


Chapter 1



Of Confusion and Chemistry

“Excuse me; do you work here?”

I looked up from the stack of books that I was organizing to quickly form an employee-of-the-month smile. “Yes; may I help you?”

The young man in front of me fumbled with the paper in his hands, looking around at his surroundings as if in unfamiliar territory. “I was just looking for my books for this semester.”

A freshman or a transfer. He looked pretty young, so probably a freshman.

I nodded in understanding. “Is that your class schedule?” I asked, indicating the paper in his hands.

“Yep.” He nodded, handing the scrap of paper to me. As I quickly examined it, I felt the pressure of a stare directed toward me. Sure enough, when I looked up, Freshman was grinning openly at me, brushing

back his hair with a more casual expression to replace his initial nervousness.

Oh, help.

"Um, right this way." I suppressed a groan and pointed two aisles to the right. He followed me, dragging his feet in what I suspect he thought was a "cool" gait. When we finally arrived at the Science section, he nearly crashed into me.

"Sorry, babe," he said, almost popping bubble gum in my face that he must have inserted during his slow meandering.

"That's Reb—" I paused. *No need for him to know my name.* "Call me Employee 34."

There. That should be weird enough to scare him off.

"Employee 34, huh?" He winked, quickly bobbing his head up and down as if sharing an inside joke. "That's hot."

"Um, Chem 101 with Gersher, right?" I thrust the book into his surprised arms without waiting for an answer and headed to the next aisle. "Follow me, please."

We moved from aisle to aisle as if running a race . . . Freshman staring and popping his gum—occasionally leaning against a row of books to wink at me and ask, "So, what year are you?" or "Does Employees Only *really* mean Employees Only?"—me, all the while, throwing books at him.

Throwing would be an exaggeration, I decided, as we finally headed to our last stop, Psychology. Placing firmly would be more accurate.

Psychology. First it had been Chemistry, then Sociology, followed by World History, then German, complete with Beginning Law and Creative Writing, not to mention Logic (He could use that course.) and Environmental Toxicology. He *is*, by all indications, a

freshman, I reminded myself, as I handed him his last book. *It's a time to figure things out.* Yet I couldn't get the thought out of my head that he was purposely selecting all these random classes just because he found it to be amusing. And *nine* classes at that.

He was insane.

And that was the least of his problems.

"That's the last one, right?" I asked, relieved, wiping moisture from my brow that had resulted from the two-minute dash we had just completed.

"You got it, Babe 34." Freshman popped his gum and stared intently about five inches below my neck. *And that was it.*

Freshman fell, sprawling, to the floor, his nine books of nine different subjects flying everywhere. "Ouch!"

"Sorry." I smiled sweetly as I helped him pick up his books. "My doctor has always commented on my excellent reflexes. I guess they were inspired to act."

Freshman stared at me in complete and utter confusion.

"To the Front Desk?" I carried half of his stack as he followed, no longer attempting to walk the "cool guy" walk.

The college bookstore was a splash of life, culture, and society. As a psychology student, I often found myself intrigued by the behavior, ways of thinking and feeling, and general schemata of others, and this was the perfect spot to engage my senses.

Other times, I was just annoyed.

As we approached the register, another student materialized, standing pleasantly with the familiarity yet youth of a sophomore.

Oh, great. I hope he hasn't been there long.

I dashed behind the counter with a smile, leaving Freshman to take a spot behind Sophomore (?). "Find

everything okay?"

"Sure did. Thanks for asking."

I nodded in return, scanning his books and then placing them in a bag as I waited for his receipt.

"Hey, are you a Christian?"

I looked up, caught slightly aback. "Yes, I am. Catholic, to be precise."

"Catholic, huh?" He leaned forward eagerly. "You worship saints, don't you?"

Once again, I suppressed a groan.

Every year for the past *ten* years it seemed that I was constantly bombarded with this misconception.

At least it allows me to correct all those crazy ideas people have about my faith, I told myself, regaining my composure.

"No, not at all. We worship only God."

"That's not true. Pastor McCarthy told me that you worship saints."

Pastor McCarthy, who surely knows more about Catholics than a Catholic herself.

"He has clearly been misinformed," I said patiently. "We ask saints to pray *for* us, that is true. But we do not pray *to* them in a worshipping sense like we would God."

