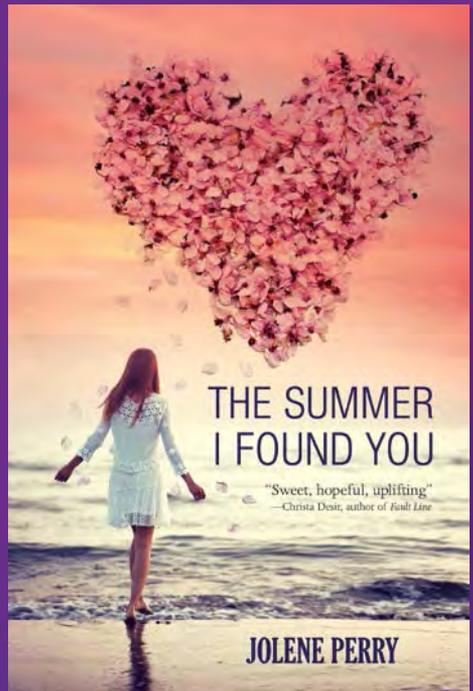
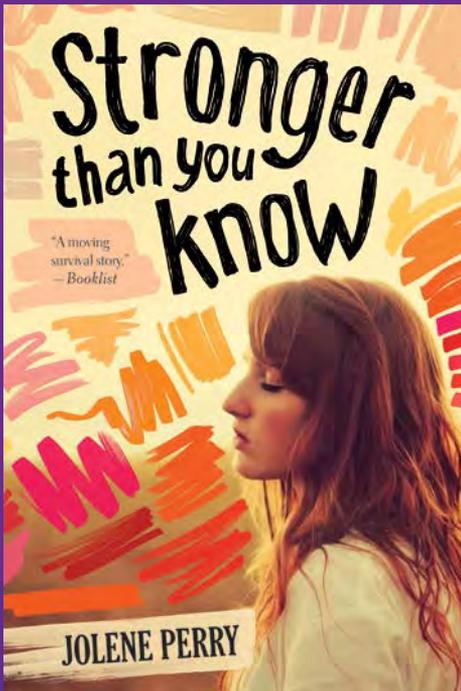
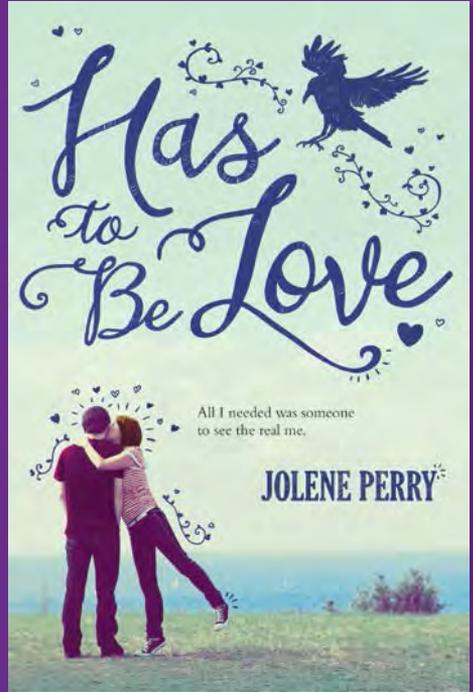


BY JOLENE PERRY





JOLENE PERRY

is a prolific author of young adult fiction and lives in Alaska. Her heroines are real girls that we all can relate to: from Clara Fielding in *Has to Be Love* who has big city dreams to Joy Neilsons from *Stronger Than You Know* who just wants a normal life, to Kate Walker from *The Summer I Found You* who is coming to terms with her new reality and Gabe Osborn from *All the Forever Things* who is simply trying to get by without too much drama. These girls jump into lakes and ride horses, attend carnivals and prom, but most of all learn what it means to be a true friend—and find a great love.

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Best friends. Love. Death. The usual stuff.

All the



Things

JOLENE PERRY

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From growing up in the funeral home her family runs, Gabriella knows that death is a part of life and nothing is forever. Yet Bree, her best friend, has been a constant; it's always been the two of them together against the world. But when Bree starts dating a guy—the worst guy—from that ultra-popular world, suddenly she doesn't have time for Gabe anymore. Now the only one at school who wants to spend time with “Graveyard Gabe” is Hartman, the new guy, but Gabe, not wanting to lose her mind over a boyfriend the way Bree has, holds back. It takes a very strange prom night (with the family hearse instead of a limo) for Gabe to truly fall for Hartman. But when she leaves the after-prom party with him, she's not there for Bree—or for the deadly accident that happens that night. Bree survives, but will she and Gabe ever be able to rebuild their friendship?

Chapter 1

Mom and Dad wheel the large oak casket up the narrow hallway. Dad pulls from the head (as always) and Mom pushes from the foot (as always). The bereaved stands in a worn, gray suit. His shoulders hunch forward, and he stares at the floor—typical posture of the brokenhearted.

Everything about this moment is familiar. The silent communication between Mom and Dad as they shift the casket into the best position for viewing. The bereaved's sighs, me sliding the soft soles of my shoes over the carpet, and the overpowering smell of condolences that have arrived from companies with names like FLOWERS R US.

I lean on the doorframe between the viewing room and the lobby, waiting to be needed or to wave Mr. Nichols through the doorway to sit with his wife.

Mr. Nichols arrived early, which wouldn't be a problem except that my brain is still fuzzy from lack of sleep—too much online back-and-forth with Bree last night.

The casket jolts as Dad sets the wheel locks. Mr. Nichols flinches beside me and clutches his old fedora-style hat.

A normal person would think it's sweet that the family cared so much. A normal person might also blink a few times and shed a few tears over the family's loss. If I did that, I'd dry out. I've learned that the only way to stay professional is to stay detached.

My toe traces another circle on the carpet, and I stare down at Dad's old dress shoes from middle school. I stifle a groan. Bree will be here soon for the horrid group project that's been looming over my head for the past week. My best friend being part of my group isn't nearly enough to offset dealing with stupid Bryce Johnson.

"Gabriella?" Mom's voice is a little too shrill for this to be the first time she's said my name.

Her brows are raised nearly to her hairline.

"Gabriella?" she says again. "Would you please see if Mr. Nichols would like some coffee while we finish setting up?"

I step forward. This is Mom's subtle hint that I need to get this man out of the viewing room so Dad can open the casket and make sure Mrs. Nichols hasn't adjusted during her trip up from the basement.

Gesturing toward the front of the home, I put on my best work smile. "Mr. Nichols, if you'd follow me, we have snacks, tea, coffee..."

His gray eyes droop in sadness.

I clasp my hands together in full hostess mode, because without that, I start to feel all the weighted grief of the people who come through here, and I can't experience that every day.

"Maybe coffee."

The defeat in his voice tightens around my heart. I step back and take a few long breaths. Three breaths to be exact. I can always shove the sadness away in three.

The man slowly follows me through the large lobby to the table

that my cousin and I set up with refreshments for the family viewing. The one that he's two hours early for.

I pour a coffee for Mr. Nichols and stand with a smile until he's dropped in a sugar. Mom gives me a quick thumbs-up from the doorway to the viewing room. I set a small coffee pot and more sugars on a tray in case he sits in there a while.

Pressing my lips together to make sure the red lipstick is still even, I start back across the lobby toward the viewing room, Mr. Nichols on my heels.

My phone vibrates in my dress pocket. It'll be Bree, making sure I'm ready to leave on time. But seriously, this isn't vintage shopping or doughnuts, so she shouldn't mind being a few minutes late.

"Right this way, Mr. Nichols," Dad says. I pause, letting Mr. Nichols walk ahead.

Mom passes me on her way to our closed-door messy family offices, dabbing at her eyes. "Be quick. He wants time alone with her."

Crap. He got to Mom. If this man makes me tear up, I'll have to redo my eyeliner. I take three more slow breaths before I walk back into the viewing room and set the coffee tray on a small table. Dad has the head part of the casket propped open now, and the woman looks asleep instead of dead. I'm feeling pretty proud of the job Bree and I did on her makeup.

"We were married sixty-five years," the man says quietly.

"Wow." Right now, the final month before the end of junior year feels like an eternity.

"There's nothing like finding your soul mate." He peers at me before his eyes go back to his wife.

"I'm sure." But then you end up like the woman in the casket, or the man crying above her. Everything is temporary. My hip vibrates again. Bree must be here, pacing in the parking lot.

“Will you show my son in when he gets here?” the man asks, his voice cracking.

No, no, no. Cracking voices sometimes make my throat swell. After that come teary eyes, and cat-eye eyeliner is *not* easy to fix.

“Absolutely.” I take a couple steps back. “And I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He peers at me again, and a corner of his mouth twitches. I swear he knows those words tends to fly out of my mouth without a second thought.

My hip vibrates *again*—I’m for sure running late.

The moment I’m back in the lobby, I sprint to the door of the back offices and snatch the phone from my pocket.

We’re not going to be late, Bree texts. Tell me we’re not going to be late, G.

Mom blinks a few times through her tears, and I stop.

“I knew Mrs. Nichols,” Mom says as she dabs her eyes a few more times. “Hazard of a small community.” Mom should be dried out by now for sure.

“Sorry.” But I still need to go, and my body leans toward the door in anticipation.

Mom sniffs again. “What do you have going on?”

“US government, meeting for our project. You know, with it being a teacher workday and all...”

“When is this?”

“Like now.”

“Okay.” Mom sighs. “We’re fine. Angel’s at the front desk.”

As if summoned, Angel steps through the door with his typical larger-than-life smile.

Angel is a nice enough guy. His accent is hard for me to follow sometimes, but he seems to put people at ease. Angel is great with

all the people who come through here—both the live and the dead ones. I'm fine with this, until he begins telling me about the conversations he has with the deceased.

“Hey, Angel,” I say. “I'm taking off.”

“Miss Osborn.”

I snatch a piece of gum from the package on Mom's desk. “I'll only be a couple hours. Promise.”

Mom looks me up and down. “Might wanna change first. You got taller again. Maybe we need to find some longer dresses.”

I glance at my simple black A-line dress with a white collar. Of all the times I need to wear my Wednesday Addams dress, it's definitely when I'm sitting across the table from Bryce Johnson. My gut twitches with nerves at whatever asinine comment he'll come up with today. I'm pretty sure the last time Bryce said a word to me, it had something to do with asking if I kept skulls in my bedroom or something equally stupid.

“I wear this all the time. And anyway, I'm already late.” I pick up my large patent leather purse from the coatrack, wondering how good a weapon it would make if I felt the urge to beat Bryce over the top of the library table.

My phone vibrates *again*.

You're supposed to be waiting under the awning, Bree says. COME OUT NOW. We will not be the slackers in our group.

This is so like Bree. On time. Organized. Prepared. Especially because she knows I'll need reinforcements today. Stupid Bryce Johnson.

