



**Accepting**

**Me**

**Jo  
Ramsey**



# Accepting Me

By

Jo Ramsey

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## Chapter One

If Landon mentioned his boyfriend one more time, I would probably scream. Or throw his box of books out the window, probably without opening the window.

Don't get me wrong. I was happy Landon had found someone. He needed more people to spend time with. He'd only been in town a little while, because he and his dad moved around a lot for his dad's job. Landon was an awesome guy, but some people didn't want to be friends with the new kid. Especially if the new kid was openly gay.

He'd met this guy V.J. at a basketball game when our team played against V.J.'s school, and since then Landon hadn't talked about much else. It was kind of fun at first, seeing Landon all blushy and stuff. Entertaining. But it got old pretty fast when he stopped being able to have a conversation without bringing V.J.'s name in after less than a minute. I was glad he was happy. I just didn't want to hear about it every five seconds.

I was going to have to get used to it, though, because Landon was moving in with my family so he could finish high school in one place. Even though they'd only been in town a few months, his dad's company was already sending him somewhere else. So Landon and his dad had talked to my parents about letting Landon stay with us until graduation. No one had a problem with it. Landon was at my place most of the time anyway.

That was why he had boxes cluttering up my room. Today was moving day. I sat cross-legged on my bed, watching him try to find space for his books on my bookcase. Our house only had three bedrooms, so he and I would have to share. My little brother Tyler got to keep his own room.

"You'd better not bring him over here to have sex in my room," I said.

"Yeah, Shane, because I'd totally do that." Landon turned toward me and rolled his eyes. "After his dad walked in on us, we might not be having sex anywhere for a while. Definitely not here. I have more respect for you guys than that. What's up your ass today, anyway? Every time I mention V.J., you have this look on your face like I'm making you smell dog crap."

"Sorry." I wasn't doing it on purpose. Hopefully Landon knew that. "You mention him kind of a lot. Maybe we can talk about something else. Like how weird it's going to be for you to open Christmas presents here."

"I'm opening them at home." He paused. "Dad's house. Whatever I should call it now. He wants to have Christmas morning be just him and me."

"Okay." Not having him at my house first thing Christmas morning would be less weird for me, too. Landon was a good friend, but he wasn't family. At least not yet.

He crammed a few books onto one of the shelves. "You need to find someone to go out with. Then you wouldn't get so annoyed when I talk about V.J."

"I don't get annoyed. Just bored." The thought of having "someone" was beyond boring. The whole idea made my stomach hurt. I'd watched my friends have boyfriends or girlfriends, and it seemed to be a lot of work. And a lot of hanging on each other and

agonizing about kissing and sex.

None of that interested me at all. My friends and my parents asked me all the time why I didn't date someone, and the only answer I had for them was that I just plain wasn't interested. It didn't make sense to them.

It didn't make sense to me either, really. Everyone else I knew either was paired up, or they were between pair-ups and wishing they were paired up. The older I got, the more couples I saw around me. I didn't understand it. I couldn't figure out why they wanted to be joined at the hip to someone.

"You wouldn't be as bored if you had a girlfriend." He paused again. "Or a boyfriend. Hell, I don't even know if you're gay, straight, both, or neither. What kind of person are you into?"

"The kind who doesn't ask me questions like that." I stood and stretched. "Thanks for killing my mood. I thought I was in here to help you set up your stuff, not to be interrogated."

"Man, I just don't get you." He took more books out of the box. "You know, just tell me to drop it instead of acting all pissy."

"Drop it." I didn't sit down again. He wouldn't actually drop it. He almost never did. Especially with something like this, where he didn't understand what was going on. Maybe he would stop talking about V.J. and dating, but he would probably start trying to get me to tell him why I was so pissed off about his questions.

I didn't totally understand it myself. Everyone in our group teased each other about dating and flirting and crushes, but anytime someone tried it on me I either lost my temper or walked off on them. Or both. It wasn't normal, at least based on how my friends acted.

"Anyway, I really appreciate you and your parents letting me move in," Landon said. "It would have sucked hard if I'd had to move again with only a year and a half left of school. I'm never moving again if I can help it."

"Except when you move out of here someday," I said.

"Yeah." He grinned at me over his shoulder. "Unless your parents let me stay after you move out. Maybe they'll like me better than you."

"Sure. You just go ahead and believe that."

