

me, just different

the reinvention of skylar hoyt

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2009 by Stephanie Morrill

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Morrill, Stephanie.

Me, just different / Stephanie Morrill.

p. cm. — (the reinvention of Skylar Hoyt ; bk. 1)

Summary: An incident at a summer party and major family crises have high school senior Skylar Hoyt rethinking her way of life, and with the help of a new boy at school and a youth coach at church, she begins to find her true self.

ISBN 978-0-8007-3377-3 (pbk.)

[1. Self-perception—Fiction. 2. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. 3. Family problems—Fiction. 4. Popularity—Fiction. 5. High schools—Fiction.

6. Schools—Fiction. 7. Christian life—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.M827215Me 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2009005111

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

I wanted to refuse Eli, but I couldn't after the night we'd had.

At the snap of the gas pump, he pulled back from the kiss and looked into my eyes, awaiting my reaction. If my giving in surprised him, it didn't show. He smiled, and instead of saying what I already knew—that getting together was a mistake—I forced myself to smile back. Just like that, I became Eli's girlfriend.

"You should come to the game tonight," Eli said, unhooking the nozzle from the Land Rover's ever-thirsty tank. If he didn't have a gas guzzler, I couldn't help bemoaning, the kiss might never have happened.

"Skylar, did you hear me?"

I ordered my mind to return to our conversation. "Sorry. Lisa and I already talked about it. We'll be there."

Eli's eyebrow quirked with amusement. "She and John must be 'on' this week."

"Who can keep track anymore?"

He ripped his receipt from the kiosk and then surveyed my face. "I don't want us to be like that."

Now Eli seemed nervous, like he knew he'd served me another chance to back out. Jodi's face danced before my

eyes, but last night's blur of frightening events trumped the promise I made her three years ago. Last night Eli was the only secure object, the only reason I'd woken up this morning with everything still intact.

I'd been confused, of course, to wake up in the back of Eli's new car. I'd sat up, my head killing me. I found Eli sleeping in the fully reclined driver's seat, his mouth hanging open, his breathing loud. I could remember only bits and pieces of how I'd come to be there, but I recalled enough to know one thing—I owed him for the night before.

But what a horrible reason to become his girlfriend now.

I opened my mouth, fully intending to back out, but when I looked at him, at those dark blue eyes, I couldn't do it. Would it really be so bad to date Eli Welling? We'd been friends for years and probably would have gotten together before now if Jodi wasn't in the picture. And he'd taken such good care of me last night.

I sucked in a deep breath. "Don't worry. We won't be like them."

Eli's mouth broadened with his dimpled smile, the one that made all the girls at school swoon, and we continued on our way.

A block from my house, Eli slowed the car alongside the curb. "Here okay? I mean, I'd walk you to the door if I could, but—"

"I know." I reached for the door handle but didn't leave. "Thanks again for last night. If you hadn't come in . . ." I didn't bother finishing. We both knew what might have happened if Eli's jealousy hadn't made him follow Aaron

and me upstairs. "I want you to know it won't happen again."

"I know."

"Last night was a wake-up call for me." I fingered the buckle of my purse. I bought it yesterday because it matched one of my back-to-school outfits perfectly. It seemed important at the time, but now I didn't care. "I haven't been living the way I'm supposed to."

"You can't blame yourself for what Aaron did," Eli said.

"But I shouldn't have put myself in that position. I need to make some changes. Quit smoking, quit partying. Maybe go back to church." Despite the lack of thought I'd put into this, it made sense.

"I'll help." Eli reached for my hand. "I'll go to church with you."

"Really?" Our families went to the same church, but neither of us had gone since turning sixteen. That he'd go for me . . . "You'd do that?"

He shrugged. "Sure. I'll make my mom and you happy all at once. Everybody wins."

"That means a lot to me," I said, and rewarded him with my first real smile of the morning.

"See you tonight," he said as I climbed out.