I run for the door and hope I have everything in my phone that I need for our meeting.

Bree wears a smirk and a pastel miniskirt, her arms folded across her chest. “Did you forget what time it was?”

“No,” I say, giving her a more dramatic sigh than I intended. “The husband showed up early for the viewing, and then Mom and Dad took forever with the casket.”

“Nichols?” she asks as she opens her car door. Too bad Mom didn’t see Bree’s skirt, because it’s a solid two inches shorter than mine.

I nod.

“Well, then I’m glad I didn’t come in. Crying makes me crazy. How do you think we did on her makeup?”

“She looks fab,” I say, bumping Bree with my hip. “Of course.” Bree and I are a pretty unstoppable team when it comes to making dead people look alive.

“Okay. Let’s go.” She points to her small car. “I want you to be aware that I’d be making you drive if we weren’t already running late.”

I make a face. I hate driving, and she knows it. But I have to admit that if it weren’t for Bree, I probably still wouldn’t have my license. “You know Mom never gives me her car, so we’d have to take the old hearse if I drove.”

She laughs. “Yeah, there’s that.”

The second we’re in the car, Bree hits the gas. Her hair is in shiny, thick curls and teased in the back to add to her whole sixties vibe. “I see that you’re dressed appropriately to see Bryce.”

Shoving away the bits of uncertainty trying to weave their way into my resolve, I pull back my shoulders. “Of course.”

Bryce Johnson is the stereotypical spoiled California jock boy. He’s only a junior but walks the halls of our school like he owns it. His smirk is annoying. His hair is always perfect. And I hold him responsible for destroying any chance to date Davis, the only guy I ever put effort into dating.

“Can you even believe how long ago that Wednesday Addams thing was?” She laughs a little as she smooths her lips together. “Like, eighth grade?”

I stop breathing. “Yep.” Eighth grade. My little eighth-grade heart had flitted like a hummingbird as I’d tiptoed out of my house and into the dark cemetery. Davis lived in the direction of the beach, so we’d agreed to meet at the lower gate of the graveyard.

Davis and I had been friends since the seventh grade, but over the summer, I’d started to notice little things, like the way the left side of his mouth always turned up before the right, and how whenever Bree and I saw him at the park or the beach, he’d always say hi to me and stand closer than he needed to.

That night, I knew something was going to happen between us, and I was so ready. I stood outside in the dark and tried to remember all the things that Bree and I had read about boyfriends. About how to keep eye contact and ask him questions. Also, that I could always walk away if I changed my mind about him. We pored over online stories about first kisses, and I was determined that mine would be perfect—if it came to that. But really, I knew that kiss was coming. *Knew* it.

When Davis came through the lower gate, we sat against one of my favorite flowering trees. He said something about meeting Bryce for a sleepover that night, and the cemetery feeling so different in the dark, but then we laughed about being back at school for another year of middle school, and I remembered that I liked Davis not just because he was cute, but also because he was my friend. Our shoulders touched. Once in a while, his leg would touch mine. And then he asked to read my palm, but he didn’t read palms. I’d read *Seventeen Magazine*—he was looking for an excuse to touch me.

There was no way I was going to let that perfect moment of him tracing the lines on my hands pass me by without my first kiss, so I

leaned in and kissed his cheek. Davis jerked in surprise, but his eyes were smiling when he moved toward me and pressed his dry lips against mine.

Perfection.

Until—

“Graveyard Gabby, Davis? You can’t be serious! She’s a Wednesday Addams, not someone you’d *kiss!*” Bryce yelled.

In less than a second, Davis was up and running for the gate where Bryce sat on his bike, arms folded and a scowl on his face. Davis paused when he picked up his bike, and we locked eyes for a moment. Hope crashed something sparkling, warm, and wonderful through my chest. Until Bryce slapped Davis’s back. “Come on! We were going to meet at the corner and you didn’t show, man.”

They took off, and that was the end of Davis speaking to me. But Bryce seeing my first kiss had much worse repercussions.

Bryce told the whole school that I went around kissing boys in the graveyard, and the slew of names began: Graveyard Gabby, Stone-Cold Gabe, Wednesday Addams...

Bree and I spent that week together watching *The Addams Family* movies since I had *no* clue who Wednesday Addams was. We plotted how to get Bryce to shut up. Clearly the Wednesday Addams and Graveyard Gabby talk wasn’t going to go away, so Bree said that maybe Bryce would stop making a huge deal of it if I just jumped into who he thought I was. And the thing is, after watching *The Addams Family*, I decided that Wednesday Addams was a kick-ass girl.

With Bree’s help, I fell in love with everything dark and vintage. I showed up at school in a simple black shift dress, Dad’s shoes, and dark liner on my eyes. That first day, the name-calling grew worse, but by day three of me sticking to the new version of myself, I’d become a boring and far-too-willing target.

Over the next few weeks, I spent every penny I'd saved on a new wardrobe, Bree and I started our blog, and we embraced being different. Together.

Now Bree and I wear what we want, listen to what we want, and do what we want, which makes high school less of a prison and more of a rite of passage. I can't wait until it's over, but at least we're in it together.

"You're quiet over there," she says.

"Yes," I agree. "How many times have you saved me?"

"Don't you mean, how many times have we saved each other?"

I brush off my already-clean black dress. "Yeah."

Bree blows me a kiss. "So many times."

So many.

"Look both ways," I say automatically when she reaches the four-way stop.

Bree's mouth twitches. It always does. "You're more of a parent than my parents."

I snort but don't say anything else. I'm never quite sure what to say when Bree brings up her disaster of a family.

When she pulls to a stop in front of our small public library, her phone sings "Thriller" and she groans before picking it up. "Hey, Grammy...No, I told you I had a project at the library, remember?" There's a pause. "Grammy, it's Friday...teacher workday...Yes... You had bingo last night, not last week...Grammy..." She glances at me and rolls her eyes. "Yes. Friday. Group project. And then I'm hanging with Gabriella for a bit."

Unless I have to work.

Bree lets out a slow sigh. "Okay, Grammy...Yes, I fed the cats, just check the dishes...No, Friday... *Today*..."

Her grammy is a mess, but after her dad's numerous affairs and her

parents' divorce, he and Bree's mother both moved away. Living with her grammy is Bree's only option if she wants to stay in Paradise Hill.

"What was that?" I ask as soon as she sets her phone down. "You were talking in circles."

Bree slips her phone in her bag without looking at me. "She's just old, I guess. Forgets what day it is sometimes. But she doesn't have much of a schedule, so she gets confused. Mom's no help, of course."

Of course her mom's not helpful. She's in a craphole apartment in LA, living like a runaway teen.

I think about Matthew living with his grandma, my aunt Liza, and know how much work it can be for him. "Do you need any help?"

"Turn back time and tell my parents to not have their midlife crisis until after I graduate?" She exaggerates her smile and bats her lashes.

"Um..."

"Kidding." Bree's smile turns real. "You can keep being my friend and help me with our website, and make sure your parents keep hiring me to do makeup."

"I can do that." I push the car door open, ignoring my weak legs as I steel myself by staring at the library doors. I hate that one person has so much power over me. Maybe wearing my most Wednesday Addams dress was a bad idea.

"You can face Bryce, Gabe. He's just a guy."

I know I can face Bryce, but I hate that I even need her reassurance right now.

"Besides"—she shrugs as she walks ahead—"he's not that bad anymore."

What?

Chapter 2

I chase Bree toward the old library, with its tiled roof that the palm trees seem to be trying to attack from all sides.

“Bree, wait.”

She holds open the door for me.

“How can you say he’s not that bad?” I hiss.

Instead of answering, she rolls her eyes a little and waves at me like I’m being silly. Me. I walk sideways a few steps, moving through the big white shoulder-height book-tag detectors.

The dusty, mildewed smell of our library accosts my nose, and I sneeze. I hate sneezing. The whole world blacks out just long enough for—

A sharp pain cracks across my nose, and I blink, reach out as the floor flies toward me, and grab the librarians’ counter.

“Ouch, sweetie!” Judy frowns from behind the counter.

I look back at the culprit—the stupid detectors. Seriously, the library books are already *free*. The library shouldn’t need detectors.

I start to scrunch my nose to survey the damage but wince.

“Gabe!” Bree gasps as she points, her face paling. I must be bleeding.

“You were putting mascara on a cadaver *yesterday*,” I point out. “This is just a few drops of...” But I can feel the heat sliding through my palm, so maybe I have more than just a few drops of blood. Of course this would happen just before being forced to work with Bryce.

“You know blood just startles me at first.” Bree blows out through an O-shaped mouth. “I’ll be okay.”

Judy shoves a box of tissues into my hands, and I grab two off the top and scrunch them under my nose. People pass out if they lose too much blood.

“Given the pain on my face, I’m not really worried about you,” I tell Bree, and she lets a gaspy, little laugh escape.

“You go sit.” Judy shoos us in the direction of the study tables. “I’ll bring you ice. The boys and Trinity are already there.”

“Thanks,” I mumble through the tissue. *Wait. Boys? As in more than one?* It’s me, Trinity, Bree, and Bryce. That’s our group.

More blood leaks through the wad of tissues and down my wrist. “I need the bathroom.”

Bree steps ahead and holds open the bathroom door.

The bathroom fan clacks, and the fluorescent lights zap the color from my skin, making the blood on my cheek, chin, and hands look even more startling.

Bree jerks stiff paper towels from the dispenser and runs them under the water as I stare at myself in the mirror.

“What a mess.” I groan.

Bree takes the box of tissues and hands me wet towels. “Clean up, Gabe. I promise you’ll survive this.”

I point to my eye, which has begun to swell.

“Well, hell. Do you want to skip?” Her words come out so slowly that I know Bree does not want to skip out. She wants this over with. *I want this over with.*

“Just gimme a sec.” I rinse off my hands and gently swipe the wet towels over my face. My nose, cheek, and eye all hurt and are all beginning to swell.

Bree holds out a few of the soft tissues. I dab my nose a few times and get just a small drop of blood. Better. Crouching down, she digs through my purse and holds up two Advil, which I take using water from the sink.

Dabbing my nose again and again, I come up with just the tiniest spots of blood.

What a stupid day. I let out a sigh and start for the door, holding the tissue under my nose.

“You okay?” Bree whispers. “Like, for real? Or should we leave?”

“We’re already here.”

Today sucks.

Bree tucks an arm over my shoulders. “No stress.”

She said this the first time we met—I was bleeding then too—the victim of a volleyball hurling through the air in seventh-grade PE. She ran with me to the bathroom and handed me toilet paper and wet towels until the bleeding stopped. Hopefully I’ll never have to admit how many more times she’s had to make an emergency trip for me than I’ve had to help her.

A guy leaps to standing from the small table where Bryce and Trinity sit. “What...*happened?*” he sputters.