"You can sit down again. I promise I'll stop talking about the annoying stuff."

I didn't totally believe him, but I sat down anyway.

While he finished unpacking his stuff, we talked about school and the books he'd brought. And a bunch of other things which weren't really worth remembering. Everything except dating and V.J., which made me happy. Sex didn't interest me. Relationships didn't interest me. I didn't mind having friends, but I didn't want anything more. I'd repeated it so many times I should have had it tattooed on my forehead, except Mom and Dad wouldn't let me have any tattoos until I was at least eighteen.

After Landon was done with his stuff, we went downstairs for supper. Mom had made

turkey burgers and a huge salad including cranberries, strawberries, chopped egg, cheese, and almonds. No fries or chips; Mom and Dad tried to keep those kinds of things out of the house. I wasn't sure if they were on a permanent health kick or if it was just because of Dad's lack of willpower. Before Tyler was born, when I was three or four, Dad had weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds more than he did now. He'd told me a few times he was afraid he'd go back to stuffing his face if we had junk food in the house.

I didn't mind eating the healthy stuff. Neither did Landon, who lived on take-out most of the time when he was with his dad. He'd probably eaten supper at my house more than I had since we'd become friends.

We sat at the round table in the middle of the dining room, which was supposed to be a living room. Our living room was a separate room which was supposed to be a den.

"Dawn, you have to teach me to cook," Landon said. "Please. I want to be able to make stuff like this for myself when I'm out on my own."

"I'd be happy to as long as you're prepared to really work in the kitchen." Mom smiled and set the bowl of salad in the center of the table beside the platter of burgers and whole-grain rolls.

"She's pushy when it comes to cooking." Tyler walked into the room and sat on the other side of Landon. "Trust me."

"Only when you completely ignore directions and almost set the kitchen on fire." Mom went down the short hallway to the living room. "Centauri, supper's ready."

Yeah, my dad's name is Centauri. Really. His parents were—let's just say different.

Dad sat beside Tyler, and Mom took the last chair. Before we could eat, we each had to talk about something we were thankful for. My parents had started the tradition before I could even talk, because even though they didn't believe in a god to pray to, they did believe there were higher powers than us in the Universe. They felt those powers deserved thanks for good things that happened in our lives. Plus focusing on good things made everyone happier.

Since Landon was still sort of a guest, he went first. I expected him to say he was thankful for V.J., like he had last time. Instead he said, "I'm thankful for being mostly moved in, and for you guys letting me move in. It really means a lot to be able to finish high school here."

"I'm thankful because you're here," Mom said. "It's going to be nice having another kid around."

"Is that your thanks, Dawn?" Dad asked.

Mom smiled. "Yes."

Dad nodded. "Okay. I'm thankful because I found the bug in the app I've been working on, so now I can finish it up and show it to the higher-ups at work."

"I'm thankful for winter break and not having to go to school," Tyler said.

"You've used that one every day since school got out," I said.

"I'm thankful for it every day since school got out. I'd rather work on my manga." Tyler had convinced himself he would write and illustrate Japanese graphic novels when he grew up. He didn't know any Japanese and could barely draw people who looked like people, but he kept trying.

"It's your turn, Shane," Mom said.

I had to think about it. Not much had happened today other than Landon moving in, and I didn't want to use that since Landon and Mom both had.

After a couple seconds I came up with something that went along with what I'd been thinking earlier. "I'm thankful because I have friends and don't have to worry about relationships."

Mom got a weird look on her face as if she wanted to say something and didn't know what. Tyler looked down at his plate and poked at his burger roll.

"There's plenty of time for relationships," Dad said quickly. "I for one think it's smart to just be a teenager and focus on things like school and part-time jobs for now."

Maybe I should have said I didn't think I'd want a romantic relationship even after I finished school and had a real career, but I kept my mouth shut. According to what they'd told me, neither of them had dated anyone until college. They just hadn't wanted to. But then they'd gone to college and had started dating people, and then they'd met each other. That was probably what they expected me to do. Date in college and find my soul mate. Because those totally existed.

They could sort of understand wanting to stay away from dating while I was in high school, but I didn't think they'd understand wanting to stay away from it forever.

Thank something, Landon changed the subject. "We haven't talked a lot about rules here. I don't mind not having them, but you guys are being great about letting me stay, and I don't want to do anything to tick you off."

