

**TOP TEN THINGS I'D RATHER DO
THAN GET A LECTURE FROM MY PARENTS**

10. Pick up Jenny's dog poo from yard. She's obviously trying to get into the Guinness Book for the biggest number two EVER.
9. Clean my eight year old brother's bathroom even though he gets more pee on the wall and floor than in the toilet.
8. Squeeze zits—even ones beside my nose that make getting my braces tightened seem like fun times.
7. Eat Mom's turkey-shaped soy alternative instead of the real thing on Thanksgiving.
6. Do everybody's laundry for a whole year.
5. Walk around with a KICK ME sign on my back—had to do it in fifth grade on a lost dare so I'm no stranger to going viral on YouTube.
4. Repeat sixth grade even though it's driving me completely insane.
3. Have conversation with Mom about "Becoming a Woman" (don't forget the finger quotes).
2. Have conversation with Dad about "Becoming a Woman".

And the #1 thing I'd rather do than get a lecture from my parents:

Buy gas relief medicine at the pharmacy for Dad while cutest
box boy ever asks if I need a bag. Totally serious right now.

Chapter One

DOWN THE HOLE

Bet I can beat you for most embarrassing moment. I'm living it right now and no, it doesn't involve a toilet paper tail stuck to the bottom of my shoe while walking down the hallway at school. Instead? Four firemen (why can't they be ugly?) just yanked me out of a sewer hole and were staring at me like I'm insane. But it wasn't the three super old twenty-somethings who made me want to die right now. It's the one on the end who made me squirm and doubt whether I should give them my real name.

Because I absolutely knew who *he* was. My crush. David Perkins, a whole grade older than me and *the* cutest guy in the seventh grade class, let alone all of Crossley Prep. Only *he* could take my mind off of my LIFE'S MISSION. But more on that later...just as soon as Mr. Perfect, the guy most *unlikely* to be my first boyfriend, isn't right in front of me. I stared up at all six feet of him, his junior fireman-in-training badge glimmering in the sun.

Sigh. He was never going to think of me *that way*. Instead his eyes said *this girl's psycho for sure*. And clearing up the crazy question was most def out. That would mean I'd have to tell him the real reason I'd ended up six feet below street level. Rule number one about a top-secret investigation: keep your mouth shut and look nuts if you have to. Definitely had an A+ in that department.

"Hey," David breaks the stare-down. "I know you from somewhere?"

But before I could answer, one of them plops this box in front of me and pulls out some pretty official doctor-y stuff from it. The others began talking to each other because

apparently I've worn out their interest. Except David. He's still staring like I'm some hot new...circus act.

"Okay, Katherine is it?" the guy asks, practically choking me with this ugly collar thingie. "I'm Matt. Hold still while I get your vitals. We need to monitor you to make sure you aren't in shock."

The padded collar was tight and I couldn't move, which I guess was the point. I pushed my hair out of my eyes. My curls were super annoying, bouncing around like everything was great.

"But I'm fine!" I finally said. "I don't need you to monitor anything!" My voice was all crackly—always is when I've been busted. But it didn't matter. No one was listening anyway. Instead they were all jokey-jokey with each other. I mean, excuse me for not being closer to death.

"Fine, huh?" Matt said. "Let me be the judge of that, Red." He tussled my curls like I was a Cocker Spaniel. Or maybe I should say like a Puli, because I'm the human equivalent with my big, fat, red cigar curls. You know those dogs that run around looking like an old-fashioned mop? Cute hair on a Puli, not so cute on an almost-twelve-year-old girl like myself. David laughed and his eyes got all squinty-in-a-cute-way. Too bad he was laughing at me, not with me.

Then I overheard some official, fire-chief-guy (thought they only wore those big red hats in the movies) say, "Yes, Mrs. Goldstein, we're at the scene right now. Your daughter's okay and you can meet us over at Citrus Grove Community."

Double crud. The rest of my day was about to become epically messed up. Solitary confinement once the unit (unit = Mom = The General) gets a hold of me. I

know there'll be mounds of dishes to wash and toilets to scrub. Mom will never understand I had a good reason for doing what I did. I mean, what would you rather do? Study for a stupid math test or carry out your LIFE MISSION, aka (duh-that means also known as!) hunting for secret tunnels? Geesh. Talk about total unleashing of parental RIDICULOUSITY—made up words are sometimes the best words—on me. Did I mention yet that being in sixth grade has serious drawbacks?

But wait. What if I *seemed* more hurt? Would I still be grounded for life? I started second-guessing my injuries. Was that a muscle spasm in my back?

You know, I wouldn't have to be making up lies if I just had better luck. All I was trying to do was make a monumental discovery in the archaeology world. Instead I end up here as the joke of the Citrus Grove Fire Department. I mean, who knew old sewer covers were sometimes hidden? Who knew they eventually rust and break apart? Isn't someone supposed to be watching out for this kind of stuff so nobody gets hurt?

