

CHAPTER 1

When is it My Time to Fly?

Levy rubs his temples in slow circles. He breathes slowly through his nose then turns his attention back to his work. *The NIA are going to flip when they see this.* His OCD reminds Levy to adjust the carburetor for the tenth time. *I have never spent this much time on any of my inventions.* He rubs his hands briskly together. *This has to be the one.*

There is a scratching at the science lab's huge glass window. The oak tree outside is tapping on the glass. It breaks Levy from his intense focus. *The wind is changing. I wonder if it means things are changing for me, too?* From his worn denim backpack, he reverently sets out various assortments of screwdrivers sorted by size and color. His fingers pluck up the smallest flat head.

The wheels of opportunity are lining up. I can't screw this up. He takes a breath. *Think clear. Use smart words. Keep smiling.* He holds the circular frame of his prototype engine in order to calibrate a set of dime-sized gears. Levy's finger nudges a gear and watches the belt's progress.

He glances down again at the flyer at his elbow. *The real dudes will be here, the National Inventors of America!* The judges and hosts in Washington are inventors from around the world and represent big companies looking for the next great idea. His finger begins tracing the embossed lettering on the flyer. *Who would have thought our little nothing town of Remick would be chosen for this? Then again, who would have guessed someone would build Bill Gates Charter here? I guess this is where underdogs like me get their chance.* Levy closes his eyes and imagines what that day might be like.

"You actually built an engine that runs off the sugar in soda.... soda pop?" the head judge asks in awe.

"The sugar and the carbon dioxide," Levy reminds them, "is the real kick."

All the other members of the NIA swarm around his entry.

The head judge shakes his head. "It looks so small and fragile." He is the judge-that strangely resembles Bill Nye the Science Guy, right down to the red bow tie. "Why is that?"

Levy clears his throat. "I tried to create an engine that would use mostly recycled parts. They are inexpensive to replace and highly economical on fuel."

The judge raises an eyebrow.

"It can be part of an electric hybrid or a self-charging power system."

The bow tie judge makes a few quick notes on his phone. "Why did you design such a heavy-duty cage for your engine..." he examines his notes, "the *Fizz-E-Drive*, correct?"

"Yes, that's what I call it."

"Why the cage?"

Levy waves a hand. "It's to protect the engine during start up. The soda does pack a punch and tends to shake. So, I had to make sure it didn't blast into space."

The judges' jaws drop.

"It's a joke," Levy reassures them with a smile.

They all look at each other and smile back. That's when the judges all begin talking, like a cage full of excited birds.

"How did you get the right combination of gasses and sugars?"

"Did you build this from scratch or did you modify an existing motor?"

"How many miles will you get with this fuel mixture?"

"Can any flavor of soda power the engine?"

"Is the fuel still drinkable, if you get thirsty?"

They all fall silent at the last question and gawk at the young female judge who asked it. She pushes back her glasses. "What?" She looks around at the other older judges. "It's just...all this talk of soda made me thirsty."

The judges barrage the boy with one question after the other. However, Levy is anticipating, even yearning for the numerous questions and he's able to answer them all with precision and clarity.

The noisy group takes furious notes and they all beam with broad toothy smiles.

"This is it, people," the bow tie judge announces. "We've found our next great inventor!"

There's a roar of applause that echoes off the walls.

"You and your family pack your bags." The head judge shakes Levy's hand vigorously. "You are going to meet the president." Then the judge whispers in his ear, "I hope you are ready for fame and fortune, Mr. Roarke."

The sound of imaginary applause echoes in his head, making him grin. Levy slips off his safety glasses and rubs a line of sweat out of his eye. He looks up at the science lab clock. "I have half an hour to get this finished," Levy mutters, then squints to make sure it really says 2:25 pm. "How did lab go by so fast?"

The Einstein clock on the wall ticks.

He drums his fingers. *Tick, tock.*

The clock's minute hand moves.

Levy, stop looking at the clock. Stay focused. Think about what you are doing. That's how accidents happen, remember?

The left side of his brain sees the world with exacting cold logic and is his constant voice of reason. It is his nickname and his alter ego at the same time. Levy is driven by it as one would be by a no-nonsense coach. *Thanks, Brainiac, for the nudge.*

Time is not a toy; it's a tool. Use it wisely.