Dad got an evil grin on his face, which meant he was about to throw something at Landon that Landon might not be able to respond to. "What do you think your rules should be?"

Landon blinked and opened and shut his mouth a couple times. "Um, I don't know. With Dad, I had a curfew. He didn't really give me any other rules. I mean, I was supposed to do my schoolwork and stuff, and he didn't want me to have a job because he wanted me to concentrate on school. I'd rather have a job, though, so I can have some spending money and maybe help out around here."

"Your dad's sending us money every month," Mom said. "You know that. We don't need you to give us anything. I can understand wanting some money of your own, though. I don't see anything wrong with you having a part-time job somewhere as long as you can keep your grades up. We'll have to see what your dad says."

"I think there should be a rule saying he can't bring his boyfriend into my bedroom." I paused, because I knew my parents probably wouldn't go along with it. They didn't necessarily think teenagers *should* have sex, just that if they were going to anyway, they



should have access to protection and a safe place to do it. A box of condoms had been in our linen closet since I started middle school, and Mom and Dad had made sure Tyler and I knew they were there and that we could bring people to the house to have sex as long as we let Mom and Dad know about it. "At least, not when I'm around."

"I agree," Dad said. "And I'll add that there won't be any sneaking around, Landon. If you want to bring V.J. over, ask us first. If you want privacy with him, ask us first. And I'm pretty sure I don't have to talk to you about being safe."

"Um, no." Landon looked down at his plate. "I have the hang of safe sex, I think."

"Good."

Dad dropped the subject, which was a relief. To Landon and to me. I really didn't want to listen to a conversation about sex when I was getting ready to eat. I didn't see anything wrong with other people having sex or talking about it. I just didn't want to hear about it.

"Well, unless anyone has anything else to share about today, we can eat," Mom said.

We all started eating, and I tuned out the conversation about Landon's rules. Mom and Dad would give him the same rules they gave me and Tyler, probably, with a few modifications since they had to consult with Landon's dad about really important stuff. I didn't understand how the whole legal guardian thing worked. I just knew Landon's dad had given my parents permission to make some decisions but not others, and my parents could sign school papers and take Landon to doctors and things like that.

None of it mattered to me, so I just stuffed my face with a couple turkey burgers and a pretty huge amount of salad.

## Chapter Two

After we finished eating, Mom, Landon, and Tyler headed for the living room to watch TV. I took the dishes into the kitchen, because it was my night to clean up from supper. We rotated chores so no one would get tired of having to do the same thing every night.

Dad followed me and leaned against the counter beside the double sink while I started filling one basin so I could wash the dishes. I'd tried for about eight years now to persuade my parents to buy a dishwasher. So far, no luck.

"You didn't seem too thrilled with the conversation out there," Dad said.

"I didn't think I needed to be thrilled about Landon having to follow rules." I squirted some dish soap into the filling sink and quickly turned the bottle upright again so a few tiny bubbles escaped and floated around in the air. Maybe it was kind of childish of me, but I got a kick out of watching the bubbles.

"I didn't mean the rules conversation," Dad said. "I meant before. You're the one who mentioned being thankful not to be in a relationship, but you kind of shut down when your mom and I followed up on it. Is there something you need to talk about?"

I talked to my parents about a lot of things. They were that kind of parent. They didn't judge and didn't come down hard on me when I'd done something they didn't approve of. All they did was talk to me and help me solve problems. If I'd done something they thought I shouldn't have, they gave me consequences that made sense.

My parents were awesome, but I didn't know if I should talk to Dad about this. He might not really want to hear it.

"Relationships just bug me." I paused. "I don't mean bug. I mean... You know, this isn't as easy to explain as I'd hoped."

"Try again." He probably had a pretty good idea of what I meant, but he wouldn't fill in words for me.

"I don't have a problem with other people's relationships. I just don't want one of my own." I started paying a lot of attention to the dishes in the sink, because focusing on something else made it easier to talk than looking at Dad. "I don't understand why people want to pair up. I mean, why go to all the trouble when you can just be friends and not have to deal with fighting and messes and stuff?"

"Messes?" He chuckled. "You mean emotional or you mean the wet spot?"

"A little bit of both." Dad joking about sex didn't bother me. Like I said, my parents didn't think teens necessarily should have sex, or that they necessarily shouldn't. It was a thing that some teens did, and my parents were realistic and open enough to talk about it.

