

## AUGUST, FRESHMAN YEAR



Henry squeaked into the classroom just as the bell rang. He'd hoped he would have time to run Catherine Hodges's package over to the post office, but he would've had to make it there and back to the Bible building in five minutes. Then, he spent two minutes going to the wrong side of the building. All of that meant he carried the box under his arm as he tried to find a seat to squeeze into. He'd prefer a spot in the back of the large room, but only the second row was available—much closer than he'd like.

The room buzzed with the nervous energy of thirty Freshmen on their first day of classes. The man who must be his professor walked up and down the aisle with a stack of syllabi. He handed out several per row, each student taking one and passing it on.

When Henry got his copy, he scanned it until he found the list of test dates and due dates. For people like Jason, who had grown up going to church their whole lives, a class on the New Testament would not be a difficult prospect. But for Henry, who had only read the Bible for the first time a few years ago, it was daunting.

“All right, folks.” The professor strolled back to the front of

the room. He waved his hands to quiet the students. “Let’s get started. Welcome to Honors New Testament. I’m Dr. Cooper.”

*Wait, what? Honors?*

As a requirement for his scholarship, Henry had been placed on a special academic track. He just didn’t realize that New Testament would be one of his honors classes. How could he possibly pass an *advanced* Bible class?

“Before we begin, I’d like everyone to stand.” Chairs scraped as the students rose. “Great. Now, please lift your left foot off the floor.”

Some students giggled, but as Henry looked around, he saw everyone balancing on one leg.

“Wonderful, thank you. I just wanted to make sure we got started on the right foot.”

Several low groans could be heard around the room, but Henry let out a loud burst of laughter. A girl giggled from somewhere to his right. Henry poked his head around to see who it was and found a short young woman with curly brown hair. She turned, maybe to see who shared in her laughter, and gave Henry a shy smile.

Henry’s anxiety eased a little as he slipped back into his seat. At least the professor had a sense of humor. Maybe he’d also have a lot of grace for his students.

“I know a lot of you might be wondering what an honors Bible class will require of you. I’ll admit, this will likely be one of your more rigorous classes this semester. You can’t just skate by without reading or studying, like some of your friends.”

Henry shook his head. He definitely hadn’t been counting on breezing by in any of his classes.

“But I promise, you will get out of this course what you put into it. And I hope by the end of the semester, you will find it has been one of your more rewarding educational experiences.”

It would be an experience all right.

“Now, I encourage a lot of discussion in my classes. And in

order to feel comfortable doing that, we need to get to know one another. I'd like to go around the room and introduce ourselves. Just give me your name, your hometown, and a favorite hobby."

Dr. Cooper looked at the front row. "Let's start here."

The curly-haired girl from earlier spoke. "My name is Catherine Hodges, but my friends call me Cate."

Henry gasped. He cleared his throat to disguise the sound, looking around to make sure no one noticed. His box buddy.

"I'm from Wichita, Kansas. Oh, and I like to read."

Henry didn't hear much else as the next person took a turn. Well, at least he figured out how to find Catherine. Or Cate, assuming she would ever consider him a friend.

The next step, Henry decided, was to figure out how to give Cate her package without burning any bridges. If he was going to share a mailbox with this girl for four years, he needed to make a good impression.

One by one, guys and girls introduced themselves. When it came to Henry, he only had to think a minute. "Henry Mullins. I'm from Shady Springs, Arkansas. And I enjoy photography."

In a few minutes, the rest of the students had shared. Henry realized he hadn't actually caught more than a couple names. He needed to pay better attention if he wanted some friends to study with in the future.

"All right, let's see how I can do." Dr. Cooper rubbed his hands together and pointed to the first row. "Cate, Heather, Kevin, Nichole." He proceeded to name each and every student in the room. Henry whistled. A few students clapped, impressed. It helped a little to know that his professor at least cared enough to learn his name.

Next Dr. Cooper walked them through the syllabus. There were reading assignments every day. And it was a daily class. There was a mid-term, a final test, and a research paper due before Thanksgiving. Henry took a deep breath. He'd only

finished his second class of the day, and he already felt as if he were drowning.

After the last bell rang, Henry quick-stepped over to Catherine's seat, the package under his arm.