Levy gives a salute to the hidden left half of his mind. *Right, Brainiac. I mean, left.* The hole in his jeans, catches his eye. A flush of embarrassment heats his cheeks. He pokes his bare skin with one finger. *I used to love jean days before we went broke. Now I'd rather wear the Gates uniform every day.*

He glances up at a girl texting on the latest cell phone while his flip phone with the chipped screen, sits like a mute lump in his pocket. *Gaww, I forgot to charge it again.*

Get your mind off it, Levy.

He pictures his Grandpa in his overalls doing the same examination on a '69 Chevelle. *Give everything you do 100% and you will never fail.* Levy had removed the engine and was now attaching it within the enclosed metal frame. It was easier to transport that way and it kept the engine vibrations to a minimum.

FPSCC. FPSCC.

He does a mental exercise with this acronym. Mom and Dad had taught him how to use mnemonic devices to improve his memory.

FPSCC

For Plenty of Speed Chug Chug

One more run down just to be sure.

- 1. Fuel tank full.*
- 2. Pulley system on tight.*
- 3. Spark plug clean.*
- 4. Crank tight. No Knots. Pulls smooth.*
- 5. Carburetor. Check.*

MMMM, new car smell. Levy enjoys the new rubber aroma wafting from the belt and appreciates how it clings snugly to the grooves of the pulleys. He sits back with folded arms. *I finally took one of my crazy dreams and did something with it.* Levy snaps his fingers. Looking around he opens his faded denim backpack. He carefully pulls out a large sealed plastic bag. With an air of great reverence, he opens it, carefully removing his journal.

Grandpa said to treat your ideas like gold. He folds back a few pages that hold designs, ideas, research and observations to aid in his inventions. Levy slides his finger to the next journal page and writes:

So, today, September 17th is an exciting and very sad day too. I wish Grandpa could've lived to see me invent the Fizz-E-Drive. He would be the first to cheer if...when I won.

It's been hard to trust anyone but myself, since Grandpa...died. He said he would be there to see me become a great inventor. Dad made the same promise but then he got into that stupid accident.

Before he knows it, Levy begins to write effortlessly. Normally his journal is all chicken scratch and disjointed notes, not today.

This science lab is sort of like a hideaway for nerds. We can be ourselves here, for the most part. You can have a hair-brain idea and no one will think you're crazy.

Today though, I have been bubbling over with Class Two behaviors. Stress can elevate the Nerdatonium levels in your blood. At least that's my theory. (Yeah,

I know I make up my own words but I think the elemental building block of a nerd, being Nerdatonium, is pretty cool in its own way.)

Levy closes his journal. He reseals it in its bag and carefully puts it in the secret compartment in his backpack. He pats it lovingly. *Ah*. Levy catches himself, excited to see the science teacher, Mr. Quasmick, approaching. *Here is a guy who doesn't let difficulties get him down.*

Mr. Quasmick was born with one side of his face slightly drooped. It crept out some of the others students, especially the girls.

He's not that scary looking. Levy watches his teacher reach up and rub his hairy face. *I bet that's why he grew that cool thick beard.* He rubs the bare divot under his own nose. Out of sympathy for his favorite teacher, Levy came up with a cool nickname for him. Mr. Guy Quasmick is Mr. G.Q. *How many teachers have a magazine title for a nickname?*

As if on que, Mr. G.Q. walks up to Levy's lab station clicking the clip of his clipboard. "You'll be ready, right? I can check off this final assignment?"

"Green light." He gives his teacher a salute.

Mr. G.Q. quickly salutes back. He notices Levy's uneasiness. "Is your heart in your throat, Levy?"

Levy nods his head. He takes a hard swallow, "I'm just a...little nervous."

"I can hear it from here." Mr. Quasmick gives him a knuckle bump. "You'll do great." He waves an arm over his chest. "Just remember breathing is good." Mr. G.Q. pats the lab counter.

The last bell rings. Levy sits on his stool, breathes, and watches the science class students exit out one door and the science fair students enter through the other. Within a matter of fifteen minutes, the room is filled with twenty-five guys and girls, and their unique projects. They represent twenty San Diego school districts. He locates Amada and Sagan who are the two other finalists from *Bill Gates*.

Sagan waves at Levy. He has a mini-sized-accelerated garden green house. This invention can raise tomatoes and lettuce in almost half the time. Sagan gives Levy a wink and mouths, "Good luck, Brainiac."