Dad nodded. "Okay. So you think sex is messy and leads to fighting?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just don't really understand why people do it."

“It feels good,” he said. “And when you’re with someone you really care about, it strengthens the connection between you. People enjoy being close to each other, physically and emotionally, and sex is a way to be close to someone you’re in love with.”

“Okay. Why do people want to be in love with each other?”

“Wow.” He paused. I still didn’t look at him. “I don’t really know how to answer you, Shane. I’m going to have to think about that one.”

“Okay.” When my parents said they’d think about something, they actually did. Sometimes they came up with an answer after Tyler or I had forgotten we’d asked a question. Dad might not be able to answer this one, but if he couldn’t, he would at least tell me.

“Shane, I need to ask you something,” he said slowly. “I hope you’ll try to answer. If you can’t answer, that’s okay, but I still need to ask.”

“Okay.” My chest got a little tight and I held my breath waiting to hear his question. I kept working on the dishes, even though they were pretty clean by now.

He hesitated. “I’ve never heard you talk about a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend, or even any crushes. For a while, your mom and I wondered if you were gay and weren’t ready to talk about it, but after what you just said, I’m leaning toward thinking that isn’t why you don’t talk about people you’re interested in. You say you don’t understand or want sex or relationships. Do I have that right?”

“Yeah.” I scrubbed harder at the plate in my hand.

“Do you think that might change as you get older?”

I held up a finger to let him know I wanted to think before I spoke. As much as I wanted to avoid the question, I would answer it. I just had to figure out how.

He stayed silent, and after a couple of minutes I managed to come up with something to say. “I don’t know. I can’t predict the future. Maybe things will change when I’m in college, the way they did for you and Mom. Right now, though, no, I don’t think it’ll change. Even Tyler goes around talking about girls he thinks are cute and that kind of thing. I don’t think anyone’s cute. I like the way some people look, but I don’t want to hug or kiss or have sex with them. It’s the same way I like some landscape paintings or nature photos.”

I glanced at Dad out of the corner of my eye. He nodded. “When you think about your future, do you think about having a partner or spouse? Kids?”

I didn’t usually think about my future at all past graduating high school and going to college. I hadn’t even figured out yet what I wanted to study in college. But since Dad had asked, I tried picturing myself as an adult, living on my own, working, all the stuff adults did.

Except being married or living with someone and having a family. Just trying to picture those things made my head hurt. Thinking about having roommates didn’t bother me. Having a roommate or two wouldn’t be too different from living with my parents and Tyler, as far as I could see. But having a spouse and kids just didn’t feel right. Especially the spouse.

“No,” I told Dad. “I don’t think I’d want that. I know everyone’s supposed to, but I don’t think I do.” I paused. I didn’t see anything wrong with the way I felt. To me, the people who wanted all the kissy-huggy-sex stuff were the weird ones. But I knew everyone else might consider me weird for not wanting those things. I needed to find out whether my dad was part of “everyone else.” “Do you think something’s wrong with me?”

“Look at me,” he said. I did, and he smiled. “I don’t think anything’s wrong with you. You’re you, which means you aren’t the same as anyone else. I am a little worried about what it means that you don’t even want to think about relationships and sex, because it seems a little unusual for a teenage boy. I didn’t have any relationships until college, but I thought about it. And I thought about sex a lot.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“I figured.” He just looked at me for long enough that I had to turn back to the sink because he was making me uncomfortable. “I think there’s a reason for how you feel, the same as there’s a reason Landon would rather date guys than girls. I’m going to have to do some research.”

I almost laughed. Dad “researched” everything he didn’t immediately understand. In a way, it made things easier, because he managed to find explanations that made sense. But sometimes it annoyed me, especially when he lectured me about what he’d learned.

“Let me know what you find out,” I said. “I don’t really need to know why I’m the way I am, though. I just want other people to understand it so everyone will stop acting like I’m a freak for not going out with anyone.”

“I hope your mom and I don’t do that.”

“You don’t act like I’m a freak.” I chose my words very, very carefully. “You just act as if I’m going to outgrow it or I’ve chosen not to date so I can concentrate on school or something. That isn’t how it is, Dad.”

“I think I understand now.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “And I’m sorry we assumed this was just a phase. Can I share with your Mom? If she knows what we’ve been talking about, she might understand too.”