Sophomore scrunched up his nose as if he still did not believe me (and he probably didn't). "But you worship statues?"

Oh, brother.

"Not at all."

"The Pope?"

"No."

"Mary?"

"No."

"Rosary beads?"

"No."

"Easter lilies?"

Oh, goodness.

"No. Just. God. Like. I. Said. Before."

He shook his head. "I'll have to consult with my pastor. Until then, you're not a Christian."

Sophomore grabbed his book bag, dropping a pamphlet for True Word Church on the counter.

Freshman stared at me, this time with a clear sense of disapproval, as I rang up his order. When I finally handed him his bag, he shook his head, now a grouchy old man wagging his finger at noisy children in the neighborhood. "I can't believe you're Catholic."

"Really?" I managed to keep my voice even.

"Yes." He shook his head again. "I can't date someone who isn't Christian. So long."

And, with that, Freshman disappeared as quickly as Sophomore had, tossing a piece of paper on the floor as he left.

When it came between curiosity and irritation, curiosity usually won out with me. I knelt in front of the counter and picked up the piece of paper.

Visit Faith Community Church. Special classes for recovering Catholics are available.

I leaned against the counter and finally let out a sigh.

Well, hey, at least anti-Catholicism had some benefits in this case, I retorted to myself sarcastically. *Gets rid of annoying guys who try to pick you up.*

"You look like you just heard someone insult Italians."

I turned around and, automatically, a smile began to replace the already deeply-planted frown as my favorite co-worker and assistant store manager, Jeffrey, strode over to the register.

Jeffrey was nothing short of an anomaly . . . an anomaly, and a contradiction. His hair came in billows

down to the middle of his back like that of a hippie, yet he discussed matters of business with all the air of a professional in the accounting section of the bookstore. He spoke of philosophy as he readjusted his cowboy hat, and got together with questionable characters for a smoke while always leaving a loaf of bread for his aged grandma on the way over. He was liberal and unpredictable and had probably slept with dozens of girls, yet he had always been respectful to me. He spoke of a father who was in and out in jail, yet was saddened by the choices he had made in life. He was the kind of person I never thought I would consider a friend, even within the confines of a business relationship, and, yet, his hearty laugh, good humor, and genuine desire to grow closer to God and farther from his faults had made me grow fond of him, I realized with a smile. Even if both he and I knew that we lived in different worlds, and those worlds could only mix so far. Even so, he had risen above his circumstances, his difficult background.

He had a good heart.

“Even worse.” I rolled my eyes, both in response to his remark and in an effort to shake myself from my ponderings.

“Worse than insulting Italians?” Jeffrey raised an eyebrow. “I thought it didn’t get worse than that.”

I laughed. “Well, there aren’t many things that do. But this one takes the cake.”

Jeffrey surveyed me with an anticipatory glance before nodding quietly.

Jeffrey, being Jeffrey, realized that I didn’t want to talk about it. In that way—but only that way—he almost reminded me a bit of . . .

“So,” Jeffrey strummed his hands rhythmically on the countertop, “it’s the big day, huh?”

In the rush of the daily bookstore duties, intermixed

with unforeseen irregularities in that agenda, I had briefly forgotten what had enveloped my mind for the last few weeks.

The next big step in graduate psychology. My first day of a semester-long, full-time psychology internship.

1,000 hours that could determine all future hours in my life.

No pressure.

I managed a smile. "Well, there will be enough psychos in the city to keep me busy, no?"

Jeffrey laughed heartily. "You could say that. You nervous?"

I shrugged hesitantly. "It should be an experience."

Jeffrey said gently, "You're not in Cedar Heights anymore, Rebecca."

He was right. Cedar Heights, the place that I had called home for twenty-two years, had been temporarily left behind me for a psychology internship. In the place of the sleepy little suburban town I had grown to love and cherish was the big city of Los Angeles, wild, unafraid—perhaps too unafraid—and unknown. No longer did the night end at 9 p.m. and the local news stations boast of a world with relatively no crime, of the status of one of the safest locations in the United States of America. Los Angeles was forever wide awake, pulsing with the vigor of a diverse culture, yet, at the same time, pulsing with the danger of a Safari chase. This was no place for a girl in her early twenties, relatively alone and on her own.