I don’t know this guy. He’s spindly skinny and crazy tall. His pants are plaid, and his jacket with rolled sleeves looks straight out of 1985. Dark curly hair hangs over a pale forehead. Glasses cover a face that I sort of expect to see acne on, but there’s none. He’s thin, and his

face is smooth. He'd be a great Addams Family butler if they ever do another movie.

"I'm fine." I wave him away. But I'm completely not fine.

"Are you bleeding?" Trinity asks as she peers over her phone. I'm amazed her eyes reach my face over the screen she loves so much.

Bree waves her away with a forced laugh. "She said she was fine. Tiny bloody nose. No big."

"So." Bryce adjusts his letterman jacket, as if we all don't see it *every day*. "This is Hartman, from Connecticut. He and his mom are crashing with me right now, so Mr. Sandstrom put him in our group."

The lanky guy folds himself back into the chair next to Bryce.

Bree elbows me until I've scooted over enough to sit across from the new guy, leaving Bree in front of Bryce, and Trinity at the head of the table.

"Why don't you introduce Hartman as a regular person instead of a jock? You know, give me his first name instead of his last?" My nose is really starting to throb, but playing down an injury helps other people notice less, so I'm determined to pretend I'm fine.

"Uh..." Bryce says.

I glance at the skinny guy across from me. "What's your name?"

"Hartman Smith."

I blink. And then blink again. "Hartman is your *first* name?"

Bree smiles too widely. Her brows wiggle just before she gives me a subtle he's-boyfriend-material wink, and I cringe. If this guy knows Bryce and is staying with Bryce, then he's the last kind of person I need. Also, I'm holding tissues against my nose, which is probably swelling.

Trinity hasn't looked up from her phone since her first comment.

"I'm Gabriella, but Gabe is fine," I tell Hartman. I blot my nose a few times and drop the tissue in my bag.

“Gabe, like the boy’s name?” he asks.

I feel my eyes narrow. “Are you making fun of my name?”

“Were you making fun of mine?” His face is flat and unreadable.

Instead of trying to decipher him, I point. “And that’s Bree.”

“Bryce said”—Hartman glances at Bryce—“wasn’t hard to figure out who was who.”

Right. Because Bree is the pretty one with her dark eyes, perfect hair, and bikini-model body. The twinge in my chest is pushed away with a single, deep breath. I’m not the pretty girl, and that’s fine. My lips are too thin and my eyes too squinty and my skin too pale, and my blond hair too boring. And I’m sure there’s another whole list that could go along with that one. Maybe two.

“Yeah,” Bryce cackles. “Because Gabriella is dressed up like Wednesday Addams again.”

Just like always happens when she’s mad, Bree’s brows pinch together. “Grow up, Bryce.”

He sits back, holding his hands in a surrender gesture and chomping on his gum like he needs to kill it before we start our meeting. And seriously, he’d make a comment if I *wasn’t* dressed this way about where my regular wardrobe had gone. There’s no winning with guys like him.

At least Bree is back on the same page with me where Bryce is concerned.

I glance around the table. Trinity is still tapping on her phone. Bryce’s eyes are on Bree in a way that says he’s noticing her. (He’s so gross.) Hartman is still staring at my face and whatever misfortune was handed to me by the stupid detectors. Our eyes lock for a moment before his gaze drops back to the table.

“Here you go, dear.” Judy hands me a bag of ice wrapped in a scratchy, brown paper towel.

I try to smile, but it makes my nose feel like it's breaking, so I take the ice and slowly slide it across my right cheek toward my nose. It better not be broken. Not when it was my idea to meet here instead of Starbucks. I can't believe I'm stuck sitting across from the new guy where he'll have full view of my bag of ice and swelling face.

Maybe I should have stayed home and helped with the family viewing or hung with my little sister. "I'm swelling up like Mr. Gibson."

Bree's gaze snaps to me. She widens her eyes, holds in a smile like *Of course you'd say this*, and shakes her head. This is what we do. I make sure she doesn't use grammy-speak now that she's living with her grammy, and she tries to keep me from talking about dead people too much. We both fail at least half the time.

"Do we know a Mr. Gibson?" Bryce asks.

I glance at Bree, and she quietly laughs at me. I swear I can hear her thoughts: *You started it. You can't back down now...*

"My parents run a funeral home," I say slowly. "We had a Gibson in who was...swollen," I finish lamely.

Bryce snorts. "Classic Graveyard Gabe."

I narrow my eyes, which earns me another cackle from him.

"Uh..." Hartman blinks a few times. "Okay."

I'm such an idiot.

"What brought you here?" Bree asks Hartman with her superpolite voice. She gives me a quick smile. Bree is so good at redirecting a conversation after my wreckage.

"My, um..." Hartman swallows. "My dad died. My mom doesn't have much family, but she and Bryce's mom are close. Dad is from here, so we moved here."

Instinct kicks in, and I reach across the table, not quite touching his hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss." It's my smoothest, best, most instinctual work voice.

Bree taps my foot under the table, another suppressed smile tugging at her mouth. Clearly, it's too late for me to not sound like a funeral home director.

Nobody says anything, but even Trinity is peering over her phone again, so my words just hang out there.

I need a redo on this day.

Bree nudges me under the table again, and I jump. She subtly raises one brow and does a half glance toward Hartman. And then again with a little more exaggeration. I shake my head just enough for her to hear me silently screaming, *No way*. And especially not after *this* first impression. Her continued slightly raised brows say that she's not going to let the idea of this cute guy go—at least not soon.

“Can we actually *do* something?” Trinity asks.

Group projects are the *worst*. I have to deal with people who aren't Bree, horrible things like bloody noses happen, we've thrown a stranger into the mix, and now, always-on-her-phone Trinity is the one asking us to start.

Hartman clears his throat as he stares at the table. “Yeah. We should...um...get started.”

* * *

One hour at the library, and we all have assignments for our “how a bill becomes a law” presentation. The whole discussion made me wish I'd taken government on independent study over the summer, but it's too late for that now. At least we can leave.

“So...” Bryce starts and leans over the table toward Bree. “You're in that after-school touchy-feely experiment that Ms. Bates is running, aren't you?”

Bree sucks in a breath. “Yeah...”

I scoot closer so she knows I'm on her side with whatever comes

next. The group is for students with recently divorced parents—something our counselor started for her PhD program.

“I just noticed you, that’s all. Thought maybe we could get together sometime or something,” Bryce says. To my friend. Bryce Johnson...and my friend.

What?

“What?” Bree says, her posture suddenly stiff.

“No big thing.” He smiles a little, and I hate that even though I don’t like him, I appreciate the perfection of the tanned dimples on his cheeks. “There just aren’t that many of us in the group, so I thought it might be cool to be able to say that we actually got together outside of group. Maybe get a chance to skip one of them or something.”

“Yeah...” Bree trails off and glances toward me.

I’m sure my face is blank, because my mind is blank. Guys in Bryce’s position in our school don’t ask out girls like Bree and me. We’re not involved in any school activities...*anything*, while Bryce is practically the school mascot. Well, he’s the mascot for the upperclassmen who play sports. He’s probably hated by everyone else, but by all accounts, that feeling is mutual.

“I know Hartman really wants to get back to his mom.” Bryce flicks another piece of gum in his mouth as he leans back in his chair like he’s lounging. “But I’m starving if you’re up for a burger or something.”

Is he seriously asking out my friend? In front of everyone?

Bree’s wide eyes grow even wider, her gaze flitting from me to Bryce to me to Bryce...

She pinches my sleeve and drags me to standing. She missed the perfect opportunity for ultimate humiliation! What is she *doing*?

“Um, just a sec?” I say as she pulls me behind a bookshelf.

“Did that just happen?” Bree asks, out of breath. Her hand

rests over her chest, and her eyes are so huge I'm worried about permanent damage.

"You dragging me away from the table?" I say. "Because my sleeve says that just happened."

"Bryce Johnson asking me out."

"I think..." I lean back and peer at him. He cocks a brow at me. Right. We both know that Bree and I are about to decide together and dissect the conversation. He's *so* going down. "Yeah, I think he did."

Bree stares at the bookshelf for a moment. I'm about to tell her that I'll break the news to him, or say we already have plans, when I see the faintest twinges of a smile.

"Not Bryce. Are you *serious*?"

"He is sort of perfect looking, and I just..." Her brown eyes lock onto mine. "I have a major confession."

Bree and I don't have major confessions because we share things. Like *everything*.

"Remember how I had that big crush on him before the whole graveyard incident?"

Oh, I remember.

"I was mad at him for you, but..." She peeks through the bookshelves, but I have no idea if she can see him or not because I'm not going to look again.

"But?"

"But he's still... He is just so beautiful. And I wanted to tell you that I've always sort of watched him, but with your history, I was afraid to."

I scoff. No one with that kind of ego and reputation could be considered beautiful.

"It's just one quick meal. How many girls get to say that they dated one of the hottest guys in school?"

“*This* particular guy?” I ask. “A dozen? Two?”

Bree whisper-laugh and shakes her head. She is actually considering going out with Bryce Johnson. “He really is just *gorgeous*, Gabe. Can you let your grudge go for one night? For me? Please?”

She smiles, but it wobbles a little. She actually cares what I think. I guess this shouldn’t surprise me, but her überconfidence always shifts how I think she feels. I generally assume Bree is great because she generally acts like she’s great.

“Don’t you remember how he ruined my first kiss? I mean...” I lean in closer. “Come *on*. And he hasn’t grown past the stupid nicknames. Not to mention how many girls hate him after dating him.”

Bree sucks her lower lip into her mouth. Her eyes plead with me. Asking me to go along with whatever she wants. Which means I will. “Maybe I could talk to him about the name thing.”

This is such a disaster.

Bree lets out a slow breath through O-shaped lips. “One quick burger and a drop-off. That’s it. I’m just...” Her shoulders fall a little. “I’m a little curious, you know? What it would be like to go out with someone like him.”

Like him. That should be her first clue. Not like us. Like him. Like the big asshole he is.

I lean back to see around the bookshelf and glance at the table. Barely holding in a groan, I know I’m not going to stop Bree. I never would. But still...everything that comes out of his mouth is so horrible.

“Gabe?” she asks.

I lean back between the bookshelves.

“Look. I know,” she continues. “Sisters before misters, and we’re here together, but...When will I get another chance at dating one

of the coolest guys in school? It's something I should *not* care about, but maybe I do?"

I blink a few times. She really is serious.

"Help a sistah out?" She laughs quietly, her eyes pleading and her glossed lip tucked into her mouth.

"Yeah." I relent. "Fine. Helpin' a sistah out."

She grabs me arm. "*Best. You. Are. The. Best.*"

"Once in a while."

Bree pulls back her shoulders, sucks in another breath, and heads for our table. Her hips swing a little extra as she walks.