Levy notices Amada as she sets up her smoothie machine. *She got the student's vote with her tasty drink that supposedly improves test scores.* Amada casts Levy a scowl. Levy furrows his eyebrows. They share a laugh. Amada's entry is a functional machine. She and Levy are in the same category. That places Amada on Levy's radar as real competition.

Spinning back on his stool, he and the Fizz-E-Drive stare at each other for a few moments. *Fizz, you gotta keep it together. We're not going to have another repeat disaster.* He reaches for his old faithful backpack and breaks out his secret stash of materials. Levy finds a small spool of wire to secure the engine to the thick piece of rubberized plastic he had already used to mount the engine.

"No pressure, but my future is at stake." Levy brings his lips inches away from the Fizz-E. "Remember, buddy, you don't have permission to botch this up like my first two models. Real live people will be watching. I can't have another exploding rain of soda and bubbles or watch you shake yourself to pieces."

In a few minutes, he weaves a tense metal web that holds the engine in place. Six copper bolts are the anchors for the invention. He twists coils of wire around five of them securely. *It is not the safest looking thing but I feel better now that you are behind a cage...of sorts.*

Levy grits his teeth. "Failure is **not** an option. I have put too much blood, sweat, and...gears into you." He frowns at the one tiny flaw he had hoped would disappear. He taps the slightly bent bolt head with his wrench. "You can't break me. I won't let you." He purses his lips.

Let it go. It's fine.

Levy's lips curl as he speaks to the bolt. "My teacher is coming back and *we* want to make a good impression, so shape up." He smacks the bolt with his wrench and it rings back nastily.

"Okay, Levy. I made my rounds. Now I have time to talk." His teacher pulls up a stool. "There are some pretty cool projects out there." Mr. G.Q. rubs his beard. He is every inch a cool science guy to Levy. Mr. G.Q. sports a white lab coat, jeans, and old sneakers. There is the familiar smell of coffee and Old Spice.

Yeah, he's got style, like his name suggests.

Mr. G.Q. examines, with intense curiosity, the organized collaboration of wire, crude but clean circuitry, and various parts perfectly organized at the boy's station. "Wow, you've got me beat."

"What?"

Mr. G.Q. points to Levy's organized workspace. "Dad use to say, 'A place for everything and everything in its place.'" He chuckles, "You should see my office at home."

"That bad?" Levy frowns.

"Bad." Mr. G.Q. straightens his lab coat.

Levy pats his station. "It helps me focus, when things are perfectly placed." He eyes a piece of wire that has become uncoiled. Levy wraps it around his pointer finger, ties it off, and places it with the other six tiny coils, all color-coded, of course.

"I like the curves of your engine. It really is unique."

Levy smiles.

"So, do you have your speech for the judges ready?"

Levy gives him a so-so wag of his hand.

"Just talk to them. Once you get going," Mr. G.Q. motions with his hands in large waves, "it will flow out of you."

The boy sighs.

"So, this is not the prototype engine you won the County with?"

"No, that had a few...issues."

"Your timing with this idea is very...timely." Mr.G.Q. twirls the end of his mustache. "I wish I thought of it."

"This third model's full name is the Sweet Fizz-E-Drive."

Mr. Quasmick thoughtfully wrinkles his lips. "Clever. So, it's *sweet* in more ways than one?"

"Right."

"This little guy runs on a mixture of sodas?" Mr. G.Q. asks. "Not soda water, but root beer, cola, stuff like that?"

Levy holds up a finger. "Correct, but, more specifically, on the sugar and carbon dioxide in soda."

Mr. Quasmick twirls and strokes.

Levy rolls on. "Soda is cheap. Have you ever noticed how many people never finish a soda? A lot of it gets wasted."

They both look at the cans sitting around the room.

"Corn has to be refined and turned into sugar. This stuff is already in liquid form and needs less fermentation time." *Tick, tock, save time on the clock.*

"So, is that why I've seen you recycling cans in the cafeteria?"

"Exactly! My buddies give me a hard time for lugging this around." Levy opens his backpack. He pulls out a water bladder from his dad's old camel bag. Instead of water it holds a thick dark liquid.

"The lid is tight?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

Levy unscrews the lid and carefully begins filling up the reservoir on top of the engine. He primes the pump by depressing a soft plastic bubble three times. Levy takes one more look at the Fizz-E before he speaks. "I was going to save this for the presentation after school but do you want to see it work?"