And, yet, here I was.

I nodded. "I know."

I thought back to the young man who had been flirting with me earlier. He, with all his cliché (if clichés existed) remarks and drooling winks, was probably one of the more innocent, upstanding citizens in the city. I

recalled an earlier scenario three months prior . . .

*I was standing, leaning against a tree outside, during my dinner break. Three men of identical attire and the aura of a less innocent world approached me. **Gang members** was my instant thought as I quickly formed a calm demeanor, staring curiously at my apple. **Confidence, apart from arrogance, was instrumental in my safty.** I casually met their gaze, seemingly without a care in the world. In the back of my mind, I noted the proximity of the bookstore and my heart beating wildly in my chest.*

The tallest, who stood slightly in front of them and appeared to be their leader, addressed me.

“How old are you?”

“Two hundred four,” I responded coolly.

Leader paused, taken aback. He opened his mouth as if to utter a word and then closed it.

I slowly backed away from the tree with an irresistible smile. “He hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years?”

When all else fails, talk Shakespearean, and it will confuse them enough to keep them at bay.

Leader and his followers stood, gaping in bewilderment, as I entered the bookstore, exhaling deeply.

Jeffrey, upon hearing the story, called campus security. Afterwards, he surveyed me with a somber expression, lecturing me with his eyes. If it hadn't been such a serious moment, I would have been amused by such a change in Jeffrey's eternally laidback demeanor.

“You should have left from the start.”

I nodded, assenting. “I know. It was stupid of me.”

“Although,” Jeffrey relaxed, smiling, “you handled

yourself well. You didn't anger them or let them scare you," he paused, observing my hands, which were shaking, "or, at least, didn't show them that you were scared."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"But next time . . ."

"I know."

Now, three months later, Jeffrey once again surveyed me with a knowing expression. "Any guys bother you today?"

"No one dangerous, but," I exhaled in annoyance, "a less-than-chivalrous nuisance."

Jeffrey smiled. "Well, in that sort of case, I'm not worried."

I cocked my head slightly in curiosity.

"You can handle yourself well with the regular idiot. It becomes obvious to them soon enough that you're not game."

"What do you mean?" I looked at him, this time the one held at bay by confusion.

"The way you carry yourself tells people a lot."

"It does?"

"Yeah, I mean," he strummed his hands on the counter again before finally looking up with a smile, "they don't have to see a ring to know that you're . . . pure. And that nothing they do or say can change that. It's . . . you. It's Rebecca."

"Actually, I came across a ring that rather took my fancy and was thinking of getting it."

He smiled, shaking his head slowly. "Don't ever change."

I grinned. "I'll try not to."

Jeffrey bowed, a mischievous grin inching across his face. "And, Miss Rebecca, we must find your Prince Charming."

I hardly had time to respond when he pulled my hand forward and began to passionately sing the first line of "That's Amore".

I giggled as he spun me around to the joint lunar-pizza imagery of love.

Jeffrey often viewed the bookstore as his personal dancing—and singing—studio. And sometimes he didn't bother to wait until the customers left.

"And when . . ." he paused, "the sun hits your eyes like a bowl of lasagna?"

I snorted. "Somehow I don't think that was the next line."

He grinned, bowing again.

"But it was still funny."

"Thank you, Madame." He glanced at the clock, his eyes returning with an even brighter beam. "Hey, wanna grab a bite at the café before you leave?"

I followed his gaze back to the clock. *How time flies.* It was only a minute until closing time, and no customers had ventured hither since Freshman and Sophomore.

"Sure."

We "walked" the bookstore, making sure everything was in order and reorganizing anything that was not. Jeffrey took out the trash as I vacuumed and wiped down the windows and door. With a sigh of relief, we finally headed to the back to gather our belongings and clock out. A few minutes later, the locked door closed quietly behind us.

We walked easily, a companionable silence filling the breeze that lightly touched our shoulders.

Companionable silence.

Peter.

Two and a half years ago, a student from Canada had come to Cedar Heights, California during the season of Lent . . . and, by no dramatic exaggeration, changed my

life in a mere month and a half. In the midst of trials that we had both endured and joys that we had shared, he had become my friend . . . No, more than a friend. A . . .

I glanced at Jeffrey, the off-beat, somewhat questionable older brother from another mother.