"Okay, Bryce. Grabbing a bite sounds fine." She leans against her chair as if saying yes to him isn't a big deal, but I can see the stiffness in her shoulders and how she's trying to keep her face just a little too calm.

Bryce glances at me and chuckles. "I'm glad I passed the group test."

He didn't, but I'm nice and keep my mouth shut.

"Hey, Gabe." Bryce taps his friend on the arm, and Hartman's attention turns back to the table. "Hartman can give you a ride home if that's cool."

Oh. That wasn't part of the plan.

Hartman taps the table with long fingers. "Yeah. That's fine."

How has my fate this afternoon suddenly been decided? What if Hartman is a bad driver?

Trinity is gone with a brief wave. The two guys are talking about schedules and family and I don't know what. How am I suddenly stuck with the stranger?

Bree leans toward me and whispers, "Are you actually sure you're okay with this, or are you just doing that thing where you're annoyed but still the best friend ever?"

"As long as you're not trying to set me up with Hartman, I'm not

annoyed.” I’m a little annoyed. She should *feel* my annoyance. It’s so strong that I’ve almost forgotten about my nearly broken nose.

Bree’s smile turns mischievous. “He’s super cute, Gabe. I expect a full report of your ride home.”

“Yeah, I’ll need a report too.”

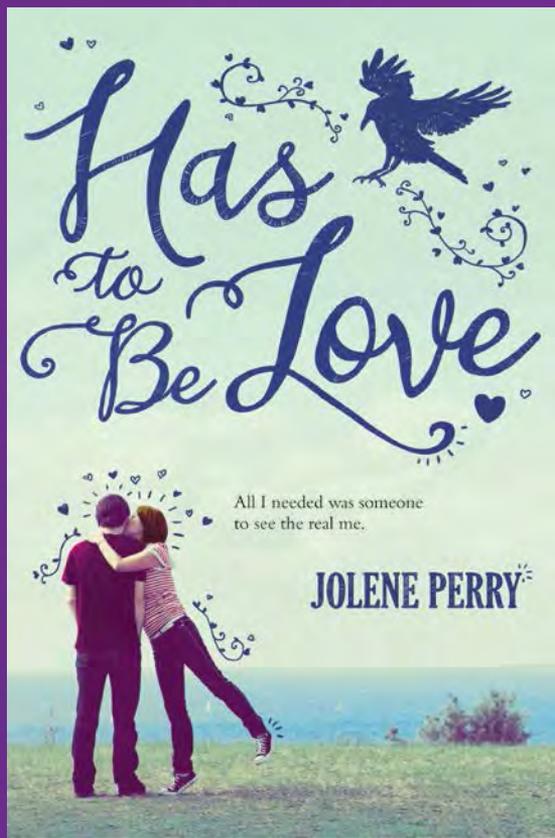
Bryce tosses Bree his award-winning smile—or at least his girl-getting smile—and Bree waves over her shoulder as Bryce leads her to the door. “I’ll call ya, Gabe!”

Bryce looks her up and down like he’s going to eat a snack off her body.

Gross.

He even has this swagger thing when he walks. He’s not fooling anyone. He holds open the library door and gestures outside with a long swing of his arm, and Bree blushes.

Oh, this is not good.



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Years ago, Clara survived a vicious bear attack. She's used to getting sympathetic looks around town, but meeting strangers is a different story. Yet her dreams go far beyond Knik, Alaska, and now she's got a secret that's both thrilling and terrifying—an acceptance letter from Columbia University. But it turns out her scars aren't as fixable as she hoped, and when her boyfriend begins to press for a forever commitment, she has second thoughts about New York. Then Rhodes, a student teacher in her English class, forces her to acknowledge her writing talent, and everything becomes even more confusing—especially with the feelings she's starting to have about him. Now all Clara wants to do is hide from the tough choices she has to make. When her world comes crashing down around her, Clara has to confront her problems and find her way to a decision. Will she choose the life of her dreams or the life that someone she loves has chosen? Which choice is scarier?

1

My hair flies out behind me as I race on my four-wheeler toward the hardware store. The cool spring air bites my cheeks, but there's actual warmth from the sun and the faintest hint of green at the tips of the tree branches. Any day the leaves will burst. Every spring in Alaska moves from snowy to green in about two weeks, and I can't wait to get rid of this ugly brown in between.

The large log storefront and old metal warehouse of Motter Construction come into view through the thick trees along the river, and I hit the gas, making the lugged tires kick out mud behind me.

The lumberyard, hardware store, and construction office is my once-a-week job, or whenever my boyfriend's mother calls and asks me for help, like today. I slide to a stop in the gravel parking lot just in time to see Elias toss a bundle of lumber over his shoulder.

I stand on the wheeler for a moment longer, watching him with the customer, all perfect smiles and strong shoulders. He jogs back into the warehouse from the lumberyard, and I head for the front door. My body and brain are still buzzing from the acceptance letter I got today. I'm not going to do anything about it yet, so there's no point in saying anything.

Tapping my back pocket, I double-check for my small notebook. Nothing's worse than knowing exactly what to write and having

nothing to write it on. It's there, like always.

"Clara Fielding." Mrs. Motter sighs over her laptop. "Have you come to save me from inventory again?"

The relief on her face bubbles a short laugh up my throat. "Yep."

Her gaze doesn't even pause on my scars as she watches me walk toward her. She's known me since long before the attack that marred the right side of my face just over five years ago.

I step around the store counter. "Let me see what we have going on here today." I flip her laptop toward me and know immediately it has everything to do with technology and very little to do with actual inventory taking. "Why is all this red?"

"I don't know." She shakes her head as she sighs again. "I thought I was *adding* inventory, but—"

"You subtracted it." I smile again, and this time she does glance at my face for just a moment too long. I tilt my head forward so my blond hair gives me some coverage. No matter how often I smooth my bangs down and keep my head forward, I'm still known as the girl with the scars. Or, more often, the girl who was attacked by a bear and survived.

"Now I'm worried I don't have the numbers right." Her shoulders fall. For Mrs. Motter, computers are still voodoo magic. Almost anywhere but in small-town Knik, Alaska, this would be a problem.

"Let me go in the back and get the drop-off receipts, okay?" In reality I'm looking for an excuse to see Elias and maybe sneak a kiss in the warehouse.

"Thank you, Clara." She stares at the screen like she can somehow *will* all the numbers to do what she wants.

I jog through the doors into the back and slow to a walk, wondering how long it'll take me to find him in the floor-to-ceiling maze of metal shelving.

“Saw your girl is here.” One of the guys laughs, but I can’t see anyone over the high racks of tubing, lumber, trim, and insulation.

“Her face, man...She must make it up to you in other ways, huh?” A different voice, but the twisting in my stomach is familiar.

“Don’t be a dick, Kev,” someone says. “Grow up.”

I’m used to this—I am. But it still takes my breath away. Elias mutters a few things I can’t understand, and I flatten myself against a row of doors.

Breathe, Clara. It’s not a big deal. You don’t even know the warehouse guys that well. They’re older... But I know that guy voiced what everyone probably thinks. He was just rude enough to say it out loud.

Pressing my hand over my heart, I close my eyes and take in a deep breath. I need to find a smile before I see Elias. I catch a glimpse of his faded red Motter Construction T-shirt between two rows. I sprint toward him and grab his belt loop.

His smile is wide as he spins around. “Hey, beautiful.”

I’ve always thought of Elias as a haiku—all simple, gorgeous perfection.

His hands slide around my waist and his fingertips tap my pocket. “Been writing?”

I kiss his cheek. “Always.” Maybe I’ll write even more now that I know it could actually get me somewhere.

“Do I get to see?” He kisses my cheek back.

“I could be persuaded.” I step back wanting him to follow, but he doesn’t. Elias never does. At least not here. He wants to seem professional to the crew and his dad, who has brought Elias into the company almost full time now.

I want a kiss. I always want a kiss. There’s something about connecting with someone that way that makes the rest of the world matter a little less.

He shakes his head with the teasing smile I love so much. “Not here, Clara.”

“Please?” I step closer.

He clears his throat as his gaze dances on everything but me. He forgets I know when he’s trying to hold in a smile. “So, when is Cecily back?” he asks. “You two withering away without each other yet?”

I stick my finger in his dimple. “She’s back a couple weeks before we graduate.” I lean closer. “You already know when my friend returns, and you’re ignoring what I want.”

“And is the trip to Seattle before or after that?”

“Before.” This time I kiss his dimple. “You already knew that too.”

His near-smile just makes his dimples deeper. “Incorrigible.”

“Irresistible?” I turn my head a little to the right. It’s automatic to always turn my scars away from people. Even him. Even after knowing him since long before my scars and dating him for close to two years.

He leans back and does a quick scan both ways. The look on his face as he steps closer says “all clear” so I move in for my kiss.

He rests his calloused hands on my shoulders and leans in, pressing his lips to mine and sending the fluttering tingles through me that seem to be fiercer every day. The comments from the warehouse guys start to slip away. I part my lips a little and am leaning forward when someone clears his throat behind me.

Elias and I jump, and his dad gives us a frown.

“Elias, we have another load.”

Elias’s jaw tightens slightly as he steps around me and takes the slip from his dad so he can collect the order. He gives me one quick look over his shoulder, tilting his head toward the back of the warehouse where the river is—meaning, *I’ll meet you there in a few.*

I hate it when Elias is right and we’re caught. He warns me every time, and every time I ignore him. If I’m being honest, we’re caught

more often than not because once I start kissing Elias, I'm not good at stopping. He has the stopping part of kissing me down to an art.

"I'm getting the new inventory sheets," I say to his dad, even though we both know I'm back here for Elias. His dad shares the same view as his son. Work is work. Dates are dates. No need to confuse the two. I want them all smashed together. All the time.

I quickly snatch the drop-off sheets from the office and run back to the store so I can get this mess sorted out. The second I sit down, Elias is next to me, taking my hand and tugging me back to my feet. Unlike his dad, his mom gives us a smile as we walk for the door.

"Five minutes," I tell her, but she waves us away.

Elias leads me out the door, and I follow him to the small bench near the river. The river runs brown and thick and muddy this time of year, matching the brownness of everything else.

When we were kids we made mud pies behind this warehouse. When my mom died and my scars were new, Elias built this bench for me. When I turned sixteen and my dad said I could date, Elias gave me my first kiss on this bench. Now we still come here sometimes to kiss.

I slip my arms around his neck, his hands touch my lower back, and I think we might end up in the middle of a very nice make-out session. It's probably good that we're out in the open like this because kissing Elias tends to turn off my moral compass and makes me want all of him.

Being raised with strict standards where boys are concerned—no dating until sixteen, no sex until marriage—should mean that I'm the cautious one with Elias. But it seems like I'm never the more careful one.

Elias breaks our kiss and taps my notebook in his hands. He won't open it without my okay though. He never would.

