

Chapter One

The Madness of Mr. Hendrix

Colleen made it a point to be one of the last students in the door of high school chemistry class with Mr. Hendrix. The mere thought of sitting in an empty classroom with her teacher, waiting for the bell to ring or the next cluster of students dissuaded any skip in her step. Knowing that there would be numerous experiments ahead, Colleen stopped by her locker and grabbed a hair tie to keep it in check. On the go, she spun her golden locks up into a high ponytail and fixed the strays down with her signature lime-green headband. Today would be another boring day spent trapped in halls of Roosevelt High School, until the bell rang of course. Colleen Carlyle loved sticking it to her parents, and on this day they wanted her to attend some political rally. She had other plans which coincidentally happened to conflict with her parent's attempt at drawing her into the political scene; her mother being the Governor of Washington State and all. Instead, Colleen chose to plan a perfectly timed first date to see Electronia with her new boyfriend Cory.

Colleen's chemistry teacher, Simon Hendrix, arrived early and prepared the classroom the same way he did every day. He would mark up the whiteboard with equations and elements to be utilized later in class. His classroom was like any other at Roosevelt High except for one special treat which every student grew to cherish, even Colleen to some extent.

As Colleen entered the classroom with a click of the doorknob, she walked over to her desk, which like every other desk, had a small index card turned face down. She eagerly reached for it but her attention was drawn by a goofy red-headed boy bursting through the classroom door. An uncharacteristically shy smile escaped her clutches as he entered the classroom with a boisterous battle cry.

“Chemicals!” said Cory Saunders as he announced his presence, psyched for a productive day studying his favorite subject. Forgetting Mr. Hendrix’s index card waiting on her desk, Colleen gazed over at Cory with a not so subtle twinkle in her emerald green eyes. She had never been so taken by a boy before, especially a dork like Cory. He always loved to make his mark when he entered a classroom they shared like he was some kind of peacock performing a courtship dance. Fortunately, Cory’s desk was right in front of hers, which made passing notes fairly easy. He left his small crew of friends and made a dash for Colleen.

“You—me—still on for tonight?” asked Cory eagerly as he approached his desk in front of Colleen’s.

“What? Did Mr. Shriver take your phone again?” responded Colleen with a bite to her tone, but Cory readily patted a rectangular imprint on his pants pocket.

“Nah, I just like to talk to you in person,” said Cory confidently to Colleen. He had a glowing reputation for being comfortable around just about anybody, despite being a rather unremarkable junior in high school.

“Oh, keeping it old-fashioned are we? High School students? Direct personal contact,” said Colleen, smiling, and played along dramatically drawing her hand across her forehead. “You swoon me off my feet, Cory Saunders.”

“The pleasure is mine, milady,” answered Cory with a twinkle in his smile, and sealed the chivalrous act with a deep bow.

“Please don’t fucking catch me when I fall,” said Colleen in a dry tone and sat in her seat.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Cory knowing just how much Colleen loved to poke fun at the publicly romantic couples that would make out in the halls.

“Language in the classroom, Ms. Carlyle,” said Mr. Hendrix from his desk.

“Shit!” said Colleen out loud and shook her head. “Sorry, Mr. Hendrix, I mean shoot! I mean fucking!”

A few of her classmates giggled to each other, but Mr. Hendrix went back to his work and left the kids to settle in without another comment. Cory turned in his desk to face Colleen.

“So—the gig tonight? You never actually answered. You said you’d plan it after all,” said Cory.

“It’s gonna be a blast,” said Colleen through a warm smile. “Trust me, I’ve got it covered.”

“Sweet, I haven’t seen a live show in ages. Especially Electronia,” said Cory, beaming with excitement. Colleen caught herself gazing at Cory as he slung his satchel on the back of his chair and flipped over the index card on his desk. He always played into her little games. No other guy she’d dated had the courage to follow her silly antics, let alone match them.

“What’s on the E.E.S. card today?” asked Cory rhetorically and flipped the card around. “Oh ho, yes!”

Colleen took a seat and flipped over her index card as well.

“Iron, or Caesium,” said Luiz from the back of the classroom. “What kind of a matchup is that?”

“Iron totally wins,” said Colleen and raised her hand high. “Everyone pick Iron!”

“What!?” exclaimed Cory in disbelief and slouched in his chair.