A brother, then? *No*, I found myself shaking my head, *brother just doesn't seem right*.

Then, what was he? An honorary cousin, a next-door neighbor?

I shook my head.

He was Peter, and that was all that came to surface.

I paused, trying to remember where I had heard that before.

"What's up?" Jeffrey had evidently observed me shaking my head, and he eyed me inquisitively.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Of Peter?"

I laughed. "Do I talk about him *that* much?"

Jeffrey smiled. "Kinda."

"He's a good friend."

And I missed him. Sure, we emailed once or twice a week and talked on the phone about once or twice a month, but it just wasn't the same.

Jeffrey nodded, understanding. "I know." He indicated the café door that had, as if by magic, suddenly appeared before us. *I had really been sidetracked.*

"Sure, go ahead."

He opened the door, and we walked in.

Adoro te devote, latens Deitas. Peter, come home.



I took a deep breath, surveying the tall screeching building before me while the theme song of an obscure horror movie played. *This was it.*

"No, it isn't." I yawned, opening my eyes reluctantly. "Not 'till tomorrow."

I surveyed my actual surroundings and gulped. "No, that would be . . . today."

I was sitting at a small table at the café, attempting to review my psychology notes before the internship started at 4. *I don't actually need to review notes, I reminded myself, after all, it isn't like I am being tested.* But Jeffrey had already left, I still had half an hour to kill, and I thought it might be a good idea to brush up . . . just in case.

I looked at the time display on my cell phone. *Actually, that would be ten minutes.* Ten minutes to get there.

While I lost track of time often enough, I never fell asleep like that unless I was sick. *Why now, Rebecca,* I lectured myself. At least, I had planned my schedule so that I would be a few minutes early. I relinquished my seat, quickly gathering my belongings together.

"Hey, Rebecca!" I looked up to observe a classmate from one of my graduate classes walk over, her boyfriend by her side.

"Hey, Teresa!" I gave her a hug and nodded pleasantly at her TARDIS companion. "Long time no see! What are you up to these days?"

"Not much. I'm off to my first internship in a week." Her eyes met mine with a contagious grin. "I'm pretty much thrilled."

"Oh, nice!" I slipped on my jacket. "Who's it with?"

"Same as you. Dr. Yin, on Second Street. Only," Teresa offered a teasing smile, "I don't have the official Everson Seal of Approval."

I blushed. I had been recommended for the scholarship by Dr. Everson, the head of the psychology department. The Everson Psychological

Center had been founded by his grandfather and was considered one of the best in the nation. Dr. Yin was the current psychologist presiding over the center and would serve as my mentor as I grew from a preservice psychology student to one ready to enter the field. Teresa was also considered one of Dr. Everson's best students, but she had lost the scholarship honor to me.

"I—" I turned red again. "Um . . ."

"Rebecca! Seriously, I was just teasing you." Teresa tapped me playfully on the arm. "I'm glad that a friend got the scholarship. If anyone deserved it, you did."

A friend. That was nice, I thought to myself. I guess I had always thought of Teresa as a friend, but we didn't talk that much. This would be a nice opportunity to get to know her better.

I shook my head with a smile. *I'm such a friendship nerd.* I loved getting to know people, each with their own unique qualities, and watching the friendship blossom.

Blossom into random insanity, more than likely.

I grinned.

"Well, I'll see you soon then." I returned my mind to the present. "What time does your shift start?"

"3 p.m."

"Starting next week, right?"

"Yeah. I'm . . . starting later than you because I have to go on a trip this week."

She looked down, smiling almost apologetically. My overly curious mind wanted to ask her about it, but my polite demeanor demanded otherwise.

"Gotcha. Well, hey, I'm set to start in the mornings after today, so I might run into you when I'm on my way out. It'll be fun!"

"Definitely! Well, we're going to grab something to eat." Teresa indicated her boyfriend, who had remained silent the entire time. "Nice to see you!" She gave me

another hug.

“Nice to see you, too! Later.”

I waved at the retreating couple and made my way toward the door of the café. Just as I was about to exit, my backpack, planted firmly on my back, caught itself in the double doors. I was stuck.

I cleared my throat, attempting to regain any dignity that I had left as I managed to squeeze myself out.

Hope no one saw that.