I start to tell him my writing got me into Columbia, but then we'd be in the middle of a conversation about futures, which I'm not sure I'm ready to have. Columbia is my mother's school. She'd be so fiercely

proud of me. My chest feels like it both caves and swells, like most times when I think about Mom.

“Hey,” Elias whispers as he touches my cheek—the unscarred one. “You okay?”

“Mom moment.” I shake my head before plopping my arms around his neck again. A “mom moment” is a lot easier to explain than admission to a college he doesn’t know I applied to. “But I’m ready for my next kiss.”

He shifts just slightly away again. Just enough that I start to feel weird for being so forward. “I just have a minute.”

I lean toward him. His kiss is soft but closed mouth.

“I get off in an hour and a half,” he says, our lips still touching.

My shoulders sag. “I have a family dinner tonight.”

He sits back before holding my notebook out between us.

I fold my arms. “It’s okay.”

“You still start at the back, right?” he asks.

“It’s the only way to preserve my writing mojo,” I tease. *The mojo that got me into freaking Columbia.* But I’m not going this year, maybe not even next year. My plan with Cecily was to stay was to stay in Alaska for freshman year, at least until my face is fixed, and then figure out what to do for school. Besides, Cecily’s going to University of Alaska with me so we can share our freshman year—Anchorage or Fairbanks is something we’ll figure out later.

Elias opens my notebook carefully, and I bite my lip. I still can’t believe I got *in*. It was stupid to apply a year early, but curiosity got the better of me. I had to know if I was good enough.

I am.

His callused hands flip from the back to my most recent, and he reads aloud. His cheeks turn pink.

My body suddenly feels hot from bottom to top, because I remember exactly how I felt writing those words.

His low voice echoes my thoughts back to me:

*“Fuzzy brains and stupid scars,
Trips to barns and backs of cars.
Lightning flashes, sight of blue
Coming back to haunt me. You...”*

Before giving him a chance to react to the rest of the poem, I grab his face in my hands and kiss him. For real. Mouth open. Tongues moving together. I really wish he'd put his hands on me. Everywhere.

And then our kissing is just over. No fingers sliding under my shirt or bending me over backward on the small wooden bench or...any one of a million other things I might like to be doing but probably should stop myself from doing.

“You’re amazing.” He gives me another soft kiss. “Your words *and* your mouth.” His cheeks are pink again. Elias reaches around my lower back, but I know it’s just to slip my notebook back into my pocket. Kissing is done. “Have a good dinner.”

“Good luck with work,” I say. And the same weird feeling of *wanting* I felt while writing that poem comes back to me.

2

Not only is tonight a family dinner, but it's a dinner with a stranger. I need to brace myself. The old plaid couch helps my body relax. Meeting new people isn't one of my strong suits.

I know what it's like to have people see my scars before they see me. Even in Knik, where pretty much everyone knows me, it happens. In New York? Probably a million times worse. I shouldn't have applied so early.

Tucking Mom's book onto my knees, I begin to read. Again.

She never finished her degree at Columbia, but she did manage to write a book of short stories. And every time I open *Alaskan Paths*, a tiny part of me hopes that my name will be on a cover one day too. It's a fragile dream, but I never feel more connected to Mom than when I find myself wanting the same things as her.

Dad pauses at the edge of the living room. "We'll need to get started cooking soon," he says in his gravelly voice.

I tap my finger across the cover of Mom's book—a cheesy mountain picture that looks painted. Small Alaskan press, but still a thrill.

"Clara?" Dad calls again.

"Coming!"

Dad's already set the massive table, and my heart skips again because I don't *want* to meet the guy who is subbing for Ms. Bellings for a couple months.

“I’ve opened a standing invitation for Rhodes Kennedy to eat with us,” Dad says as he starts browning the meat, holding the spatula out to me before he burns it or something.

“Why?” The word comes out a bit snottier than I mean for it to. It’s that English is *my* subject and having a sub for the end of senior year feels cruel. I take the spatula and dump in some tomato sauce and the onions he’s chopped up. The smell of marinara sauce begins to fill the kitchen, and some of the tension dissipates.

Dad turns toward the fridge. “Because he’s a guy who has never been here before, and I think a young college student might appreciate a couple home-cooked meals a week. Especially considering he’s going to be student teaching for the first time.”

His voice is so methodical and matter-of-fact that I really can’t argue. It’s exactly the kind of thing he’d do anyway—welcoming the new face into our little town.

And we’re definitely a little town—probably microscopic for someone coming from college. The grocery store is mostly canned and frozen stuff, and the produce is an hour away, along with the Walmart.

I go to the private Christian school in Knik because Dad and the principal of the high school have some feud over...I think it’s that the principal’s husband is the only other accountant in town and is a “money-grubbing crook.” Apparently I should not be in a school that is run by the wife of a crook. Never mind the fact that both schools only have a couple hundred students total, and that we all hang out and know each other outside of school.

“Where’s he from?” I ask. I’m sure he’s said before, but Dad’s chatter about the school board generally floats in one ear and out the other.

“New York.”

My heart gives a few thumps. “Which school?”

Dad pauses and scratches his chin. “Columbia? I think that’s the one.

You applied there, right? Like your mom?”

I take a hard swallow. I could go. I mean, not this fall. Too soon. Not enough time to get my face fixed. But *Columbia*. J. D. Salinger went to Columbia. So did Federico García Lorca, Hunter S. Thompson, Eudora Welty, Jack Kerouac, Langston Hughes...Allen freaking Ginsberg. My hands shake a little at the thought of how something so far out of reach feels oddly closer now that someone from *there* is *here*. And now that my acceptance letter is *in my drawer*. Like Columbia used to be a foreign country and now...isn't.

“Good school.”

I think about the acceptance I have stashed away. What it means. How we'd even pay for it if I did decide to go. Well...when I decide to go. Or maybe they won't have room for me in a year, and that decision won't need to be made.

There's a beat of silence where Dad stares at me because he's way, way too good at reading me.

“What's on your mind?” he asks.

I widen my eyes and give him a smile as I stir the sauce. “Dinner.”

Dad shakes his head and watches me for a moment longer. “How are you feeling about going to Seattle?” he asks.

“Good.” I shrug like it's just another trip, but I've been thinking about it at least as much as Columbia. The trip to Seattle is going to change my life. That's when the plastic surgeon will work on my scars. Then the world will open up.

“We could put it off just a little longer if you want. Sometime over the summer or next winter or...”

I stop stirring and face Dad. “We have our tickets. The appointment is in two weeks. How can you even *ask* that?” New York isn't an option this fall, but if I don't get my face fixed, it won't be an option for next fall either.

He scratches his thinning hair, leaving pieces of it up in wisps. “We were always told that there might not be a fix for your scars. I pray there is for your sake. I just don’t want you to be disappoi—”

“And times change,” I insist as my neck heats up, spreading embarrassment and anger far too quickly for me to hide my reaction. Even Elias’s kiss couldn’t totally dissolve the comments I heard today. “And that’s not what we were told. We were told we needed to wait until I was older and the scars were fully healed.”

Dad and I have looked over the website of the plastic surgeon a million times. It’s amazing what he’s done for scarring on other people. And then I wouldn’t have to leave for college until my face looked... normal. That has always been part of my plan.

Right now I’m an ugly mess.

My eyebrow is half gone. I’m missing a bit off the corner of my upper lip. Four welted lines mark from the corner of my eye, the edge of my nostril, the top part of my lip and chin. The angry purple red scars almost touch my eye and have messed up part of my hairline. Only doctors have ever asked me if the scars feel funny, but they do. Both to my fingers and to my face.

Dad and I stare at one another for a moment longer, both knowing we’ll go, both knowing I won’t relent, and Dad in his dream world thinking I’ll somehow wake up one day okay with looking so freakish.

I won’t.

“I understand you wanting them gone,” he says. “I just want to make sure you’re happy now too.”

Right.

The doorbell rings. I’m off the hook for this conversation.

But as Dad goes to answer the door, my stomach rolls over. When I meet new people, there’s always staring and then subtle (or not-so-subtle)

glances over my face, and sometimes there are questions. Most often are quick, guilty glances followed by avoidance.

I can't imagine strangers' reactions changing so, according to Dad, that puts the burden on me to decide how I feel about their reaction. It's one of many things I have yet to master. The reality is that it's really hard to tell myself they're thinking anything different than the random comments I overhear at school. *She'd be maybe even pretty if... It's the one at the edge of her eye that freaks me out... Wonder if they feel as gross as they look...*

I shove out a breath and pour a half cup of red wine into the spaghetti sauce. The tangy smell of grape and alcohol tickles my nose, and I take a whiff right off the top of the bottle. Dad doesn't drink, and I've never had a drop, but I breathe in deeply again.

There's chatter from the entryway, and the new guy says something about the woodwork on the walls and ceiling. I swear I can feel Dad beam from here. He built this house and loves talking about it. In seconds he's launched into the story about the people who milled the wood from trees my dad cut down himself. I've heard this story about a *million* times.

"Clara?" Dad steps into the kitchen, and I shove the old cork into the bottle of wine. "This is Ms. Bellings's nephew, Rhodes Kennedy. Though he'll be 'Mr. Kennedy' to you."

I brace myself for the stare and turn from the stove to meet with... My heart does some sort of fantastic leap because...brain fuzzing... just wow.

Blond, curly hair in serious need of a cut (if you're my dad) or just perfect (if you're me), relaxed smile, sparkling blue eyes.

And then his eyes do the predictable scan across my face. A quick frown is followed by a hard swallow (I note by his very manly Adam's apple) and then a forced smile. This is the point when my brain checks

out of the moment because his reaction makes my neck heat up and my stomach tighten. I will never meet someone face-to-face without getting some kind of stare or nervousness—at least not until I’m rid of my scars.

I tilt my head down enough that my hair cascades like a shield.

Rhodes Kennedy reaches his hand out and shakes mine. Any weird expression on his face is gone. I’m not so lucky because the tension’s going to stick with me for a while.

“Need help finishing up?” he asks.

“No, I...”

Dad gives him a friendly slap on the shoulder. “Come sit down, Rhodes. Clara loves to cook.”

And I do love to cook, but in this moment I’m ready to be alone in the kitchen, even though a million questions about Columbia rest on the tip of my tongue.

I give Mr. Kennedy a quick smile through my hair, carefully not watching his reaction. But instead of following Dad, he helps himself to a fork and pulls out a noodle.

“They might be ready,” I say, even though I’m supposed to want him gone. He’s just...I don’t know. There’s something about how his hair is perfectly messy and how his jeans are a little too skinny and his shoes a little too trendy and his glasses a little funky. It reminds me of how I imagined going to college out of state would feel. Like beat poetry and unexpected rhythms and quirky rhymes...like everyone would be more like him and less like me, whose jeans are stained from playing with horses and riding four-wheelers.