“Go ahead. I just want you guys to accept me.” My voice choked a little, so I swallowed hard and put my attention back on the dishes. I’d spent a lot of time pretending the way people acted about this didn’t bother me. So much time that I’d convinced myself, until now.

Now I realized how much it upset me when my friends, and even my parents, acted like I wasn’t normal, or like I would grow into being normal somehow. Mom and Dad had always said “normal” wasn’t even a thing, but apparently in some situations, it was. And I wasn’t.

“I’m going to go talk to her now,” Dad said. “You okay?”

I let out a long breath. “Yeah. I’m just going to finish up in here. Make sure Tyler does his chore, please. He’s been blowing it off lately.”

“So have I, so I’ll be sure we both do our chores. After Christmas we’ll add Landon to

the rotation.”

“Yeah.” Christmas Eve was the next day. Hopefully adding Landon to our chore rotation meant only one more day of having to clean a whole room by myself. None of us would do chores on Christmas, because it was always a day off for us.

Dad left the room. After I finished the dishes, I did a quick wipe-down of the countertops and swept the floor. It didn’t look very dirty, so I didn’t bother mopping it.

Instead of going into the living room, I decided to go to my room. Landon and Tyler were arguing about the TV, which meant I’d be able to have some time alone. The thing about having Landon living there which would take the most getting used to was not being able to have time alone in my own room unless I told him to stay out. And telling him that would seem weird considering it was his room too.

Right now, I decided to take advantage of the chance for some privacy. I went into my room, closed the door, and flopped down on my bed.

Staring up at the ceiling, I tried to figure out why I was so upset. Dad had said right out he didn’t think anything was wrong with me, so why did I still worry about what he thought? He hadn’t judged me, but I still felt judged.

Maybe I was just judging myself. I was okay with the way I felt, but not everyone would be. Some people would consider me a freak, or wouldn’t believe me if I told them how I felt. Maybe Landon felt the same way about being gay. Being gay was more acceptable than not being anything, but plenty of people still didn’t approve of it.

If I’d thought he would understand at all, I would have asked him. But he was one of the people who always teased me about finding someone. At school or the mall, he pointed out girls and guys he considered cute and encouraged me to talk to them.

Maybe if I told him doing that was the same as me trying to talk him into going out with a girl, he’d back off. He might at least understand why I had a problem with it. I just didn’t know if I was ready to tell him.

After a while, I decided to stop thinking. It was giving me a headache, and I wasn’t solving anything. I kept staring at the ceiling and tried to shut off my brain so I didn’t get stuck in a thought-loop.

I did a pretty good job of it. When Landon came in, I looked at the clock and saw that an hour had gone by. It wasn’t late or anything, but I was pretty tired. We’d moved a lot of Landon’s stuff and we still had to bring more things over from his old house the next day. He and his dad would have their family Christmas Sunday morning at the old house, but they had to be out of there before Monday so the new owners could start moving in.

Landon yawned loudly and shut the door hard enough to shake the walls. “You awake?”

“I would be now even if I hadn’t been.” I sat up and glared at him. “Do you always walk in like an earthquake?”

“How many times have I slept here? You know I don’t.” He sat on the edge of the other bed, which had been unofficially his since we’d become friends. “What’s going on with you? You’re hiding out in here while we’re all out there being a family. And it’s your family, not

mine.”

“It might as well be yours now,” I said. “I’m not hiding. I’m resting. You have heavy stuff.”

“Did we piss you off at supper?”

The question didn’t connect with what we’d just been saying, which was pretty typical with Landon. If something popped into his head, he said it even if it had nothing to do with the conversation.

“You didn’t piss me off.” I decided to take a chance on following up with what I’d been thinking earlier. “It’s kind of hard to explain. Would you be happy if someone told you girls were the ones you should be dating?”

“Hell, no.” He paused. “Is that what you’re dealing with? I’m into guys. You aren’t into anyone?”

“I’m not into dating.” I tried to remember where my brain had gone with this earlier so I could say it without sounding stupid. “You’re gay, right? So you only want to date guys. You might like the way a girl looks, but you wouldn’t want to date her.”

“Exactly.”

“I like the way some people look, but I wouldn’t want to date them. Whether they’re guys or girls.” Out loud, it didn’t sound as stupid as I’d been afraid it would. “I’m just not interested. And before you even ask, do you think you’re going to want to date girls—women—when you’re older?”