“Are you serious?” asked Colleen as stumped as she was disappointed. “It’s Iron!”

“Clearly you’ve never heard of Caesium. This matchup is a test,” said Cory in retaliation to Colleen, and in part to the class. He then spun around to face his teacher for backup. “Right, Mr. Hendrix?”

Mr. Hendrix chuckled to himself while his Colleen debated with Cory over the two elements. At the start of the year, Mr. Hendrix created a

single elimination bracket with the hopes of finding the most popular element among his students.

“But Iron Man, Cory,” said Colleen, and circled Iron on her sheet.

“But Caesium, Colleen,” Cory whined.

“You wanna get dumped?” said Colleen with a snappy wry smile. Cory gasped.

“Is this our first fight?” said Cory, beaming with glee.

“Put ‘em up, buster.”

Mr. Hendrix collected the cards and shuffled through them tallying the results. After counting out the votes a few times, he spoke under his breath, “Well, it’s a good thing we are going to be talking about Caesium today.”

He added Iron as the near-unanimous winner on the Elemental Elimination Station.

“Cory here understands why Caesium should be the clear winner. Care to share?” said Mr. Hendrix while he crossed out Caesium on the board. Being the teacher’s pet, Cory stood up and strutted to the front of the classroom.

“Iron Man,” whispered Colleen.

“Iron Man isn’t made of Iron!” hissed Cory as he marched through the sea of students.

Colleen stuck her tongue out just to get under his skin.

“And here I thought you were a senior,” retorted Cory. He raised a silencing hand to keep the class from booing him for being an egghead.

“Naysayers,” Cory muttered under his breath as he approached Mr. Hendrix who was waiting at his desk with a beaker of water. Mr. Hendrix handed his student some forceps and a pair of gloves. Cory’s eyes went wide. Colleen watched from near the back of the classroom with an eager grin on her face just waiting for him to slip up.

“I was planning on writing an equation. We aren’t demonstrating Caesium in a classroom are we?” said Cory as his eyes flared open.

“No,” laughed Mr. Hendrix and patted Cory on the back. “I admire your sense of self-preservation. If you were in the wild you’d live forever. Go on, sit down.”

“I should have known,” said Cory, appreciating Mr. Hendrix’s wit, and walked back to his desk. “That’s what I get for posturing.”

“Indeed,” chuckled Mr. Hendrix.

Colleen had a look of curiosity on her face as Cory sat in his desk. He appeared genuinely concerned. Mr. Hendrix cleared his throat and went to the center of the classroom.

“As the matchup clearly shows—twenty-two points to one, Cory no doubt—you all favor Iron, a soft metal which isn’t well-suited for many uses on its own. Iron is a versatile metal when combined with other elements, but strictly speaking, our little competition isn’t a matter of alloys. This is a matter of pure potential. Now, please direct your attention to the Oscar Award-winning Simon Hendrix as he attempts to wow you with the beauty of Caesium and its reactive properties.”

Mr. Hendrix turned on the projector which displayed himself in protective gear standing over a beaker of water.

“Are you ready to choke on your words?” said Cory over his shoulder to Colleen.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” mumbled Colleen and ruffled up his short red hair.

The class leaned forward to watch as Mr. Hendrix carefully took a tiny shaving of silver metal with a pair of forceps and dropped it into the beaker. Less than a second passed and the glass shattered.

“Woah!” the class said in unison.

“Fuck you,” Colleen groaned through her teeth and flicked a wad of paper at the back of his neck. She couldn’t see his face, but he had to be beaming triumphantly after her little retort.

“Woah indeed. Got nicked on the cheek here,” said Mr. Hendrix and pointed up to the screen. His onscreen counterpart turned the camera around and showed a tiny slice in his protective mask.

“That’s why you wear your mask,” said Mr. Hendrix and turned the projector off. “Cory knows that Caesium is one of the most explosive elements when combined with water, which is why he was the only person who chose it above Iron. Good job, Cory.”

“I want to change my vote,” said Britney.

“Me too,” added Luiz.

“Explosions!” said another voice.

A wry smile slipped onto Mr. Hendrix’s lips and he changed the results to match his class’s new found love for Caesium.

“Geek,” teased Colleen and tossed another wad of paper at Cory.

