. But when everyone saw that so little was being wasted compared to when Mrs. Benton ran things, and that more kids were buying lunch than ever before, it all simmered down. Mom became Queen of the Cafeteria.

Actually, this was an odd situation. Because at home, Mom didn't reign in the kitchen like she did in school. We weren't a sit down to dinner every night family. Once in a while, maybe. But not often. Everyone generally fended for himself and ate in the living room or wherever. Partly because you couldn't find the table in the kitchen or see the counter tops. And partly because there was always some cool show on no one wanted to miss. Kids usually ruled in that room.

Well—unless Dad was home.

Mom divided her time between her computer and us kids. If she was at her computer and one of us needed her, she'd say "Just a sec!" and give us her attention as soon as she was finished doing whatever.

For the most part, she didn't care to invade the living room space. When she cooked, it was always a meat and potatoes deal. Filled the belly, but nothing terribly special. Of course, that could've been because Dad seemed to only want that. And only corn or peas for a veggie. If we had those.

That she could apply for this job at the school cafeteria and change everyone's attitude about school meals was just wild. Who knew she had it in her?

Most everyone liked my mother and they envied me being her daughter. A lot of the kids thought the idea of seeing a parent at school every day would be an infringement of privacy. But, except where Rodney's concerned, Mom's cool. And heaven knows it's worth it not to be poisoned every day at lunch!

At least, that's what my opinion was—until today.

Today, I'd come to school on the bus with my brothers. Most of the time, I rode with Mom to Aunt X'Lohna's where we dropped off Jon Jerard and Brady. Aunt X'Lohna got Brady off to school mornings as she lives near the elementary school which started an hour after the high school did. Sometimes, we'd have breakfast with her. Other times, Mom and I would have breakfast at Cooper's Diner or The Kitchen on Berry Street and slide into the school parking lot just as the bell rang.

Although I'd reluctantly acknowledged, at some point during my sleepless night, that there probably had been nothing she could've done to have kept Dad from leaving, I just couldn't face that issue this morning. Didn't want to sit there while she and Aunt X'Lohna discussed what had happened. I would have thought she'd've called her right when we got back home yesterday, but apparently, she hadn't. Giff asked her if she had, and she'd just shaken her head. No amount of talking changed the fact we weren't one unified team anymore.

The house had felt pretty empty without Dad and Brady, both last night and this morning. Okay, Dad would've been heading out for work just as we were getting up, but still . . . just knowing they wouldn't be there later . . . or ever . . .

I wouldn't admit it aloud but I'd've given my bike to have Brady back! Mom would have given much more.

She wasn't at the serving counter with the other cafeteria ladies. Quickly, we pulled plates of sloppy Joe subs on really good rolls, chips, and carrot and celery sticks onto our trays. Decided on dessert choices and headed out to find some seats. When we came out into the main dining area of the cafeteria, there was Mom with Mrs. O.

Mom's arms were folded. Mrs. O had a hand at her shoulder, her expression concerned and compassionate. Mom gave Mrs. O a tight smile. I read her lips. "We'll get through it. Everyone else does!"

All right—maybe Dad is a donkey's butt, but did she have to go spreading it all over school that he left? Wonderful! Great! Why didn't she just get on the PA system and announce it to everyone? Get it over with all at once!

Keighley followed my black stare. She crunched off a bite of a carrot stick, then tapped my arm, demanding, "You fighting with your mom, Devynn?"

Really, I didn't know how to answer, so I mustered a cool tone, hoping it would warn them I wanted no questions asked. "Kinda, sorta!"

"Is that what happened? You get grounded or something?"

"Or something."

Why not let them think I was grounded? I didn't believe I'd feel any better if I did tell them. Couldn't decide if I wanted their pity. Wasn't sure I could handle it if they gave it.

"Well, so what did you do?" Cyndi prompted. "*Did* you sneak out to meet Rodney? Or what?"

"Meet me? Oh, how I *wish*!" An arm wrapped round my shoulders and before I suspected his intention, Rodney Jacques bent and stole a swift kiss. "But . . . alas, she didn't!"

Involuntarily, my gaze gravitated toward my mother. Sure enough, she'd seen it. I met her gaze for two seconds. Defiantly, for I like it when he does things like that. Or, at least, I think I like it. I know it makes a bunch of the girls jealous. I do like that!

She let out a breath. Her look changed, and I thought she'd march right over to order him to leave me alone. But, in the end, she went back into the kitchen to help serve. Mrs. O sent me a look too. Pretty much the same one as Mom's. She went off to the teacher's lounge.

Cyndi watched Mom walk away. "Doesn't matter what you wish, Rodney. You're forever on her mother's *Keep Your Filthy Mitts Off My Daughter* list just the same!"