“Nope. I think I’m pretty well set on guys.” He crossed his legs on the bed, even though he still had his shoes on. I decided not to mention it. If he wanted dirt all over his bed, it was his problem. “So this isn’t just that you aren’t ready to date, or you want to concentrate on school like your parents say. You don’t think you’re ever going to want to date?”

“Exactly. Or have sex, or anything. I’d rather just have friends. I don’t think it’s a bad thing.”

“Me neither.” He shrugged. “Okay. So how come you didn’t tell me this before? All you’ve ever said is, ‘Stop being pushy, Landon.’”

I laughed. He did a pretty good imitation of me. “I didn’t know how to tell anyone. Being gay is kind of normal, you know? So is being bisexual. Or any other ‘sexual.’” I made air quotes. “But being whatever I am... Most people don’t understand it. I don’t know if I even understand it completely.”

“I know what you mean.” He grinned. “All right. I won’t bug you about finding a girlfriend or boyfriend anymore if you stop looking like you scraped me off your shoe every time I talk about V.J.”

“Deal.”

We shook hands, and he yawned again. “Okay if I go to sleep? We did a lot today and there’s still more tomorrow.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “I’m going to sleep too.”

“Cool.” He stood and flipped off the overhead light, then got into bed. “I don’t think you’re any weirder than I already did.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You’re welcome.” He didn’t say anything else, and after a minute or so he snored.

I was pretty sure the snore was fake. They usually were.

## Chapter Three

Saturday turned into a blur pretty quickly. Mom and I helped Landon bring the rest of his stuff over to my house, while Dad and Tyler helped Landon's dad finish packing up everything else to either go into the moving truck or the storage unit Landon's dad had rented. He planned to come back in a couple months to get the stuff out of storage, but the place he was moving into to start with wasn't big enough to hold everything.

A couple times, Mom started to say something to me. Each time, someone else interrupted her by walking into the room. That was fine with me. I was pretty sure Dad had talked to her the night before, which meant she wanted to follow up with me. Since I didn't really want to talk about it, I had no problem with the interruptions.

Unfortunately for me, we finished moving Landon's stuff and he went into my—our—bedroom to call V.J. before going to his old house for the night. I didn't see why he couldn't have waited until he went to the old house before making the call. Then again, I didn't see why he felt the need to call V.J. anyway, since they'd just talked the day before.

Mom took the opportunity to drag me into her and Dad's room, where most of the serious conversations in our house happened unless they took place while someone was doing a chore.

She closed the door and motioned for me to sit on the bed. "Dad and I talked a little last night."

"I know." I sat down even though I didn't really want to. "He said he was going to talk to you. Mom, honestly, I don't see why this is a big deal for everyone. I don't want a spouse and two kids and a white picket fence. I don't want to date anyone, kiss anyone, or have sex with anyone. I'm just plain not interested in any of it, and I don't really understand why anyone would be. But it isn't destroying my life or anything. I have plenty of friends. I just don't want more than friendship. With anyone."

"Wow." Mom and Dad responded the same way to a lot of things. "I didn't even have a chance to talk, Shane."

"Sorry." I wasn't. I'd figured she was going to ask all the same questions as Dad, so I'd answered them. It should have saved us some time.

"Your dad said you think this is the way you're wired," she said. "The same as if you were straight, gay, or bi."

"Yeah, that's pretty much how it seems to me." I didn't remember saying it that way to Dad, but it was an accurate way to put it.

"He also said it seems to you as if no one, he and I included, accept or understand that this is just the way you are."

"Sometimes, yeah."

"We don't ever want you to feel unaccepted," she said. "I hope you know we do love and accept you no matter what. I think it's just hard for us to hear you don't want to find a partner in your life. I think all parents want their child to find someone to fall in love with



and build a life with.”

“Some parents want their child to marry someone of the opposite gender and have lots of babies,” I said. “It doesn’t mean everyone has to.”

“Of course not.” She frowned. “Are you saying our not accepting that you’re—I don’t know if there’s a word for it. I’ll have to look it up if your dad hasn’t already. Are you saying our not accepting it is the same as if you were gay and we tried to convince you to be straight?”