Mr. Quasmick nods his head. He looks like a kid in a candy store.

Levy closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"Oh yeah! Crank it up, Levy! This is exciting!!"

I just need it to actually run and then we are in business. Looking at the housing, he gives the stubborn bolt the stink eye. He says a quick silent prayer. *One more try. Don't embarrass me.*

"Ready when you are, Boss."

I like the sound of that. Boss. "Ah, I need to make one more adjustment, Mr. G.Q."

You are stalling.

Mr. Quasmick pats his shoulder and gives him a wink. "Good, that will give me a minute to check on a couple late projects that just rolled in."

Levy nods. He grips the wrench in his right hand, locks on the bolt and puts his left hand on the frame. *Which of us is more stubborn?* His grip is so tight that Levy can feel the blood pulsating in his hand and wrist. Gritting his teeth, he gives the bolt an exasperated final twist. The bolt snaps off at the head and spins off.

CRACK!

"Holy!" The bolt head thwacks into his eyebrow. "MY EYE!" He grabs the red burning sensation over his right eye. "AYE!"

Like a chain reaction, the connecting wires and pieces break off, violently. A number of tight copper wires snap!

PING! PAANG PING!

Levy tries to move his arm out of the way but he is a millisecond too slow. He turns abruptly in pain. A trio of lightning fast wires slash his left forearm like a wild cat's razor nails.

"You...stupid...!" Levy cries out. He throws his wrench. "I give up on you, you worthless piece of junk!"

Calm yourself down. You know what happens when you get angry.

Levy's eyes are aflame. Everything in the room ignites into a blazing red. Even his breath feels like a raging smoke. "How many stinking hours have I wasted on you. His invention seems to stare back with two gear-like eyes begging for a second chance. Levy's claw-like fingers clasp the metal frame.

Think before you do this.

"It's too late for sad puppy dog eyes!" he growls, focusing his pent up rage on the shivering metal invention.

"YEAAAAAAHHHH!"

You are going to regret this.

If he had enough upper body strength, Levy would tear his invention in half, no such luck. So, amidst the gasps and screams of the onlooking student inventors, he lifts his pleading metallic victim above his head.

"YOU!"

There are screams and gasps.

"STUPID!"

The prototype crashes to the tile in slow-motion.

"STUBBORN!"

The internal engine, inside its housing, breaks free.

"USELESS THING!"

The outer frame twists and snaps. Breaking like a piñata, metal pins, tiny silver gears, and soda scatter to the four corners of the lab.

"I HATE YOU!"

The crash and rattle settles into a deafening silence. Every eye is on Levy. His chest is heaving and his fists are balled.

Mr. Quasmick rushes over to examine the situation.

Levy observes his sticky brown and red hands. *What just happened?*

Looking up he sees that his fellow students are a frozen mixture of tears and shock. They all stand back at a distance. The ring of metal and fizzing soda still echoes in his ears. He pushes his arms forward to get a handle on the moment.

"Levy, what happened?" Mr. Quasmick assesses Levy and the wake of destruction. In a daze, Levy shows him his bleeding forearm. Mr. Quasmick deftly grabs a white terry cloth, soaks it under a faucet, and wraps it around Levy's injury.

"Oh, God, I am bleeding. Who else got hurt?" Levy begins to hyperventilate. "Oh God, what have I done?"

"Levy, breathe, yeah, c'mon. Good. Relax, it's over."

"NO!" The reality of the twisted carcass on the floor sinks in. "My engine! I totally destroyed my chances of getting into the fair." Hot tears burn his cheeks. "What did I do?"

"Levy, accidents happen." Mr. Quasmick tries to calm Levy. Levy's now on the verge of tears. "Son, there is always next year to present your idea."

The boy falls to his knees. He reaches out and tries to hold the jagged-edged machine to his chest. A great sadness overwhelms him and his breathing is erratic. He blurts out a sound like a dying animal. "GAWWWWWWWW."

I hate even looking at it.

Levy feels like his idea is dying before his very eyes. This emotional outburst brings forth Arby, his right brain's suppressed emotional side.

Oh, Buddy, I am so sorry, I didn't mean it. Don't die.

One gear eye is gone and the other about to fall off. In a daze, he begins to pick up a gear here and a spring there to put in his pocket.

Mr. Quasmick raises his hand. "I'll get it. Your arm comes first. Those slices look deep and you might need stitches."