“Nerd,” Cory responded.

“I know you are but what am I?”

“Does your sense humor always devolve when you know you’re wrong? Or am I just crazy?” asked Cory as he shot her a glance out of the corner of his eye.

“Why did it have to fucking explode?” whispered Colleen through gritted teeth and flopped her head onto her desk.

“Ms. Carlyle!”

“Fucking…”

“That’s better.”

“Fuck me…” mumbled Colleen into her folded arms.

“I heard that.”

Colleen shot her head up to see the disappointed eye of Mr. Hendrix staring right at her for swearing in class again. She attempted to cool him off with a smile, which seemed to do the job.

“How can he hear so well?” whispered Colleen to Cory when Mr. Hendrix looked away.

“I’m a teacher, it’s my job to see and hear everything,” said Mr. Hendrix while he started to flip through his textbook. She threw up her hands and conceded to her teacher.

“Alright! So now that we’ve handled that bit of business. Notebooks out and...”

“Hold on,” said Colleen in protest. Mr. Hendrix deliberately removed his spectacles and shot Colleen a scrutinizing glare with his icy blue eyes.

“I didn’t see a hand, Colleen. Did you have something to add?” said Mr. Hendrix with manufactured patience. Colleen scowled at Mr. Hendrix, and then raised her hand.

“Yes?” asked Mr. Hendrix with a pleasant yet fake smile.

“You have the score twenty-three to zero. I don’t wanna change my vote,” said Colleen. Cory turned in his seat and gave her a funny look. Colleen plastered a satisfied grin across her face. Mr. Hendrix shrugged and stepped back over to the winner’s bracket and changed the final tally to twenty-two Caesium, and one Iron.

“Actually, before we move on, would anyone else like to vote Iron?”

He scanned the room and saw no other hands, but the question still lingered.

“I’m curious, why stick with Iron?” asked Mr. Hendrix. “I mean, there’s no wrong answer. I simply didn’t see this coming. In fact, I thought you’d be the first one to change your vote. Yet here we are. You’re proving me wrong yet again, Ms. Carlyle. This is becoming a habit.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to prove you wrong,” mumbled Colleen.

“No—no, don’t apologize for being an independent thinker. You could always apologize for your language in a classroom, that I wouldn’t mind—but I will never silence critical thought. The greatest minds of modern man were independent thinkers. So don’t apologize for proving me wrong—apologize for not doing it enough,” said Mr. Hendrix to Colleen. “Now—why Iron?”

Each pair of eager eyes awaited Colleen's response. Even Cory glanced back at her to see where she would take this.

"Uh—well, you said Iron is boring on its own. Isn't Caesium? They both need to go through a change to become interesting."

A twinkle of pride swelled in Mr. Hendrix's eye. "Continue."

"I mean—you had to mix Caesium with water to make it blow up, and Iron is only any good when you mix it with other stuff, so then it does become a matter of combining elements. I was under the impression that chemistry was the study of change in matter so really this whole competition banks on alloys and reactions being a factor. I'd imagine Caesium is useful in quite a few specific areas, but maybe not on a public scale. Take Iron for example. Mix it with what, Carbon? And you get steel—*Steel*."

Colleen clicked her shoe against the leg of her desk. "I could be wrong, but steel is used in a few household items is it not?" A few of Colleen's classmates looked at one another and nodded in concurrence.

Mr. Hendrix beamed at his most vocal student, even if she wasn't always vocal in a productive way.

"So for this specific example, I choose to look at how the two elements change with reaction. When Caesium changes it becomes something destructive. When Iron changes it becomes something constructive. I like explosions as much as the next teenager but I don't think I want to see Electronia perform on a stage that's prone to explode, which I might add is likely built out of steel. That's why I'm not changing my vote. I prefer my musicians alive and in one piece."

The buzzing fluorescent lights seemed louder than usual. The attention started to make Colleen's skin crawl.

"What? Are you waiting for a mic drop? The board is that way," said Colleen and dismissed the class towards their teacher.

"That's a very well-thought-out opinion, Cindy," said Mr. Hendrix.

It took Colleen a moment to process Mr. Hendrix's uncharacteristic slip up. He usually knew the entire class by the end of the first week. "I—uh—don't know where that came from," said Mr. Hendrix followed by a cough masking his embarrassment.