“I don’t know if it’s really the same, but it feels the same to me. I didn’t sit down one day and say, ‘Hey, I’ve decided I’ll ever fall in love or have sex’ any more than Landon sat down one day and said, ‘Hey, I’ve decided I like guys instead of girls.’ I’ve always felt this way, even when I was Tyler’s age.” Even when I was younger, in elementary school, and all the other kids chased each other around the playground so they could kiss.

“That’s a good way to explain it. I think I really understand now.” She hesitated. “Do you really think your dad and I haven’t been accepting?”

She sounded upset. She and Dad were usually pretty proud of how open they were, especially when it came to Tyler and me. The last thing she probably wanted was to sound prejudiced or anything.

I gave her a break. “I don’t think it was intentional. You just didn’t understand this isn’t a choice or a stage.”

“Yeah, exactly. But I understand now.” She opened the door. “Thanks for talking with me, Shane. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Cool.” I didn’t know whether it was or not. I just didn’t know what else to say.

Landon was still in my—our—room when I went in, but he wasn’t on the phone anymore. He was just lying on the bed listening to my stereo. His touching my stuff didn’t bother me. I’d told him anything in my room was up for grabs unless I said otherwise. I didn’t want him feeling like some kind of permanent guest when he was supposed to be part of the family.

“Did you have a good talk with your boyfriend?” I asked, making my voice kind of sing-song on the last word.

He threw his pillow at me. “Jealous because you don’t have one?”

“I couldn’t care less.” So much for being in a decent mood after talking to Mom. I flopped down on my bed and glared at him. “Why doesn’t anyone understand that?”

“Chill. It was a joke.” He sat up and looked at me. “You really mean it, though, right? You don’t care if you ever have a boyfriend or girlfriend?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know how he’d taken that from what I’d said, but I was glad he had. He was one less person I’d have to explain it to again. “It isn’t that I don’t care, really. I just don’t want it.”

“Ah.” He leaned back against the wall. “Okay. If that’s how it is, cool enough.”

“Landon,” Mom called from somewhere down the hall. “Your dad’s here.”

“Have to go.” Landon stood up. “Have a good Christmas Eve. Make sure you go to bed early so Santa will come.”

I threw his pillow back at him. “Yeah. You too.”

\* \* \*

On Christmas Eve, we had a tradition where we each were allowed to open one present. It was better now than when we were younger. Up until I was about eleven, we’d gone to church every year on Christmas Eve. Even though Mom and Dad weren’t religious and didn’t believe in some of the things the church taught, they’d grown up going to Christmas Eve services and thought we should do the same thing. So the presents Mom and Dad let us open back then were always church clothes.

We’d stopped going to church when the pastor’s wife told the congregation she’d stopped speaking to her sister, who’d just come out as a lesbian, and encouraged everyone else to cut homosexual relatives out of their lives “unless they repent.” After hearing her drivel, Mom and Dad had decided Christmas Eve was better spent at home. So now the Christmas Eve presents were usually pretty cool.

After Landon left, my parents, Tyler, and I gathered in the living room where a small potted evergreen tree took up a table, which usually held books, beside the window. Mom and Dad refused to buy a fake tree, but they didn’t like the idea of real trees going to waste, so they compromised on the potted ones every year. We kept those until they died, which sometimes wasn’t until three or four months after Christmas.

The presents sat on the table beside the tree or on the floor beside the table, depending on how big they were. There weren’t a lot of them, because Mom and Dad didn’t believe in spending their whole year’s budget on just one holiday.

Mom picked up a big box and handed it to Tyler. “Here’s the one we want you to open. Are you going to trade?” Since the church clothes thing had stopped, we had the choice of opening what Mom and Dad wanted us to open or choosing our own present.

The ones they wanted us to open were usually good ones, so we didn’t usually trade. Without answering, Tyler tore the paper off the present Mom had handed him and grinned when he saw the box. They’d bought him a tablet. “This is sweet!”

“Be careful with it,” Mom said. “You know the computer rules. No using it in your room, show us your history whenever we ask, and don’t delete anything, because you know Dad will figure it out.”

“Yeah.” Tyler opened the box. “Thanks!”

My present was next. The box was a lot smaller than Tyler’s.

“Are you going to open it or trade?” Dad asked.

“I’ll open it.” Even though it probably wasn’t anything technological or electronic, since the box was too small, it still would be a cool gift.

