



Readers of *The Elite Seat* discover how to persevere amidst the unique temptations of middle school popularity and the problem of self-consciousness; they learn God's plan to live a life of forgiveness, authenticity, and service to others—even when 7th grade survival feels beyond possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

# SPRINGING

You know how sometimes you imagine being famous? Like maybe you daydream about being someone important or someone who gets all the attention for something? Just a few months ago, I agonized about feeling invisible. *Ugh*. I was an empty vernal pond in the bitter, stark winter and everyone else had good things happening to them. Before that? I didn't have a seat in the lunchroom. I would have done *anything* for people to notice me and invite me to the popular table.

Who wouldn't love being famous?

Well, sometimes, your dreams come true.

I woke up near the end of March, and I could tell the forest had changed overnight. I grabbed my journal and scribbled my gratitude list as fast as I could: *blue spotted salamander eggs, bird nests (sparrow and robin), and turtles*. I tapped my pen on my chin.



Oh! Maybe Stephen Rackley—one of my best friends, who is most definitely my crush (even though I’m not allowed to have a boyfriend)—and I could find the den of the red fox. *Red fox*. Oh! And the bear cubs would emerge from under Joy’s back deck. *Bear cubs*. I wrote my list of five things I’m thankful to God for and then tilted my head up to listen. This morning, I was most thankful for everything I could find in the woods now that the season had changed.

The whole forest made an announcement:

Spring!

I think spring should have its own kind of verb. My English teacher, Mrs. Crisp (who looks exactly like Snow White with her black hair and bright red lipstick), wants us to only use strong, vivid verbs, and she handed us a list of hundreds of verbs. She jumps up and down and cheers when any of us uses a great verb in our writing. She likes verbs that sound like what they mean; you know—how crackle kind of *crackles* and slurp *slurps* and dazzle *dazzles*? Well, spring *springs*. It starts *springing* outside. I picture things popping up, like popcorn kernels exploding in the oiled frying pan. Buds on trees *pop*. Mushrooms *pop* up after a warm spring rain. My seeds in windowsill cups *pop*.

I couldn’t wait to run downstairs and check on those seeds. Every spring, I fill ten cups with soil and choose ten kinds of plants I want to put in the garden plot out back. Two weeks ago, I planted four kinds of tomatoes, three peppers, basil, oregano, parsley. We call it my *Spaghetti Sauce Garden* because we make spaghetti sauce from everything I harvest. The seeds transform in secret in that dark soil. I pull back the plastic wrap that makes a

little greenhouse for the seeds, and I marvel over the little green shoots that emerge. Pop!

And nature talks differently in the spring. Winter whispers; spring shouts. The birds were back. They start chirping at dawn and that's the *official* start of spring. At least that's what I think. The birds always know things before we do. And in spring, they sing like crazy. The mockingbird and robin always start the morning lineup of songs in Pennsylvania. Did you know that a mockingbird knows over two hundred songs?

Then the blackbirds, Northern Cardinals, thrushes, and even turkeys start in maybe an hour later. It's like this big performance every morning, like everyone competing for center stage. They wake me up so that sometimes, I even shout, "I hear you! I hear you! Pipe down!" before I roll over and readjust my soft covers.

I wrote in my journal this question: *How do birds know what song to sing?* Mrs. Burgley—my older mentor who moved away to South Carolina—once said that the fact that God made birds *at all* astonished her because of their beauty. "And He didn't have to make them *sing*," she reminded me. Every bird makes some kind of music, even if they don't sing a song; the woodpecker drums, the goose honks, and the hawk screeches. Sometimes I imagine God as an orchestra conductor in the forest with every bird listening for His cue.

*God.*

I've been thinking about Him all the time. It's not just that I have a seat at His table; it's that He's good. He's *really good*! He sends blessings for me to savor. And now, I'm learning to pray. For starters, I'd been writing down people to pray for since so



many of my friends liked to talk about all their problems. Blah, blah, blah.

The biggest complainer right now? Margo. She was acting so strange ever since Adam Beras—a new student from New York—transferred to our school just a few weeks ago. Margo became clumsy and stammered around him like she couldn't find her words. Yesterday at our lockers, she nervously smoothed her skirt over and over again and then pushed me in front of her to try to talk to Adam instead as she blushed and pretended to dig around in her backpack. Adam was taller than she was (which is a big deal because Margo is the tallest girl in our class), and he played football. He wore jeans and Nike T-shirts, and he kept his hair so long he could tuck it behind his ears. And he was always chewing gum.