"But---"

"No buts, just move yours and get down to the nurse's station. Go!" Mr. G.Q. escorts Levy to the door and hands him the Einstein bobble head that he uses as a hall pass.

Now Levy could feel, like needle pricks, the eyes of every kid looking up from their stations. *This is fourth grade all over again.*

Get straight to the nurse. Get patched up and then you need to get that Fizz-E-Drive operational. Keep your head in the game, Levy. The Science Fair is tomorrow.

Fízz is ruined, remember?

That hasn't stopped you before.

Thanks, Brainiac. I need to listen to my logic. I can't let my emotions get in the way. Levy furrows his brow and squares his slim shoulders. He shifts his faded denim backpack and trudges down the long sunny hall. For a few moments, the two halves of his brain are silent for a change. He enjoys seeing the creeping vine snaking up the curving silver arches and tempered glass.

Nature and technology can exist together. So why can't my logic and feelings exist together without tearing my brain apart?

That sounds very improbable.

That hurts, you know.

He allows himself a deep sigh. Levy turns a corner. The smell of fresh paint and new carpet invigorates him. Chemical smells always transport his mind back to the lab where inventions are brewing.

"HMMMM, new carpet smell." He walks more gingerly onto the spongy, mauve-colored carpeted floor. Glancing back, Levy wants to make sure he isn't tracking any dirt. That is a no-no for a neat freak.

Levy grasps the cool metal door handle. He closes his eyes.

SWOOOSH!

These are the voyages of Levy Roarke. His ongoing mission: to seek out and discover any way to make a humdrum situation more exciting.

Pushing back the nagging throbbing, Levy imagines he has just completed a journey across a spongy and hostile alien terrain. While trying to save a whole colony of humans from a savage alien race, he was attacked by their leader; thus, the reason for his bleeding left arm.

“Captain Roarke, you're injured,” cries the beautiful ensign. He gingerly moves his arm just enough to get her green-gold eyes to show a little more sympathy.

“I'm fine; really, I've seen worse.” He chuckles, “It's just one of the hazards of being a hero.”

She gently places her hand on his arm. “That's why you are my captain.”

Levy, still brimming with imagination, steps through the portal of the rescue ship. It instantly dissolves into the ordinary, metal door of a nurse's station. “Whoo-deeeeee-doo, back to reality. Great.”

It is filled with kids he doesn't recognize. The smell of rubbing alcohol, antiseptic, and other medicines are semi-masked by a flowery room spray. The walls are covered with kid-oriented medical information posters.

Levy approaches the glass window where the nurse sits busily shuffling paperwork. He clears his throat. “Excuse me. I need some help, please.” Levy stretches enough to rap on the window with the Einstein pass.

A wavy-haired woman peers up at him over a stack of folders.

Levy reads her nametag. Reah Deal. *When it comes to nursing, I bet she's the 'real deal'.*

“What's the problem, young man?” She sets down a file and produces a transparent, yellow clipboard. Levy raises his arm, giving her a good look at the wound.

“I...am...a victim of a science experiment gone wrong.” He squints one eye and hunches his back.

Over her glasses, she fixes him with a straight deadpan glare.

Levy's wounded smile droops.

She gives him a humorless laugh for his dry joke and a pen for his injury form.

He throws out a creaky voice with one last parting shot. “Thank, yooou.”

Levy sits down on a hard, plastic chair in the middle of the room. There are a number of them in a row back to back. Most of them are filled with kids. *Real comfy.*

“Oooh, what happened?”

That voice. It's soft like an angel.

“It looks like something attacked you.”

Levy turns slowly around. *Am I dreaming?* Levy turns to come face-to-face with those green-gold eyes. *Ah, no, this is really her. It's Elise.*

She flashes a warm smile.

Levy knows her name, but that is it. He had often seen his “dream girl” from a distance. This is the closest he has ever come to actually meeting her, outside of his imagination, that is.

Elise Quinonez is the only eighth grader that ever gave Levy, or any other lowly sixth grader, the time of day. In her retro 60's clothes and with her semi-earthly nature, she is Levy's opposite in every way. Levy often mused about why she was at Gates in the first place. This school was techy-heaven with a few eco-friendly aspects sprouting here and there. So, whenever

he saw Elise, Levy pictured her as a lone yellow daisy breaking through a grey concrete sidewalk. Like a deer, he stared into her one-of-a-kind green eyes flecked with gold.