I tore off the paper. Underneath was just a small, plain cardboard box. No writing on it or anything to indicate what might be inside.

I looked at Mom and Dad. Nothing in their expressions gave me any sign of what I was opening either.

So I lifted the top of the box and found a piece of paper. Nothing else.

“A gift card?” I asked.

“Read it and see,” Dad replied.

Obviously he and Mom had no intention of giving me even a hint. I picked up the paper and saw right away that it wasn’t a gift card. It was just a bunch of words. It looked as if Dad had printed it off a website.

I was kind of disappointed. Here I’d been expecting the usual awesome Christmas Eve gift, and all I’d gotten was paper.

“Read it,” Dad said again. “I think you’ll be happy once you see what it actually is.”

I hoped he was right. I focused on the words.

The first one at the top of the page was, “Asexuality.”

That got my attention. In biology class, we’d learned about asexual organisms, so the word was familiar. Reading it on this paper, I realized it might apply to more than just bacteria and amoebas and stuff. Maybe it applied to humans, too.

Humans like me, at least.

I read on. The article talked about how in humans, asexuality was just another sexual orientation, even if it was one some people didn’t understand or even realize existed. It wasn’t abnormal, and it didn’t mean the person had something wrong with them or needed therapy. It just meant they weren’t sexually attracted to other people.

That definitely sounded like me.

I was so relieved, I couldn’t even talk. The article said exactly what I’d been thinking a whole lot better than I’d been able to explain it to the other people in my life. I wasn’t weird or abnormal or anything. I was just asexual. I could live with that.

I didn’t read the whole article right then. It was long, and Mom and Dad still hadn’t opened their presents. So I skimmed to the bottom of the page, where Mom had written a note.

*Dear Shane,*

*We do listen when you tell us things. It just sometimes takes a while for them to sink in. We didn’t know what to think when you told us you never wanted to settle down with someone or even date anyone, but there isn’t anything wrong with feeling that way. It just isn’t something we’d heard before. We did some fact checking online and found some articles like the one here. We understand now. You’re asexual, and we don’t have any problem with it. You’re our son and we love you. Let us know if you want to talk, or if there’s anything we can do to help you accept yourself or to help you cope with others who don’t accept you.*

*Love,*

*Mom and Dad*

I almost wanted to cry. In a good way. Dad really had listened. I'd said all I wanted was for them to accept me, so they'd given me acceptance as a Christmas present. It made me feel better than I could even say.

Christmas Eve presents at my house were definitely awesome.

"Shane?" Mom said softly. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, definitely." I smiled at her. "Thank you. This means a lot."

She smiled back. "You're welcome."

"What's going on?" Tyler said. "What's on the paper, Shane?"

I looked at Mom and Dad, and they just looked back at me. It was up to me to explain this to my brother. That was okay, because I needed to learn how to explain to other people. I wasn't going to just walk around telling everyone I was asexual, but if people asked, I had to know what to tell them.

"The paper is an explanation," I said. "You know how you talk about the girls you're interested in, and I just kind of roll my eyes?"

"Yeah." He got this thoughtful look on his face. "Are you gay? Is that why you get annoyed when you hear me talk about my girlfriends?"

"No." Probably a lot of people in my life would think so, though. "I'm not gay or straight. That's what the paper's about. I'm asexual." The word sounded strange when I said it out loud, but it sounded right, too. "I don't want to have sex—or in my case even go on dates—with anyone at all. I just want to have friends and my family."

"Cool."

I stared at my brother. "Cool?"

"Yeah. I don't have to worry about you ever stealing one of my girlfriends." He grinned. "I don't care what you are. You're my brother, so it's all good."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I should have known Tyler, out of everyone, would accept me the way I was. I'd never tried talking to him about it because I'd assumed he was too young. I'd have to remember he was smarter than I thought. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He slid off the couch onto the floor. "Mom's turn."

My parents both looked at me as if they expected me to say something else. I didn't have anything else to say. I knew now that I was normal, as much as anyone else at least, and there were other people in the world who felt the way I did. And I knew my family not only listened but really tried to understand.

I hadn't been just talking when I'd told Dad I wanted acceptance. And now that I had it, I felt amazing. It didn't matter what anyone else thought. I knew I was okay, and my family had my back. No matter how tough it got, as long as I had those things, I didn't need anything else.