The stupidity of wanting a school so far out of my reach hits me again. I desperately want to be there. To be one of the too-cool people with smart opinions and term papers with deadlines. I just...It’s overwhelming. And it’s so *far*. And I’m so horribly ugly. I have just over a

month to give them my yay or nay on the acceptance, and the thought of answering either way makes air hard to breathe.

Mr. Kennedy tosses the noodle onto a cabinet just like Dad and I do.

“Looks like it.” His brows dance up once as he pulls the noodle from the cabinet and slides it in his mouth.

Dad chuckles. “We’ve tested noodles that way for ages.”

“Best way.” Mr. Kennedy gives Dad a smile.

“You, um...go...um...to...Columbia?” I ask, only my voice catches like three times during the *four-word* sentence.

“It’s the best.”

I nod, wanting details. Smells. Sights. Feels. Rhythms.

“I’ve read your writing,” Mr. Kennedy says.

Dad’s beaming again. I can feel it, like his pride is something that floats in the room. “I’m definitely proud of my Clara.”

I stare at the spaghetti sauce as I stir, once again tilting my chin down so my hair falls forward. Ms. Bellings raves about my stories, essays, and poems, but her praise has never felt like a big deal to me because again, small town, small school. But the tone of Mr. Kennedy’s voice makes it sound like my words could be a big deal.

“Oh,” I say because I can be eloquent like that.

His head tilts to the side. “Small town...no real training...You’re lucky to have some natural talent to work with.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I want to look up at him again, but I’d rather enjoy the compliment without any kind of pity stare from him about my face.

“You read a lot?”

“All the time,” Dad interrupts. “I mean...unless she’s writing.”

Mr. Kennedy chuckles, and the doorbell rings.

“You’ll have to excuse me.” Dad gives me a wink before leaving the kitchen.

Mr. Kennedy leans against the counter like he lives here. “So. I’ll

make sure *you* get a chance to answer my question. Read a lot?”

“I’ve read Thoreau an embarrassing number of times, and I could read Coleridge every day.” I tap the spoon on the edge of the pot before sliding it through the sauce again. “Lorca’s poems are basically words to live by.”

“At least you’re on the right track.” He smiles.

Is he *flirting* with me? I mean, he’s a student teacher and not a *teacher* teacher, but still...It’s sort of scandalous, I think. I shake off the ridiculous thought of his possible interest but glance through my curtain of hair again to see his smiling profile. Maybe I’m reading too much into him being nice.

“Tell me you don’t like Dickinson.” He rolls his eyes. “Because I think every incoming college freshman girl likes Dickinson.”

“Sexist much?” I ask instead of telling him how much I *love* Emily Dickinson. *Love*, love. So very much.

Mr. Kennedy shrugs. “Didn’t mean it that way. Just seems to be the case.”

Dad steps back into the kitchen followed by his long-time friend, Suki.

“Clara!” Suki’s smile accentuates her large teeth and the bright pink lipstick that seems to be her trademark, as she also steps into the galley kitchen. I sometimes wonder what her history students think of this overly happy but intense Native Alaskan woman whose black hair is strikingly striped with blond and whose lips are always a few shades of bright.

Dad invites her over a lot, and I keep wondering whether he’ll move forward with this weird friendship they have, or if he’ll pine away for Mom for the rest of his life.

“Hi, Suki.” I smile back at her from the stove, but the right side of my mouth feels funny today, so I’m sure my smile is extra weird.

“Oh, this tastes like heaven.” She groans as she licks the finger she just stuck in my sauce. “You have a talent, girl. I keep saying this... Probably one of the few blessings of being such an independent girl.”

My cheeks warm, even though I was sort of forced into independence. First, because Mom was trying to finish her degree online. Second, because she was writing. Third, because she died. And fourth, because Dad works a *lot*.

“Glad you made it tonight.” Dad smiles widely as he rolls up the sleeves of his plaid flannel shirt and leans against the kitchen door.

“Me too.” Suki turns toward Dad, resting a hand on his arm and touching the edges of his gray hair, smoothing over the strays.

The touching is new, so I watch out of the corner of my eye to see how far they’re going to go.

I half expect Dad to jump away, but he holds his own until he clears his throat and turns back to the table.

“Thank you, Sukiniq. I think I’ve got it all set.” Dad’s inability to use the short version of her name is just...so very *him*.

“Dinner’s in five.” I reach for the noodles, but Mr. Kennedy is already draining them in the sink, holding the pot with a surprisingly muscular set of arms for an English teacher.

I glance away before he sees me staring, pour the sauce into a serving bowl, and hope I’m able to relax at some point during dinner. And then Mr. Kennedy does what I do and tosses the noodles with olive oil, salt, pepper, and garlic. I mean, I had them set out, but he’s totally encroaching on *my* thing.

“Oh. Sorry.” He stops and stares at the bowl. “I saw the ingredients, and I just did that, and—”

“It’s how I make them too. It’s fine.” Our eyes catch again—and “catch” is the absolute perfect word because I was going for a quick glance across his face, but I got stuck at the blue. My heart skips and

acts in a ridiculous manner for an organ that's supposed to be keeping me alive. My mind is racing, going over my totally bizarre reaction to someone I've barely spoken ten words to. This is so...weird. He's a teacher and someone I don't know.

I start for the bowl to take it to the table, but I'm stopped by Mr. Kennedy.

"I got it." He reaches through my arms to take the dish. I'm stuck with what is probably an odd expression. It must be odd because I can't feel my face in this moment. "I like to be in the kitchen. No worries."

"I'll..." But my throat still isn't working so I cough a few times. "Be there in a sec," I croak as I spin around to get the sauce. Seriously, what is with me? He's just a *person*.

Voices carry from the dining room—Dad, Suki, and Ms. Bellings.

I pick up the bowl of bread in one hand and the sauce in the other and walk slowly toward the table. I set down the food, and my eyes hit Mr. Kennedy's again. He gives me a relaxed smile, and I think my lips twitch as I *try* to smile, but I'm not positive.

When I take my seat, Dad asks us to stop for a moment of thanks before dishing up.

He might be a little overzealously religious since Mom died, but when we have guests over, he's really nice about just giving us all a moment of silence instead of going through the long list of people and things he likes to include in his prayers.

Dad knows he'll see Mom again after this life because we believe in forever-marriages instead of just-for-this-life marriages, so Dad clings to every part of religion he can. I have to admire his dedication, even when it gets in the way of my appetite. Or my sanity.

I close my eyes and start a prayer, *Dear Heavenly Father*...but nothing comes. I'm all nerves over having a Columbia student here and from

worrying about whether or not I did a good job with the spaghetti and wishing Elias could have come.

When Dad says thank you, everyone digs in at once, which is how he likes things in our house, and he gives me a wink from the opposite side of the table. Rhodes Kennedy is across from me and Ms. Bellings is to my left, putting Suki very close to Dad at the end of the table.

Mr. Kennedy pulls out spaghetti noodles with two forks, his eyes on his food. “So what do you want to do with your writing?” He spoons out sauce, licks his fingers, and shoves a large bite of spaghetti into his mouth.

“Oh, I’m...” I trail off. My dream of dreams is too big to be spoken out loud.

“She’s full of talent.” Dad smiles wide. “I have no doubt she’ll put it to good use.”

I look down again because I have no idea how to take compliments—even when they come from such a biased source.

“Some of her poems I don’t quite get, but I think that has to do with age more than anything else.” Dad gives me another wink.

“I think they’re fantastic.” Suki smiles.

Ms. Bellings shifts in her seat. “I meant to ask you if I could send some of your writing to Rhodes, but I figured it was okay when I knew you wanted to apply to Colum—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt. “Totally fine.”

Dad knows I applied to Columbia, but he doesn’t know it’s *the* school. He thought it was more of an exercise to see if I could get in. It was more than that. And I made it. My heart speeds up in nervous anticipation of what that acceptance means. I’m not ready to make decisions that big—not until I can’t think past my scars. And not until I can figure out if it’s even possible for Dad to send me to one of the most expensive schools in the country.

“Well.” Dad wipes his mouth. “You nailed it again, honey. Worth keeping a little red wine around the house just for this.”

I nod, trying to relax my throat to swallow and to push away the nerves of too many big decisions about school and scars and life.

Mr. Kennedy’s eyes find mine again and I stop breathing.

Dear Heavenly Father: Why did you have to make his eyes so perfectly blue? You’ve put him at a totally unfair advantage and me at a severe disadvantage because I’m bound to say something stupid tonight. He’s a teacher. Teachers aren’t supposed to mess with my head this way. I’m also not supposed to notice someone who isn’t Elias.

“This is the best spaghetti I’ve ever had,” Mr. Kennedy says.

“Just like her momma.” Dad spins his fork on his plate. “Don’t know what I’d do without my girl.”

Five years since Mom died, and I really think he’ll be okay. Me? I’m still on the fence.

Ms. Bellings starts to talk, and I really do try to listen, but I’m staring at Dad and Suki. I watch them for a moment—or more than a moment since the wooden walls in the background come in and out of focus as they exchange smiles. The lingering smile exchange is maybe new too. Huh.

“So, Clara will be a big help to you there as well,” Ms. Bellings finishes with a smile.

“What?” I sputter.

Mr. Kennedy’s clear blues are on me. “The production?”

“Oh.” I’m still staring. This is definitely too much staring at his eyes. I can’t seem to stop. “Yeah. I’m the stage manager.”

He smirks. “We covered that.”

Oh. Brilliant.

His gaze is still on me, unflinching.

I’m convinced in this moment that he knows everything about me.

That I stole gum from the store once and never told. And if my bra and panties don't match in some way, I feel weird all day. And I have to have a pillow under my arm to sleep. I miss my mom more than I've told Elias or Dad or anyone, even though there are days when I can barely remember her face. He sees me. The depths, the...everything. I can't remember the last time I felt so exposed.

Get your head back on, Clara. Seriously.

"So, Mr. Kennedy," I start, having zero idea how to finish, but knowing I do not want to just sit and stare like the village idiot.

"When we're not at school, you can call me Rhodes. I'm young. Only sort of a teacher. It's short-lived, and your dad has already told me I'm required to eat at least two meals a week with you while I'm here." He gives me a half smile as he twirls the spaghetti onto his fork. "Also, it's still weird to be called Mr. Kennedy."

"Oh." That's all I can manage right now.

"You were going to ask me something?"

"I don't remember." I shove another large bite in my mouth.

Rhodes looks over my shoulder out the large window. "I thought it was light all the time."

"It's only April," I say, glancing behind me at the slowly dimming light. "By May it'll be light enough to read all night, just not yet."

He rests his elbows on the table. "And it gets warmer, right? Because if your days don't get warmer than forty-five, I'm going to need to buy a few more sweaters." He chuckles.

I nod. "A little, yeah."

"Probably depends a bit on my definition of warm, eh?" He shoves another large bite into his mouth.

"And the wind, because when it blows down from the glacier, our warm days cool down fast."