Guess not unless that person is a massive failure in the keeping-track-of-all-things-dangerous department. Seriously, one minute I'm in the alley behind the old Fox Theater, looking for a way into the tunnels and the next...poof, gone. Yeah, I guess I was squeezed between the buildings, and yeah, it didn't seem like anybody had been there in decades, but *still*. The ground shouldn't just collapse beneath you in a civilized society. Worst part? Absolutely no tunnels anywhere in sight at the bottom of that hole.

Here's a little background. Some call the tunnels an urban legend. You know, a made-up story that people start believing. But I *knew* the tunnels were real and I was going to prove it to the world any day now. Soon all of modern civilization would know

ancient people built tunnels and went underground here in Citrus Grove to hide from the world.

So I just needed solid evidence. *And* be able to answer the question of why they'd done this. Were they deformed? Did they have a human body with an amphibian's head—maybe a lizard or something? This discovery would make me a rock star in the archaeology world and I could go on all kinds of digs. It would be the ultimate life. Uncovering ancient ruins all over the world with cute guys in cargo shorts digging right beside me? Woo-hoo! After all, a girl's got to think about her dating future, too.

David stepped closer and started to put a band around my arm. "I'm just going to check your blood pressure, so relax."

My heart was pounding hard now and it sounded like a river was whooshing through my head. Relax? With him so close to me? His voice was kind of raspy and I wondered what he would sound like on the phone. Evan says that a two hour phone convo with a guy whose voice you like is *the best*. Being a year older than me and my friend since kindergarten (don't tell anyone he repeated the big k-grade) he comes in handy sometimes with crucial info like this.

Just so you know, he doesn't care about the popular kids or what anyone thinks of him. Which is how I try to be, too. It's just harder when Kelley Coffey torments me. She's the only one who can make me feel like an idiot, even though I'm totally smarter and funnier than her. So I do a lot of acting when she shows up, like nothing she or her friends say matters to me. But I think about it later for sure. Evan says she's the b-word and I totally think she is, too.

And the rest of our group feels the same way about Kelley. We all know sixth grade means no more kid-stuff, and you've got to stick together to stand up to people like her. It's when you need your friends more than ever—especially at lunch time. We form a united front against her and the rest of the evil cheer team friends at the long table in the caf. Kelley likes to call our small group the extra special name of the Marginals when she spots us at lunch. But she didn't exactly come up with the name on her own. It was only after I called her mile run time “marginal at best” when she stole the word and began calling us that. Otherwise she probably wouldn't even know what it meant.

Don't get me wrong. We aren't epic failures socially. True, we don't hang with the super popular kids. You know, the ASB reps, the jocks on the Crossley Prep football team, or the cheer squad. Unlike my group, they are all in a butt-load of yearbook pictures. And we also aren't the perfect Honors kids who play the tuba or trombone, and already do community service hours in *sixth grade* for their college resume. Our group was lucky to have one or two extra pics besides our class photo in the yearbook. We were, well, the in-betweens.

“Hey, be careful with that thing!” I didn't want to yell at Mr. Cuteness but he gave me no choice. The cuff from the blood pressure machine began squeezing my arm like a boa constrictor. “You wanna' loosen it up a notch?” OMG, what if he has to give me CPR because I passed out? I so didn't want my first kiss to be because of a lifesaving event.

“It's got to be tight to get a good read,” he said. Then he said something totally cool, making me forget about the tunnels. Or the fact my arm was about to be permanently separated from my body. “Hey, I *do* know you! You go to Prep, right?” His

biceps moved while he squeezed the little rubber bulb on the blood pressure thingamajiggie, and he made me feel all gooey inside.

“Uh, yeah.” Wow. That’s the best I could come up with? My tongue felt thick and my heart was probably clocking two hundred beats a second. Kind of like after I’m done with the uphill mile our Nazi P.E. teacher makes us run on Fridays. BTW? There’s a whole FB page set up by some kids about her so don’t blame me for the nickname.

Geesh I sure wish I could ignore the tanned beautifulness of David’s muscular upper arm, inches from me. You’re probably thinking this is fantastic, I could just lean in and smell his Axe body wash. And it would be for a normal girl. Me? Nuh-uh. Instead, I could feel my face turning the color of the fire engine my hero drove in on.

“Perkins—you got that BP yet?” Matt was busy writing down notes. “Let’s get this tied up and load her into the ambulance.”

Ambulance? Are you kidding me? What if someone sees me? “You know, guys, I’m good. Seriously!” My voice came out like a squeaky and they all stared at me like I was losing it.

“Fraid not, Red,” Matt said as he held the door open while David and the two others lifted me in. “Your parents will be at the hospital when you get there.”