"Hey, Catherine—Cate!"

Her curly hair bounced over her shoulder as she turned to face him. He hadn't noticed before, but she had beautiful brown eyes and a smile that made his heart stutter. "Hi, um..."

"Henry. Henry Mullins. I know we haven't officially met yet, but you're my—I mean, we share a mailbox." He gave what he hoped was a disarmingly handsome smile.

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh? I had forgotten about that." She stuck out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Henry."

"Thanks, I hope so. I mean, you too." *Real smooth, Henry.* He grimaced. "I don't know how to tell you this." He held out the box. "I accidentally picked up your mail."

"What?"

He laughed. The whole thing was pretty ridiculous. "It was actually my friend Jason. We saw the slip and didn't even think about checking to see—"

She took the package from him. "But it's been opened."

Henry leaned against the back of her chair. "Right, like I said, we—"

"And it looks like someone went through all the stuff inside." She looked up at him, confusion and anger written all over her face.

"It's so crazy. I didn't realize at first that it wasn't mine."

"But my name is written all over the outside. And on the card. And I'm sure it was on the slip of paper from the post office." Her eyes flashed, and her cheeks grew crimson.

"Yes, you're totally right, and I'm so sorry." He ran his hands through his hair and gave another of his patented Henry smiles. "I guess I didn't read any of those things. I mean, I read the card—"

“You read my card?”

“Sure, that’s how—” Henry stopped suddenly when he saw the look on Cate’s face. She was no longer confused. She was flat-out angry. Did this girl have absolutely no sense of humor? How could he possibly get himself out of this mess? “Don’t get upset.”

“Okay. So, you neglected to read the notice from the post office.” She ticked off each point on her fingers. “You somehow conned the mail room into giving you my package. You opened the box and rifled through *my* things. And you read the card which was written *to me*.”

“Wow. When you put it that way—” Henry shrugged. “I’m really sorry. It was an honest mistake.”

“There’s nothing honest about this whole thing.” She shook her head. “I hope mail fraud won’t be a regular occurrence with you.”

“No, I’ll be much more careful in the future. Promise.” He held up his hand.

“I certainly hope so.” She tucked her syllabus inside a folder and tapped the folder and her notebook sharply on the table before stacking them on top of the box.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you around.” Henry moved her chair out of the way so she could exit the aisle.

“It would seem to be unavoidable.” She marched off.

“Bye, Cate.” Henry couldn’t tell if she heard him. Probably not, since she didn’t turn or say anything back to him.

“Rough first day?”

Henry turned to see Dr. Cooper at the front of the room, collecting papers into his briefcase.

“I’m sure she’ll cool off ... in a few days.” Henry looked around the classroom. While he and Cate had been talking, all of the other students had left. Only he and the professor were there now. “Actually, I was hoping to talk to you.”

“Of course. What can I do for you, Henry?”

Henry smiled, glad to know Dr. Cooper still remembered his name. But that didn't change the fact he needed to get out of this class. "I don't belong here."

"Are you not an honors scholar?" Dr. Cooper tilted his head.

Henry sighed. "I am, but I can't pass this class."

"Why not?"

Henry spread his fingers and looked down at his hands. "I've only ever read through the Bible once. I just started going to church a few years ago. There's no way I can keep up in an honors Bible class."

Dr. Cooper nodded. "This class is required for all honors scholars. You need it to keep your scholarship."

"But isn't there another course I can take? Or maybe a remedial Bible class?"

"Remedial Bible." Dr. Cooper laughed. "We don't offer that, and you wouldn't need it anyway."

Dr. Cooper gently gripped Henry's shoulder. "You have the scores and the grades to show that you do, in fact, belong in this class. You're not the first recent convert to come here and, Lord willing, you won't be the last. I've taught plenty of students who have never cracked open a Bible before." He smiled. "If you keep up with the reading and come to me anytime you have a question, you'll be just fine."

Henry nodded, though he was still unsure. "Okay."

Dr. Cooper clicked his briefcase shut. "I mean it. I want you to visit during office hours next week."

"Yes, sir." Henry wondered if office hours were like the college version of detention. Either way, he could use whatever help he could get.

So far, college was shaping up to be much harder than he'd expected.