“Why are you here?” Elise asks.

Whoo-dee-dooo.

Levy’s whole body turns to quivering jelly. He tries to speak, but his tongue has already solidified. “I...I...I...am a victim of a scientific experiment...” To his amazement, she laughs a genuine laugh.

She at least acts like it is funny.

You are so lucky, Levy.

Levy smiles shyly.

“That’s cute. You have a very dry sense of humor, like my dad.” She holds out her hand. Elise is wearing a white long-sleeve shirt that looks like it was knit together out of clouds.

Yeah, like an angel.

“My name’s Elise, what’s yours?” Levy stares at her long-fingered hand for a moment, like he is unsure of what to do with it.

Speak, dingwitt.

He shakes her hand repeatedly, numerous times until she blushes. Levy thinks he says his name, but when he speaks, air seeps out in wisps. She looks at him patiently.

Okay, Levy, be cool, and take a breath.

Her hand is so soft, but strong. She’s touching me. Oh, man.

Hold it together. Don’t embarrass yourself any more than usual.

Levy lets go of her hand and looks around awkwardly. “Um...”

Hold it together, goober.

We can do this, I think.

“Levy, Levy Roarke, yeah...that’s...my name.” Levy realizes he is mumbling, so he seals his mouth with a pasted smile.

“You got that, in science class?” Elise points to his wrapped arm.

“Uh.”

“Who do you have as a teacher?”

“Hm.”

“Doctor Dixan or Mr. Quasmick?”

“Uh, Mr. Quasmick. He's...pretty cool.” Levy feels the tension easing up a bit.

“Cool. I like Mr. G.Q. He's one-of-a-kind.”

Levy nods vigorously.

She used MY nickname for him. That's...awesome.

Elise keeps talking. “I'm...not able to take any science classes right now.” She wriggles her nose. “I am surviving Algebra...blah.”

“Do you like, science-kind-of-things...?” Levy's words trail off. He wants to kick himself.

Eh, duh, she's at a STEM school. She has to be into:

Science.

Technology.

Engineering.

or

Math.

It's a one in four chance she's REALLY into science.

I am assuming not Math.

“Oh yeah!” Elise says with gusto. “Totally stellar.”

Levy sits up straight in his chair. He gives Elise his full attention. *Oh...yeah?* He grabs the seat to keep from soaring through the roof.

“Just say the word science and I am all over it,” Elise explains.

“Wow.” Levy's eyes widen.

“I can talk about it for hours and can't get enough.” She giggles.

Levy melts on the inside. “I...believe you.”

What are the odds that your bad luck could turn around this quickly?

Please don't jinx it.

“Normally I'm pretty shy, but get me talking about science, and you might have a hard time shutting me up.”

In his ears, her words become fuzzy, yet her face comes into perfect focus. *She has freckles in just the right places. I am close enough to see her freckles.* He doesn't have to initiate or stretch out the conversation to fill up dead silence. *If most girls are like Elise, then why have I been so afraid to talk to one?*

Slow down. Don't forget to breathe.

“What do you like most about science?”

She asked you a question.

Answer her.

“Ah, I...make things.”

“Organic or mechanical?”

“Mechanical,” Levy licks his dry lips. “I...invent things. How about you?”

“Biology is more my focus.” Elise crinkles up her nose. “Cells and microorganisms are a wonder to me.” She flutters her fingers, which make her colorful bracelets tinkle. “But, I also love to see people invent new technology.” Elise plays with her dark hair. “I picture ideas like bees buzzin’ around in their brains. You gotta love the human mind.”

Shut up. That’s why they call me Brainiac. “Shut up,” he blurts.

“What?”

Levy panics. “No, please, I meant...talk, please. I was just...”

Her giggle melts Levy again. He shakes his head.

“What?”

“I still can’t believe you really, genuinely are into this stuff.” Levy furrows his eyebrows. “Most girls I know aren’t.”

Elise shrugs her shoulders and leans toward him.

She smells like a fresh morning.

“I’m not **most** girls, I’m me.” She tilts her head to one side with a quizzical grin. “I like what I like even if other people don’t get me.”

This conversation, and for that matter, the day in general, is looking up.

I am almost thankful for my injury.

The nurse's door opens and a thin black-haired boy steps out. The nurse gives him a smile. The boy doesn't return it. He walks across the room to collect his pile of books.