"Oh—" I turned to face him. "You're not going to tell anyone about . . ."

He shook his head. "It's between you and me."

And as he drove away, I thought I might actually be happy about him blindsiding me with that kiss at the Quik-Trip service station.

It turned out Eli could've walked me to my door because only my younger sister was home. I heard her snoring

through the pocket door dividing her bedroom and our bathroom. Had she been at the party last night? I cringed at the thought. I didn't fear Abbie tattling to Mom and Dad, but the idea of her seeing me there . . . I shivered and stepped into a steaming shower.

After scrubbing away the stench of keg party, I collapsed on my bed and stared at my cell phone. I knew I should call Jodi and tell her about Eli and me before word got around, but still I didn't dial her number. I didn't want to call my best friend and confess to be with her ex-boyfriend, the one guy who, out of respect for her, I'd sworn never to date.

But that wasn't the only reason Eli and I remained "just friends" all these years. I'd never felt anything stronger than friendship for him, though I didn't know why. Eli was everything I should have wanted—gorgeous, popular, athletic. If I couldn't fall in love with him, who could I fall in love with?



Lisa laughed when I arrived at the baseball fields. "What are you wearing?" She dropped her cigarette and stubbed it out with the heel of her espadrille.

I looked at my clothes—a white tank top and cutoffs. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"It's just so . . ." She waved her hand about, as if hoping to conjure the perfect word. "I don't know. Sneakers?"

"I walked here."

"But a white shirt and jeans? It's so not Skylar."

"I like to keep everyone on their toes," I said, but truthfully, I lacked the energy for one of my normal complicated ensembles.

Lisa linked our arms as we walked through the crowd. “Speaking of which, I hear you and a certain someone finally made it official.”

I couldn’t keep my voice from sounding panicked. “Who’d you hear that from?”

She blinked overdone eyes at me, my reaction apparently confusing her. “What do you mean? Jodi told me.”

“You heard from Jodi?” Despite the intense humidity of the July night, goose bumps raised on my arms.

“You didn’t tell her?”

“I didn’t have a chance yet.” I assumed Lisa would never point out the weakness of this excuse. I wanted to ask how Jodi sounded, but instead, I said, “Do you know who told her?”

“If it wasn’t you, I’d guess Alexis.”

“How did Alexis find out?”

Lisa shrugged. “How does Alexis ever know the things she does?”

I reached inside my purse before remembering I’d flushed my cigarettes down the toilet before leaving. “I shouldn’t have quit smoking today.”

“You quit? Why?”

“It’s so bad for you,” I said as we settled onto the metal bleachers. “Anyone who starts smoking these days is an idiot.”

Lisa didn’t answer right away, just chewed on her lower lip. “It’s awful expensive, I guess.”

From the team bench, Eli noticed us and waved, then turned his attention back to the game.

“I can’t believe you two are together,” Lisa said. “It’s great. Now John and I have another couple to do stuff with.”

“Like what stuff?”

“You know, couple stuff. Movies. Concerts. Dinner.”

“We do that stuff now.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be different.”

I frowned. That’s what I was afraid of.

“So what did it?” Lisa asked.

“Did what?”

“Why’d you finally give in? I mean, Eli’s been after you since we were freshmen, and you’ve always said there was no way. What changed?”

How could I tell her the truth? I didn’t want my behavior last night, so naive, to be privy to my friends. Yet, if I omitted the intimate details, I couldn’t think of a good explanation for my giving in to Eli.

So I gave Lisa a coy smile and said, “Well, that was before he got the Land Rover.”

Lisa laughed, like I knew she would, but her giggles died a sudden death when Jodi appeared at the base of the bleachers.

One time Jodi dumped an entire soda on a boyfriend when she caught him cuddling in the food court with not-her. She punched, actually *punched*, Madison Embry when she overheard her bragging about hooking up with Alexis’s first boyfriend. And at a party last summer, when rumors started flying about Sarah Humphrey and Jodi’s boyfriend, Jodi waited for Sarah to pass out and then cut off her ponytail.