"Oh, not just hers! You're on pretty much *every* mother's list! If Devynn dumps you, don't ask *me* out! My mother would toss you off the porch so fast you'd wonder if you'd actually been on it!" Tista told him. Then, in a slightly altered tone, she added, "I wish she *would* dump you! I saw you at Cooper's Diner with Frieda Chase Saturday night! You bowl afterwards?" For the Coopers owned a bowling center which was attached to the diner in the rear. "Or did you take her home to Mother?"

At my narrowed glance, Rodney squeezed my shoulder. "Just happened to run into her. We were just talking. You don't think I'd actually be out with my cousin's girl, do you? He'd kick my butt all over town!"

"What cousin?" Tista quizzed him. "Didn't know you had any in school here."

"Yeah, she's seeing Rodger."

"Rodger?" Cyndi furrowed her brow. "Rodger who?"

"Rodger Jackson."

"The senior wrestling champ?" demanded Keighley with great skepticism.

"Rodger Jackson? *He's* your cousin?" Tista burst out laughing as if it were the biggest joke she'd ever heard.

Rodney grinned and shrugged. "Sure. My Uncle Pete didn't care for the name Jacques. So, he changed it to Jackson. Okay? Hey, do any of us laugh at Devynn when she greets her Uncle Xavion in the hallway? Huh? Where'd *that* name come from? Hey, what's it like to have an uncle four years older than you, Dev? All mine are way older. Like in their thirties and more."

I poked at the ground meat in my sub with a celery stick. "No big deal. He's a kid just like you!" That wasn't true, exactly. Xavion's a great guy, and it's awesome having an uncle just four years older. He's kind of more like another brother to me.

Rodney took offense at the *kid just like you* part and cuffed me. Playfully, but it hurt a little. I didn't let on though. If I told him to quit it, he'd just do it again.

"I'm no kid, babe! Shove over and share that with me!"

Today, there happened to be one more seat to move down to. Usually there's standing room only. At first, though, no one moved. But, then, Cyndi slid over one seat. Rodney took over mine, then he divided my sub and started chowing.

Keighley stared at him in the same way my mother and Mrs. O had. "Don't choke now!"

"Don't worry, I won't!" Rodney stopped with his half of the sub halfway to his mouth. "Jealous, are we?"

Keighley snorted. "Don't make me throw up!"

"Go get your own lunch, Hogger!" Cyndi tossed at him. "Why should she always have to give up hers to you?"

Tista sniffed. "He's just a mooch besides being a disgusting player! Devynn, listen to your mom! Ditch the dork!"

With Rodney there, no one would be probing further into what happened over the weekend. For that, losing half my sub was worth it. While

they all admitted Rodney was cute, none of my friends really liked him. He'd never be a part of our confidential talk. They wouldn't allow it.

I wasn't sure how to feel about it. I'd been crazy about him since last year, eighth grade. He wasn't quite Greek god good looking, but still—his dark brown hair contrasted with my silver blonde fairness, and his brown eyes always seemed to tease and laugh. So, when he asked me out a couple months ago, I was just hopping all over inside! Holy Moly, who could believe he'd ask me out—*me!* Devynn X'Leyna Irvette Scoville!

But my folks put a hammer down on that deal. Well, my mother did. Dad just leaned against the kitchen cabinets, a beer bottle in one hand, the other tucked in a pocket, and he let her do all the talking.

She'd had plenty to say. The gist of it being that dating wasn't, at any time, a recreational activity, and I'd have to be a senior in college before she'd allow me to even consider seeing anyone! And, for my information, Rodney wasn't in my horizons at any stage of my life!

When I looked to Dad for support, he just raised his brew and told me, "Sorry, kid, your mother's the boss!" with a funny smirky smile.

Well, I saw him, anyway. Whenever and however I could. So far, I hadn't gotten caught. Except for like now. Which was better than getting caught at the other times.

I was pretty sure there'd be some sort of lecture when I got home for Mom's having seen him kiss me at lunch. But I didn't care. I'd handle it. This was my life after all, and I had a right to live it my way!

She'd lived hers *her* way, after all! Right?

About the Author



Anita M Shaw has been making up stories since she was four and writing them down since fifth grade—usually when she should have been paying attention in class. A proud lefty, she loves giving her left-handed characters some well-deserved spotlight.

She writes for middle grade and teen readers, has shared her stories in classrooms, and chatted about writing and self-publishing at workshops. Right now, she's working on a bunch of projects, including *A Tale of Two Cousins*—the follow-up to *A Tale of Two Diaries*.

Anita and her husband have four grown sons, two granddaughters, and one adorable granddog named Tobi. When she's not writing or reading, she might be out riding horses, bowling, biking, hiking, laser crafting, or playing games with family and friends.

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