Levy recognizes the boy and lets out a snicker. “Oh, theeerrres’s Chris, or should I say, ‘Nerdeo the first, King of the Nerds.’” Levy gives him a mock salute.

This was the boy, his buddies told him about. Chris Xo was Gates most terrorized 6th grader. Levy avoided this class of nerd like the plague. He already had a tough time not attracting nerd hazing himself.

Chris is what you call a classic Class One Social Misfit Nerd.

That is such a long title for a little guy.

Chris reminds me of a marionette puppet with long skinny arms and legs.

He's sort of sad just sauntering across the room.

Everyone says he spends all his time with his nose in a foreign language book. He always has a stack of them.

Levy shakes his head.

Glad it's not me making a fool of myself, especially with the most gorgeous girl at Gates just twelve inches away.

Levy observes as Chris carefully stacks his books, drops a couple, and picks them up again. He struggles but manages to get the door part way opened with his toe.

He is pretty flexible to be able to do.

Chris attempts to wedge a knee, then a dangling foot through to open the door while balancing his books in both arms.

Levy leans his arm on the armrest. *This has to be some kind of comedy act.*

The door swings around and smacks him on his butt. There's a roar of laughter from the kids in the room. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The King of the Nerds has left the building!* Levy almost says it out loud, but another boy beats him to it.

"BAHHHHAHAHAAA." It just burst out of Levy.

"Long live the King," shouts a girl from a row over.

Levy grins.

That last comment elicits another round of fresh laughter.

This is the real medicine I needed: a new relationship, and a reminder that I'm not a total loser. There are other Nerdians nerdier than I. He swears even Ms. Deal, the nurse, actually cracks a smile behind her clipboard.

Levy turns back to continue his conversation with Elise, but something is different. The atmosphere around her transforms. "Whoa." Instead of soft, golden-eyes, two fiery coals ignite. They are boring right through him like red-hot laser beams.

GEEZ.

What did I say?

"What right do you have to be teasing that boy?" Her tone is a sharp razor. She grips the back of Levy's chair.

Levy swears the molded plastic cracks under the pressure.

Elise's knuckles squeeze in anger, turning white. "YOU are no better than those three morons who tease him every day at lunch!" Her words combust and ignite the air surrounding them.

The room feels really hot. Is it spinning?

Levy feels the room getting smaller.

“Everyone laughs at his misery and thinks **nothing** of it!”

Levy knows he’s guilty as charged. Balls of sweat bead up on his forehead and his lunch heaves in his stomach.

Elise tears into him and he deserves every scalding bite. “Do you...have any idea what that boy has been through?” Her white teeth clench. “DO YOU?!”

“Uh...” Levy swallows uncomfortably.

“I don’t think he has *any* friends!”

“I just...”

“How dare you crush what little self-esteem that poor boy has!” Veins pop out on Elise’s perfect forehead.

“Elise...”

“Some people are fragile emotionally and some of us...” Elise turns away, coddling her leg for a moment. A look of pain passes on her face. “Are fragile in other ways.”

“If you let me explain...”

Her eyes glisten. “I thought you were smarter than that, Levy Roarke.” The rebuke sends a spear right through Levy’s heart.

A “hmmph,” is the last thing that leaves those perfect lips. Elise’s face sizzles with rage. She turns her back to Levy, so he can’t see her boil.

She didn’t let me explain!

A stream of tears runs down her face, but Levy never sees it.

This girl is ticked off because no one got up to help Chris when he struggled to get out the door.

Why didn’t she get up and help him?

It’s then that Levy notices her right foot bandaged up to her knee. There is a pair of crutches leaning next to her seat.

Ah, yes, that would explain a lot...

The nurse cracks open the door and motions for Levy to enter.

Perfect timing for once today. Exit stage left.

He sighs, cradling his injured arm, and gets to his feet. Levy stops at the door and looks back at Elise. *I am sorry.*

Where you messed up, Levy Roarke:

- A. *You laughed at a fellow nerd.*
- B. *You opened your mouth at the wrong time.*
- C. *You ignored the right time to shut your mouth.*

D. Teasing always backfires.

E. You...laughed at a fellow nerd. That is pretty low.

Give her a little space. Maybe she just has a temper, like someone else we know.

The nurse taps her toe, impatiently. "Mr. Roarke?" With a frown, Ms. Deal motions him in with her clipboard.

The door slowly closes between Levy and Elise.

Me and my big mouth.