With all this running through my mind, I could barely utter, “Hey.”

“I hear you have big news,” Jodi said, masked in her poker face.

“Uh . . .”

She mounted the bleachers and took her normal spot in life, my right side. “You know, Eli’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“Um, I do,” I said. Lisa shifted away from me.

Jodi pulled an opened bag of peanut M&M’s from her purse. “Want one?”

I peeked inside, then shook my head.

Jodi burst into laughter. “Relax, Skylar. You’re acting like I poisoned them or something.” She bumped her shoulder against mine. “I’m fine with you and Eli.”

“You are?” I expected to feel relief, but none came.

“Sure,” she said, tossing back a handful of candy. “Not like it’s a big shock.”

“Eli’s batting,” Lisa said.

Jodi shook more candy into her palm. “If I were a guy, I think I’d play soccer. I wouldn’t want to wear those tight pants.”

Who was this girl making casual conversation about the pitfalls of baseball pants? I’d encountered her nasty temper many times since we’d met in eighth grade. Her support of Eli and me seemed worse than if she’d bawled me out in front of everybody.

“Do you know if Alexis is coming?” Lisa asked as Eli fouled off the first pitch.

Jodi shook her head. “She doesn’t get off work until after the game.”

Lisa accepted the M&M’s Jodi offered. “I’d hate to have to work. It spoils the summer.”

“Are we meeting up with her later?” I asked.

“I told her Lisa, John, and I would be available,” Jodi said, “but you and Eli probably wanted to be alone. New love and all.”

I opened my mouth to respond, not sure what I intended to say, but Eli interrupted me by grounding one past the short stop. I cheered the same as always, shouting and clapping, but Eli did something new. First base secured, he tipped his hat at me, causing the other spectators, mostly parents, to turn and look.

“Hey, Romeo, keep your head in the game!” his coach said.

“Knock it off,” I said to my two cackling friends.

“Oh, Skylar, he’s just so proud you’re finally his girlfriend, he can’t help it.” Jodi stood. “I need Red Vines. You two want anything?”

Lisa shook her head. “Won’t we go to Sheridan’s afterward?” We’d haunted Sheridan’s Frozen Custard all summer long.

Jodi smiled, big and humorless. “Tonight is a special occasion.” She marched down the bleachers to the concession stand.

Lisa and I followed her with our eyes. “I can’t believe how well she’s taking it,” Lisa said. “I mean, she doesn’t seem mad at all.”

“I wish she’d just yell at me,” I said.

“You’re crazy.” Our conversation paused briefly as John doubled. Lisa clapped and whistled. “You know Jodi’s not one to hide her feelings. Remember what happened to Sarah Humphrey when Jodi suspected she’d been flirting with Trent? If Jodi was actually mad, she’d have snuck up from behind and cut off your ponytail or something.”

“I hope you’re right.” But I couldn’t shake my fears of her calm exterior eventually giving way to something worse than a spiteful haircut.



After the game, Eli apologized for embarrassing me. “I guess I wasn’t thinking,” he said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“It’d have been fine except Jodi’s here.”

He glanced at her chatting away with Lisa and John. “How bad?”

“It’s hard to put it into words.”

He gave me a once-over. “No black eyes, and you’re still wearing the clothes you showed up in.” He tilted my head to see the back. “Hair isn’t shorter.”

“It’s not funny. She’s acting really, really weird. Like she’s totally okay with us.”

Eli shrugged. “Maybe she is. Jodi and I have been over for years. Maybe she really doesn’t care.”

“It’s official,” I said. “You know nothing about girls.”

Eli laughed. “I’ll use the bathroom and then we’ll go, okay?”