"And get dusty," Dad adds. "That glacial silt gets into everything."

Rhodes blinks a few times, and I wonder if he had any idea what he was getting into when he decided to teach here.

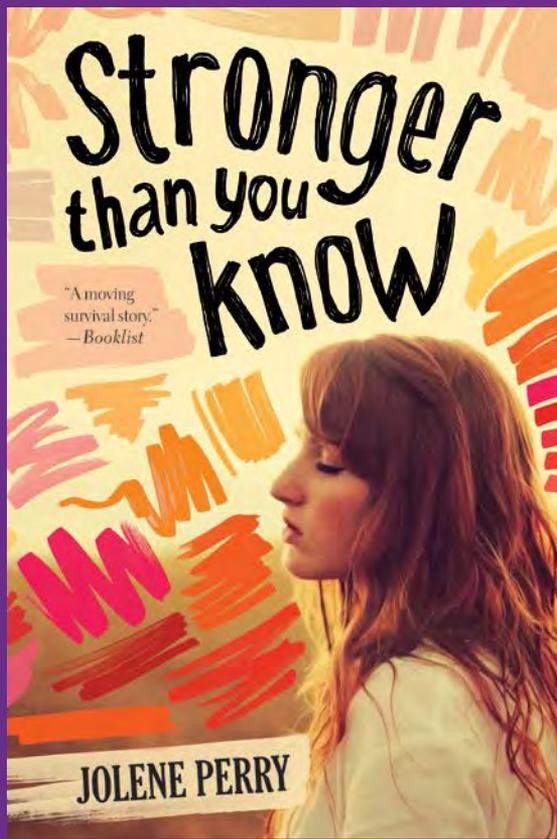
“Dinner was good. I’m impressed”—Ms. Bellings sets down her napkin—“but not surprised.”

“My mom was a good cook.” I stand, clear off the sauté pan, head for the kitchen, and set it next to the sink. Little things like my cooking and spending time in our barn make me feel like Mom could walk around the corner any moment, even though she won’t. And when I talk about Mom or think about Mom, my heart feels like someone’s shoved it in a box that’s a size too small.

“Clara?” Dad sits back in his chair. “I’ll handle the dishes tonight. Why don’t you show Mr. Kennedy the barn before he heads for home?”

I glance toward Ms. Bellings, sort of hoping she seems interested, but she and Suki are totally absorbed in a conversation revolving around the university where Suki teaches.

“Sure.” I pull in a breath, stretching out my chest so nothing feels squeezed or pinched anymore. I need to feed the horses anyway, so all I have to do is try to keep focused. *Focus. Focus.* I should be able to manage that.



9780807531556 (hardcover) // 9780807531587 (paperback)

After police intervention, fifteen-year-old Joy has finally escaped the trailer where she once lived with her mother and survived years of confinement and abuse. Now living with her aunt, uncle, and cousins in a comfortable house, she's sure she'll never belong. Wracked by panic attacks, afraid to talk to anyone at her new school, Joy's got a whole list of reasons why she's crazy. With immense courage, Joy finds friends and grows closer to her new family. But just when hope is taking hold, she learns she must testify in her mother's trial. Can she face her old life without losing her way in the new one? Will she ever truly belong in a world that seems too normal to be real?

ONE

THREE MONTHS IN AND NO LESS BROKEN THAN BEFORE

I read somewhere that happiness is fleeting, but joy sticks with you, holds on to you, and fills you up. The fact that my name is Joy is sort of a lesson in irony.



I sit here because I'm still broken. I'll probably always sit in offices like this, because I'll probably always be broken.

Dr. Mayar—no, wait, *Lydia*—is waiting for my response.

“Joy?”

“What?” I wait for her to repeat the question, hoping to buy myself more time. We meet for forty-five minutes twice a week. It's a game to see how many minutes I can waste. The more time we say nothing, the less time we have to talk about things I don't want to talk about.

Her body doesn't move, her face doesn't change, but I can feel the disapproval sliding toward me in waves. “I know you heard me. One thing, Joy. One. You can do this.”

You can do this, she says. It's so ridiculous. It's not like I'm lifting weights or anything. Like she's my coach, yelling from the sidelines, "One more set, one more! Push yourself! I know you can do it!"

What muscle am I exercising here? My brain? My heart? A combination of the two? Because it feels like a lot more of me is broken than just that. I mean, where do I even start? The thoughts swim around inside me so fast that I can't catch them or formulate them into something I can grasp, understand, or deal with.

"Joy, I know you're watching the clock, because you're always watching the clock when we're close to time. But, you're not leaving until you can tell me one thing you like about yourself." Her dark, narrow face is fixed on me.

This is probably the cheesiest thing ever. She asks me to come up with something often. "You have another appointment," I say. She can't wait forever.

She leaves herself ten minutes between appointments to make notes and prepare for the next. I know this. It means her time with me is limited. And that gives me confidence about my ability to drag this out to the point where I won't have to answer.

"Not today." She recrosses her legs and leans back in her chair. Sometimes I sit in here and just stare at her dark African skin. It's beautiful, like she glows from within. Were things harder for her because of her skin? I'm not sure. In fifteen years my pale skin hasn't helped me any.

I pull my arms more tightly around my legs. I look too much like my mom for me to pick something about myself that I like. Same

straight brown hair. Same tiny little button nose that I hate. I'm too skinny, but so is Mom. Or she was the last time I saw her.

My head rests to the side to look at myself in Lydia's tiny mirror. I even have Mom's brown eyes.

"Okay, Joy, I'm not talking *physical* traits here. You know this. Give me something else. Anything." The annoyance she's trying to hide in her voice makes me hold in a grin.

"I'm smart. I don't need my teachers to tell me how to do things."

She chuckles. "I'm impressed. That was a good one." She runs a hand through her short, spiky black hair as she leans back in her chair. I love making her smile; her teeth are perfectly straight and white.

I thought it was a good one too. But then I realize, in a way, that it's a dig at my teachers.

I blink in the chair and feel suddenly that I'm back at my first day of school. I'd never seen so many people in one place. Mom's trailer would get packed once in a while, but nothing like the jumping and hollering and the sea of navy, white, and khaki that awaited me in the halls.

I looked at all the faces, the smiling faces, the groups, the kids who sat reading, the kids who sat playing on their phones, and I had no idea how or where I fit into any of it. I still don't.

"How are we doing with talking?" Lydia asks, bringing me back to the present.

"I'm talking now." I let my eyes rest on hers. I've been to a lot of shrinks since Mom was taken to jail. A lot. Shrinks that specialize

in child abuse, that specialize in neglect. I've been to people who work only in physical abuse cases and people who counsel teens with depression and anxiety issues. I fall under every category. Lucky me.

I see Lydia because she's close to my aunt and uncle's house. She grew up in foster homes after her mom was sent to jail, so she gets at least a small part of me.

"Please don't make me run around in circles again to get what we both know I'm after. You've been with your aunt and uncle for three months, right?"

"Yeah."

"And have you and your aunt talked much about what brought you to them?"

"No more than we did when I sat here last week. She has my file. I don't get to choose what she does or doesn't know about me." I hate that I don't get to choose what she knows. Sometimes I wonder if she read it all right away, or if it she thought, *okay, ten minutes on the horrible life of Joy tonight, and I'll do ten more minutes tomorrow. My, it'll take me a long time to get done with this large file.*

"But your mom is her sister. And I think she'd like to hear things from *you*."

I disagree with Lydia on this count. Aunt Nicole drove to California to pick me up when child services called her. She barely spoke to me for fifteen hours on the drive back to her house. Maybe she was in shock, but she couldn't have been more in shock than me.

"Why don't we..." Lydia's eyes go back to her clock, and I have to wonder if she was lying earlier when she said her following

appointment canceled. “This is what I want you to do this week—ready?”

I just stare. This is the part of our visit that I dread. The *homework* part. Only she doesn’t let me call it that.

“Talk to your uncle, share something with him.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she holds her hand up between us.

“It can be something as simple as telling him about someone at school, okay? Anything.”

“It’s not like I’m the *silent* kid.” But my hands shake at the thought of talking to Uncle Rob.

“You’re *almost* the silent kid.”

“Fine.” I’m saying this just to appease her. I grab a strand of plain brown hair to give my hands something to do aside from shake and pull it in front of me to look for split ends like my cousin, Tara, is always doing. It gives me some time when I don’t have to see the expectant face of Lydia. I know I’ll just let her down. It’s rare I’m able to do what she asks of me during the week.

I try to tell myself I’m doing better than my first few weeks with my aunt and uncle. I never knew what to say but I tried so hard. I was filled with yeahs and uh-huhs. It was so exhausting to try to figure out when I was supposed to talk and when I wasn’t that I gave up—at least for a while. Mom was happy when I stayed silent and hid in my room.

“And I want you to talk to someone at school. Give one of your friends some kind of detail about you. And no, neither of your cousins

count, and your teachers don't either." She smirks. Her weird smile is how she tries to lighten the mood.

My chest sinks. It's overwhelming, which is stupid. It's just that I don't really have *friends* friends. I mean, when I sit in the cafeteria, I sit with Tara's friends, but they're not really my friends. Trent, her twin, is always inviting his sports team over, and their loud voices and the way they push each other around...I don't like guys in groups.

"Joy? Why does this make you nervous?"

I push out a frustrated burst of air. "I don't know what to say to people. I don't know how to answer their questions or..." But I just trail off because I'm not sure how to continue. Even with Lydia I don't feel like I can say—*when Mom had a group of people over, I got too much attention from the guys there. I don't like men.* Why aren't there more all-girl private schools near Seattle?

"Why don't you play around with some things to tell people about why you're in your aunt and uncle's house? Nothing that's a lie, but maybe something that would satisfy curiosity. We've talked about this before, but I don't think you came up with anything more than you moved from California."

"I'll think about it." Maybe.

Now I get to leave. I think we had eight minutes of silence today. Eight minutes when I didn't have to speak and I didn't have to listen to her say things that make me want to run out of her office.

"How are you feeling with your meds?"

I shrug.

Since I was pulled from my house, they've all been sure I'm going

to off myself. The docs stuck me on the depression meds almost as soon as I checked in. Maybe they just weren't sure what else to do.

"Let me know if you think something needs to change."

I turn to face her before grabbing the door handle. "You're the doctor."

"And I'm relying on you to tell me how you feel." We have this interchange every time we see each other.

"Fine. I'm fine."

"Joy." Her voice has that tone of seriousness that makes me pause. "I know you feel like you're not moving forward, so I'd like you to do one *easy* thing for me. Write me an email or write in your journal about what it was like when your Aunt Nicole first picked you up. Keep it simple. Talk about any part of that experience you want to, but you'll see how far you've come in a very short time."