Margo admitted it to Kee and me in February on Valentine's Day: She had a crush on Adam Beras. And Margo with a crush was hilarious to watch if you ask me. I don't want anything bad to happen to Margo or anything, but it's seriously funny to see the prettiest, most popular, and most confident girl in school get all flustered and scattered around a boy. Margo reminds me of a hummingbird with all her energy, but Margo with a *crush* is a whole other level of energy. She flits around even more—a caffeinated hummingbird.

*God, help Margo calm down about Adam. God, help Margo have a great day.*

I put a few stickers around my prayer list for Margo and then raised my arms up over my head and then let them flop down, right on top of a fluffy stuffed Great Horned Owl—my

Christmas present from Stephen. He delivered it to my front porch on Christmas Eve, rang the doorbell, and then zipped away on his bike without even talking to me. More and more, Stephen clammed up around me. He reminded me of a sea anemone I saw once on a television nature show about the deep seas. Just the slightest touch, and the anemone would collapse in on itself. I wonder how long a diver would have to wait to see it unfold again. My mom says that I probably make Stephen nervous. I don't know. Sometimes when I talk to him, he suddenly scurries away.

I named the owl Harold. I don't know why. He just looks like a Harold. I still sleep with my stuffed animals and arrange them on my bed every morning. Who cares? Being thirteen doesn't mean that I suddenly stop being a little girl. Even Margo sleeps with the purple poodle I bought her for her birthday last September.

I propped Harold up on the pillow to finish my journaling. I wrote down five things I'm hoping for or needing from God.

1. Help the seventh graders find the Barred Owl to tie with the eighth graders.
2. English essay! I need a good Greek myth to write about.
3. Stephen. Help me not think about him so much.
4. Help me find a spring activity. Why can't I be more athletic?
5. Help me have a good attitude with all my chores.

I closed my journal and then sprang up. *Springing*. I popped up, pushed off the blankets, and practically galloped to my window. If you think Pennsylvania shows off the best autumn colors and then the most stunning white winter, imagine what spring looks like. In March, the buds form on the silver and red maples.





The forsythia and witch hazel erupt with golden flowers, like someone set them on fire. Even if there's still snow on the ground, the wildflowers, daffodils, and crocuses push through. Best of all? The turtles claw their way out of hibernation to sun themselves on warm logs by Spring Creek. I jumped up and down in front of my window, just thinking about the warm, sunny day ahead.

The whole Saturday stretched out before me like a trail in the woods I'd run down.

It was only 8:30 in the morning, but my phone started buzzing.

Margo! Margo sometimes texts me in the morning. She likes to check in. She also shares her good news or anything she's excited about. Margo is all sunshine. She's as cheerful as a flowing creek and as energetic and bright as a darting goldfinch. I laughed as I thought of Margo flitting around her house. Yup. That's Margo. I was more turtle by comparison: slow and hidden. I looked down to see four texts right in a row.

*Don't eat breakfast yet!*

*Don't you dare!*

*I'm making crêpes.*

*Can you come over?*

The four texts came lightning fast. Margo texts faster than anyone I know. When I don't respond soon enough—which is pretty much every time—my phone rings. She gets so frustrated that I don't always have my phone nearby. I forget; I leave it downstairs or forget to charge it.

I started texting the first response and paused. My phone rang. I giggled. *So predictable.*

“Chocolate raspberry for me, and lemon blueberry for you.”

I could hear a pan clinging against the counter in Margo's enormous kitchen. "Come, come, come!"

"Sure!" I said, walking to the hall bathroom and putting toothpaste on my toothbrush. *Crêpes*? I remembered the time Margo invited Kee and not me for crêpes that one Saturday before school started. That was the beginning of the worst few months of seventh grade—where Margo said the most horrible three words I'd ever heard. *This seat's saved*.

And now she was inviting *me* and not Kee. Margo didn't invite me over on Saturdays.

I stood stunned for a minute, like a deer in headlights on Siler's Ridge. *Margo can invite anyone she wants. She's the most popular girl in school. Beautiful. Rich. Famous. Margo usually hangs out with the girls from her lunch table who talk about clothes and music and their videos. She's always with Adam or Matt now. So why me? Why today?*

Huh. I looked in the mirror. I was still the same old me. What did Margo want *me* for?

I wondered why, but not for long; I wanted that lemon blueberry crêpe. I gathered my hair in a messy bun, pulled on some jean shorts, and threw on an old sweatshirt. "I'm going to Margo's!" I called out as I ran out the front door into the bright morning sun. The birds seemed to sing more loudly than ever—like they all needed the most attention.



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