I considered joining Jodi and Lisa, who stood near the team bench giggling over something John said, but instead, I stood there with Eli’s bat bag at my feet. Maybe he wouldn’t mind dropping me off at home. Spending an entire night with my friends sounded exhausting. What a big difference twenty-four hours could make. This time last night, I’d not only been one of them, I’d been something like the leader of the group. Now going for ice cream seemed like a terrible chore.

I emerged from my thoughts to find a strange guy standing in front of me, grinning like we knew each other. “You Skylar?”

He wore the same uniform as Eli, but I didn't recognize him. I took a step back. "Yeah."

His smile widened. "Connor Ross. Nice to meet you." He grabbed my hand, as if our parents stood nearby grading this exchange, and gave it several enthusiastic pumps. "Eli's giving me a ride home. Normally I don't need one, my parents bring me, but all my brothers are sick and—" He interrupted himself with a laugh. "Well, it's a long story."

"Hmm." I looked beyond him, trying to send my friends an SOS with my brain waves. No luck.

Connor removed his baseball hat to scratch at his coarse, damp hair. "Eli said dropping me off wouldn't be a problem because you and I live by each other. What street are you on?"

He looked like a nice enough guy, but so had Aaron. I intended to remember how impossible it is to distinguish the nice ones from the bad. "Aberdeen," I lied, glancing at the men's bathroom. How could Eli have left me alone out here? I needed him.

John, Lisa, and Jodi sauntered past us on their way to the parking lot. "See you there, Skylar!" Lisa said.

I yearned to join them. I wanted to be anywhere but standing here making small talk with a strange guy, but it would be rude to run after them. I could only wave and envy their retreat.

Connor watched the lucky three slip into the crowd. "You know Lisa Rivers?"

"Yeah." I sighed. My opportunity for escape had come and gone.

"What's her deal? Half the time she's hanging all over

John, but otherwise she flirts with anything male that moves. Last week it was my fifteen-year-old brother.”

I caught myself smiling. “That’s Lisa.”

“She was so aggressive I told Chris to be careful with his drink.” Connor chuckled. “I was afraid she’d slip something in it.”

My mouth filled with bitterness, as if I could taste my dislike for him. “You shouldn’t make jokes like that.”

He stopped laughing. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I took a step away from him, ready to leave and no longer caring how rude I might appear, when Eli materialized. “Oh good, you found each other. Skylar, I told Connor I’d give him a lift home. He lives just down the street from you.” He snapped his fingers as he realized the flaw in this plan. “Although I’m not taking Skylar home. We’re going out for ice cream with some friends. You been to Sheridan’s, Connor?”

“No.”

“Best place in town. You have to come.” Eli draped his arm around me as we walked, despite having just finished nine innings of baseball. “That way you’ll know some more people before school starts. Of course you already know John and my girl, Skylar . . .”

I faded away from them, disinterested in anything they might have to say. Instead, I thought about having Eli all over me while Jodi watched. I half wished she’d dumped her Diet Coke over my head while we sat in the bleachers. It seemed torturous to postpone the fight. Maybe that was her intent.

When we reached Eli’s car, I gaped at Connor as he went for shotgun. What kind of moocher bummed a ride, then assumed the front seat over the girlfriend?

“Skylar,” Connor said as I yanked at the backdoor handle. He held open the passenger door. “I was getting this for you.”

“Oh.” I tried to smile, but failed. “Thanks.”

He offered his hand, helping me climb into the vehicle. “I’d never hitch a ride and take the front seat. Especially from a girl.”

“Some guys would,” I said, buckling my seat belt.

“True,” Connor said. “And you never can tell.”

Didn’t I know it.

“You’re not trying to steal my girl, are you?” Eli called to the backseat. While he sounded flippant, I caught the flash of jealousy in his eyes. An endearing quality when I needed rescuing, but annoying when it spilled into Connor’s and my casual moment of friendliness. As if I would ever be interested in a guy like Connor.