"Yeah, weird," said Colleen, feeling a little put off by Mr. Hendrix's mistake.

"Moving on," said Mr. Hendrix, but as he thumbed through his textbook his attention wandered back up to Colleen. His cold blue eyes glistened from behind his spectacles, chilling her to the bone with their scrutiny.

"That's weird. Cindy. I couldn't tell you where that came from," chuckled Mr. Hendrix. He peeled his eyes from Colleen and looked over at Lucas with a jovial smile.

"Hey, look over there, it's Hector!" he laughed while pointing at Lucas.

"And Amber!" said Mr. Hendrix to a perplexed Britney.

"Stuart! What's up, brotha?" Luiz was not amused.

He stopped on Cory and his embarrassment faded away into a sharp glare towards one of his favorite students. "Adam."

Colleen leaned forward and tapped Cory on the shoulder.

"Uh—What?" Colleen whispered. Cory shrugged.

"Cue the madness of Mr. Hendrix," replied Cory out of the corner of his mouth. The color flushed from Mr. Hendrix's skin and he shot his eyes to the back wall as though a specter had suddenly appeared behind his students.

"Hey, uh, does anyone else hear that noise? Or see that?" Mr. Hendrix asked the classroom; his rapidly blinking eyes fixated on nothing discernable. The class turned to examine the wall and found nothing out of the ordinary, yet Mr. Hendrix's hand trembled across his desk as he felt for a hold.

"The hell?" said Luiz with a cocked head.

"Uh, should we call the Principal?" asked Colleen as the class approached their teacher with caution.

“Good idea—I’ll be right back,” said Mason and took off towards the office.

Mr. Hendrix stumbled backwards, catching himself on his desk.

“He doesn’t look so good,” said Britney’s shrill voice.

“Did anybody else see something weird?” said Colleen with her backed turned to Mr. Hendrix. She saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, she was pulled around and found herself face to face with Mr. Hendrix, his hand was clamped tightly around her wrist.

“Carlyle?” grunted Mr. Hendrix.

“Yes, Mr. Hendrix?” Colleen answered softly, now frightened by her chemistry teacher.

“What are your parents’ names?” asked Mr. Hendrix. His fingers dug deep into her skin.

“Umm—ow? And you know you literally just had a parent-teacher meeting with them last week? Also, my mom’s the governor,” Colleen said and tried to pull her wrist free.

“What are their names?”

“You’re hurting me,” Colleen winced.

“What are they? It’s a simple question!” Mr. Hendrix snapped.

“Jim and Karen!” said Colleen and yanked her wrist away. “Jeez!”

Mr. Hendrix hardly seemed to notice that he caused a minor bruise on her wrist. Instead, his eyes picked Colleen apart. She was so shocked by his behavior she couldn’t bring herself to take to her feet and step back.

“Wow, uh—that was inappropriate. Okay, so I’m gonna remove myself from this situation. Yeah—wow,” said Mr. Hendrix, he started to his feet, and then stopped once again staring at the wall. “No one sees that?”

The students didn’t say a word, leaving Colleen to be their voice.

“No,” said Colleen. Mr. Hendrix shook his head, shot to his feet, and shoved Kyle and Braxton aside. The rest of the class parted to avoid his sudden outburst. Without a second of hesitation, Colleen took to her feet and started after him through the parted classroom.

“You’re going after him?” Cory asked as she passed by.

“Just making sure he doesn’t pass out,” Colleen lied and reassured him with a weak smile. She pushed open the classroom door and took off after her teacher, who was halfway to the exit for faculty parking.

“Mr. Hendrix!” called Colleen down the hall. Her teacher stopped in his tracks.

“Yes?” said Mr. Hendrix. He made no attempt to meet her halfway. She took to a light sprint to catch to him but kept a safe distance.

“Why were my parent’s names so important to you all of the sudden?” Colleen asked with a sharp bite in her tone. She could still feel his fingers digging into her wrist.

“That’s none of your concern, Ms. Carlyle,” said Mr. Hendrix and continued towards the door.

“Mr. Hendrix, I don’t know what’s going on but...”

Mr. Hendrix stopped and faced her.

“Good, it should stay that way,” interrupted Mr. Hendrix with a calm smile.