Sheridan’s Frozen Custard sat close to the busy road, its lights bright and beckoning amid the row of dark storefronts. This late at night and this deep in the summer, teenagers dominated the parking lot and spilled onto the grass, drunk on sugar and twilight.

By the time we arrived, Alexis already sat in the bed of John’s F-150, gorging on a large cup of custard.

“Yay, Skylar’s here,” Alexis said as we approached.

Eli leaned against the truck. “What about me?”

She shrugged and smiled flirtatiously. Alexis did everything flirtatiously.

Connor stuck out his hand. “I’m Connor.”

Alexis looked at it for a moment, appearing as stunned as I’d been, then offered hers in return. “Alexis.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

Eli's fingertips fell soft on my neck. "What do you want, Skylar?"

"I need to look at the menu." I adjusted my ponytail, forcing him to move his hand.

He didn't seem to notice, just smiled and smoothed my hair. "Connor, you want anything?"

"Nah, I'm good," he said, positioning himself beside Alexis. As we walked away, I heard her draw him into conversation. While Connor likely interpreted this as friendly, all of us knew Alexis was a huge gossip. She wanted first dibs on whatever dirt Connor had to offer.

"What's with that guy?" I asked Eli, tone sharper than intended.

"Connor? He comes on a little strong, but don't worry. He's real nice." Eli combed through the ends of my ponytail, fingers catching on a knot. "You wouldn't know it from looking at him, but he's a power hitter."

"Well, I don't like him." My stomach itched and my mouth tasted bitter again. Why did we have to invite someone new out with our group, tonight of all nights? I wasn't ready for new guys just yet. "He's just . . . I don't know. He makes me uncomfortable."

"You have no reason to be worried," Eli said, then planted an awkward kiss on my cheek.

Okay, ew. Did everything with us have to be so serious relationship-y? Why must even the simple act of walking from the parking lot to the ice cream line convey our couple status to the world? Especially with Jodi here.

When we joined Jodi in line, I thought Eli hanging all over me would prompt her death glare, but instead, she looked at us with desperation. "These two are driving me

crazy.” She nodded at John and Lisa, who stood in front of her absorbed in some gushy conversation. It involved a lot of nuzzling and, “No, *you* are.”

“Next,” the Sheridan’s employee called from the window. This meant John and Lisa, but they didn’t notice. “Next!”

Jodi flicked the back of Lisa’s head. “That’s you.”

“Oh!” Lisa said with a giggle.

Jodi rolled her eyes, but a moment later, her mouth drooped. “I want a boyfriend.”

I suppose Connor happened to be at the right place at the right time. Why else would Jodi attach herself to him the moment we returned to the truck? His height, freckles, and constant grin reminded me of a pesky little brother. On nights Jodi behaved like herself, she liked her guys tall, blond, and worthy of a contract with Abercrombie and Fitch, like Eli. Obviously, desperation caused this.

“He’s adorable,” she confided to me in our moment of privacy en route to the trash can. “Did you see him reading my palm? He says I’m going to have a long and happy life.”

She sounded like she wanted to have a long and happy life *with Connor*.

“We just met him, Jo,” I said. “You should be careful.”

“Connor’s harmless,” she said, and I must admit it appeared she was right. He wasn’t like Aaron, so smooth and charming. Connor was the opposite, all chatter and awkward angles.

“You can do way better,” I said as we sidestepped a couple of cackling girls.

“I guess I could.” She pitched her cup toward the trash can. It hit the rim but bounced in anyway. “So. You and Eli are cute together.”

My mouth went dry, and I double-checked to make sure she wasn't holding scissors or a soda or anything. "If it bothers you, I'll end things with him."

She waved this idea away. "Completely unnecessary."

"But I always told you I wouldn't date him."

"I know, but I expected it would happen someday."

This made me feel even worse. "Eli and I are no big deal," I said.

Jodi fixed her eyes on Connor as we started back to the truck. "You really don't think I should like Connor?"

I looped my arm through hers, overcome with guilt. "Like whoever you want."