“But, what about class? Mason is getting the Principal after all,” said Colleen, pointing her thumb back towards the front office in the opposite direction.

“As he should,” said Mr. Hendrix motioning her to go off and follow her instincts. “Tell him that I walked out of the classroom and don’t plan on returning.”

Colleen scratched her head at her teacher’s ridiculous behavior.

“But you’re in the middle of a lecture. What are we supposed to...”

She stopped in mid-sentence. Off in the distance, Colleen heard a low and hollow rumble sounding like a runaway freight train. She turned around to see where it was coming from, but there was nothing in the school that could cause such a noise.

“I thought I was going crazy,” said Mr. Hendrix.

“You hear that?” Colleen asked.

“Hear what?” asked Mr. Hendrix, but the way his scrutinizing eyes washed over Colleen made her certain that he knew exactly what she was hearing.

“No I can still hear it, it’s getting louder,” said Colleen. She plugged her ears, but the bellowing roar persisted in her mind. Mr. Hendrix took a step towards her and leaned down to get a closer look at her.

Her mind went blank for a split second and all of her thoughts spun with images of fire and concrete.

“Ah...” Colleen groaned as she fell to her knees with spectral spikes shooting through her mind. “Ah! Fff!”

A tunnel of light appeared before her very eyes. At the center of the tunnel appeared a fragmented and withered skeletal face. His sunken drooping eyes reached out, pulling at her thoughts. Cities burned, and bodies littered the streets. The bellowing rumble blasted in her hears. She squeezed her eyes shut and slammed her head into the school’s tiled floor, but the images kept flooding into her mind. She could see her brother Robert standing tall above her with a glistening smile. He was beautiful, but she wanted to scream. She wanted to beg him not to leave her. His chest split open revealing the end of a blade.

“Colleen!” said a muffled voice. It was Robert. It had to be. He was just fine away in South Korea. She wanted to reach out and take his hand.

“Colleen!”

She opened her eyes, and the visions stopped. All was silent. Her mind went blank just like before. She was on her back looking up at the bright and painfully false fluorescent lights of the school hallway.

“Hey—are you okay?” asked Cory.

Colleen pulled herself upright. She looked off to where Mr. Hendrix had been standing moments before, but he was long gone. As she started to her feet, Cory gave her an arm.

“What happened?” asked Cory as he helped her up.

“Nothing.”

“Finding you on the floor isn’t ‘nothing,’ Colleen,” said Cory and started to brush her off. “I’m gonna get Mr. Zhou.”

“Cory, stop,” Colleen snapped and held him back. He turned to face her with a concerned look, something she rarely saw during her time with any of her ex-boyfriends.

“I just tripped,” said Colleen. “And I wasn’t really in the mood to get right back up.”

“Yeah—I would call that a trip. You need a doctor,” mumbled Cory, obsessively looking over her entire body for injury.

“Not that kind,” scoffed Colleen and rolled her eyes. “Look, if you tell the principal, Mr. Zhou they’re gonna tell my parents. They are paranoid enough as it is. I don’t need more bullshit getting in the way of tonight.”

“Passing out isn’t bullshit, Colleen,” Cory kept on.

“*I’m fine*,” said Colleen with firm silencing bite.

“Are you?”

Colleen gritted her teeth.

“I don’t know. Maybe there is something wrong with me, but I feel fine now, Cory,” said Colleen followed by a defeated sigh. She hesitated while reaching for Cory’s hand, still being new to dating him but in desperate need of comfort after seeing such bizarre images coursing through her mind. Cory noticed she had doubts about taking his hand and put in the extra few inches. To her surprise, he was the one who blushed upon contact. Colleen and Cory had been friends for years, but only in the past few weeks did they decide to take it a step beyond friends.

“Okay—I’m scared. I’m really scared. But for right now can we please just go to the concert tonight? I’ll tell my parents in the morning. Just let me have tonight,” Colleen pleaded and squeezed his hand.

Cory bit his lip.

“It’s our first real date, Cory, so let this be a fun night—a memorable night.”

Cory looked down at his feet and contemplated. Colleen's heart started to sting when she felt his hand slip away. She panicked and squeezed tighter, keeping him in place.

"You're sure you're okay?" asked Cory, looking deep into the eyes.

"Positive," lied Colleen through a perfectly landed smile.