I step out of Lydia's office overwhelmed with what she wants me to do this week. The letter or journal thing is fine, but the other two tasks seem impossible, which makes me feel stupid. She's basically asked me to say one thing to my uncle and one thing to someone I know at school.

I'm Joy, the girl who's so broken that the thought of speaking two sentences is making it hard to breathe.

TWO

MY ASSIGNMENT FROM LYDIA

I sketch in the margins of the paper instead of working on my writing assignment, but something about drawing again makes me think of my trailer home. I scratch it all out, flip to a clean sheet of paper, and start to write.

There was no way to fill fifteen hours in the car with my Aunt Nicole, who I'd never met. I didn't attempt to fill the silence because I had no idea how or even if I should.

I also didn't know how to process the landscape. The cities, the small towns, the gas stations, the ocean. It felt too enormous to possibly be real. Like the National Geographic Channel come to life around me.

Over the week before Aunt Nicole arrived, I'd been taken from the trailer where I'd spent nearly every minute of my

life, locked in a small room, and asked to relive almost every experience I'd had while with my mom.

Aunt Nicole asked me about a million times if I was okay. If I wanted to stop for the bathroom. If I wanted food. She was always trying to feed me, but she kept getting these enormous bags from McDonald's, and I couldn't risk spilling crumbs in her car.

I still feel this way. So far, this assignment isn't helping any.

I throw that last line in for good measure.

I ate very little. At home Mom usually had frozen pizzas for me, or sometimes I'd open a can of soup or chili.

I'm starting to realize how crazy it was that I ate at night after Mom was asleep. Or I'd get up after she went to work and eat standing over the sink so I wouldn't have to clean crumbs off the table.

Hours went by and we were still driving. How big was the world? How many places could there be? How far apart was everything? It was crazy to think about how enormous the world was as we kept driving.

Now that I have a grasp of what a short distance we actually traveled, that too makes me feel stupid.

I knew Aunt Nicole's house was just a house, but it was so big and too pretty—I couldn't imagine myself belonging in a place like that.

I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs, closing my eyes tight for a moment. The house and the kindness and...everything...were too much. Aunt Nicole talked to me like I was a three-year-old, which I probably deserved, asking me to please leave the car, and told me about how great everything would be with my uncle and cousins and a new city to explore.

I nearly left the car when she promised privacy inside. Said I had a bathroom attached to my room even.

There were so many nights at home when I had to pee desperately, but Mom had people over and I didn't want to be noticed. Walking across the hall was a sure way to get attention.

I actually asked Aunt Nicole if I could sleep in the car. That's how desperate I was to not move. I don't write about begging to sleep in the car to Lydia because it makes me feel ridiculous—especially now that I've been there for three months, and the house is no longer scary. But I guess that's the point of the assignment. To

show me how far I've come. I'm reluctant to admit my progress, even to myself.

Aunt Nicole sat just outside my car door when she remembered that she'd forgotten to give me my Xanax before we arrived. (I hate those by the way. They make me sleepy and rubbery.)

We made a deal though, before leaving California. If Aunt Nicole handed me a pill, I had to take it, and I was given a number to call if I felt like it was happening too much or if I was uncomfortable with anything going on in the house. It's sort of stupid, really. I was burned and hit and, AND...

I can't say the word. Not even in a journal. It feels too horrible.

...in my last house, and I never called anyone. It seems kind of ignorant on the part of the child services people to tell me to call if something doesn't feel right. I had no idea what to expect. Or what was normal. I'd only just learned that my normal wasn't normal at all.

I knew even then that my fear of that house might be ridiculous, but I didn't know how to shake it. All I had was unknown—unknown cousins, unknown uncle, and an aunt I'd just met.

The moment we reached the porch, the front door opened to

expose a man several inches taller than Mom's last boyfriend, Richard, and I froze.

I make sure I write the Uncle Rob stuff because maybe Lydia won't force me to talk to him after reading this.

When I saw my Uncle Rob all I could think was please no. I know what he'll want, and I'm not big enough to stop him. Aunt Nicole can't have more power than my mom to stop a man that large.

Aunt Nicole threw herself into his arms and they murmured so quietly I felt like I shouldn't listen. A part of me registered that I thought my aunt was nice and that she liked him, so maybe he wasn't bad. But he was a man I didn't know in a house I didn't know, and maybe certain things were going to be expected of me. A lot had been expected of me in the past. I had no reason to believe that Uncle Rob was any different.

Uncle Rob said hello or something equally simple, but the lowness of his voice felt like a warning. Run. Hide. Only I couldn't just run away. I had no idea where I was.

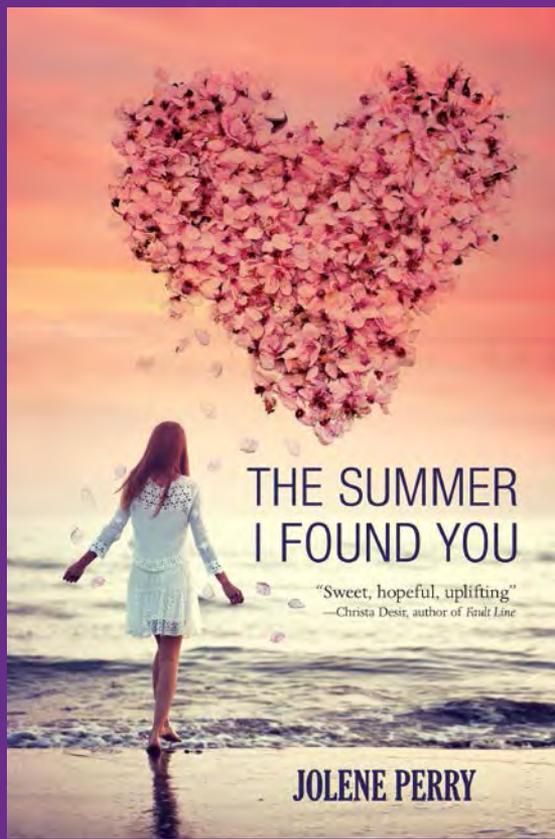
It was awful. New house. New man. New situation that I was sure would turn out like my old one. I don't even have to exaggerate to show what a mess I was. This assignment isn't making me feel

better. It's making me feel worse because I still don't want to share space with my uncle.

Aunt Nicole was nice enough to see how awful I felt and she sent Uncle Rob inside. (This is all making me feel crazier by the way.) Aunt Nicole brought me through a massive foyer in a house so big that my trailer could have fit in the kitchen. She led me up stairs three times wider than the hallway at home and into a room with its own bathroom.

My room.

That first night will always be etched in my memory. I dropped my backpack and went through the doorway and into my own bathroom. Tears spilled down my face at the glimpse of a life I knew I didn't belong in.



9780807583692 (hardcover)// 9780807583678 (paperback)

Kate's dream boyfriend has just broken up with her and she's still reeling from her diagnosis of type 1 diabetes. Aidan planned on being a lifer in the army and went to Afghanistan straight out of high school. Now he's a disabled young veteran struggling to embrace his new life. When Kate and Aidan find each other, neither one wants to get attached. But could they be right for each other after all?

1

Kate Walker

“I just don’t really see us going anywhere, Kate.” Shelton leans sideways against the locker. He shouldn’t be leaning, not when he’s so obviously breaking up with me—even if his eyes are apologetic. My heart pounds, pushing a lump up my throat, which is going to be a problem when I have to talk.

Shelton’s black hair is cut short. Perfect for a young African American guy heading off to college for great things. I think he took a picture of Obama into Super Cuts and said, “One day I want to be that guy. Make me look like him.” He continues, “We’re going to different colleges. We’re about to graduate...you know.”

Now I need to play cool. Save face. I mean, it’s not like I thought we’d get married or anything. Well, my brain might have known we wouldn’t, but my heart doesn’t know the difference. This stings, burns, and takes my breath away. But I’m determined not to show it.

I swallow a few times, trying to get rid of enough of the stupid ball in my throat to answer. “Well, yeah. I mean, we’re in high school, heading to college...I get it.” I hate that I basically repeated what he said, and I still feel like I’m getting kicked in the chest.

“We probably shouldn’t have gotten so involved in the first place.” He exhales. “You know, with how temporary everything is at this time in our lives.” He sounds like he’s saying something rehearsed.

Now the ache in my chest is being replaced with something else, something that tenses my shoulders, my sides. I start to get kind of pissed, but I’m going to stay cool. What else can I do while standing in the senior hall while Shelton Ingram breaks up with me? I run a hand through my hair, mostly for something to do. For thinking time.

Wait. “What about prom?” It’s in like six weeks. I spent half my savings for a dress. One I knew *he’d* like.

“It would be awkward. Don’t you think?” His eyes catch something behind me.

I whip my head around to see Tamara smiling at him. A junior, long, blond hair. With the little bit I know of her, she seems ditzy and so beneath someone like him. As soon as she sees me turn toward her, she walks into the nearest classroom.

“Nice.” I cross my arms as my eyes meet Shelton’s again, but I’m determined not to make too much of a scene, not to let him see how much he’s hurting me.

“What?” He raises his brows, which is a dead giveaway that he’s trying to look innocent.

“If you liked someone else, you could have just said it.” Why do boys feel it necessary to play stupid games? And it doesn’t seem like Shelton, anyway.

He leans back. “That’s pretty mean right? And…”

“And lying *isn’t*?” I uncross my arms and have to stop myself from shoving him.

“We’re not getting anywhere.” He shakes his head and walks off. That’s it. *Walks off*. We’ve been dating for over a year and I thought everything was fine.

I hate that I don’t have it in me to scream and yell. Instead I take a few deep breaths to keep from crying, which only sort of works. I blot a few tears away.

Must keep busy.

I know I have work in subjects other than AP English (like AP Biology or AP Chem), but I know it’s the only class I’ll be able to do any homework in tonight. I grab my overworn copy of *As I Lay Dying*, and stuff it in my bag. The lump in my throat and my pounding chest have left me weak. Defenseless. This sucks.



“How aren’t you more surprised?” I wipe my eyes over and over as Jen drives us home. She’s my best friend. She should be outraged—like I should have been when Shelton and I were in the middle of *breaking up*.

“How’s your blood sugar?” she asks, tossing her long, blond ponytail behind her. Jen has these blue eyes that actually glow, and they make mine feel like muddy brown. Just like her bright blond hair makes my pale brown even plainer. Jen’s also always *dressed*, while I seem to live in variations of jeans and T-shirts. But we balance each

other out, and we've been friends forever. And we're going to college together at USC in the fall. All those things are worth a lot.

Wait. Blood sugar?

"Really? That's what you're worried about?" I hate it when Jen's meticulous nature makes her sound like my mother.

"Only 'cause the senior picnic is in a few days, and your mom gets all crazy with the curfews and letting you go places when you come home and your blood sugar is all out of whack. I want to make sure you can come."

"Fine. I'm *fine*." I hate dealing with shots and carb counting, and everything that comes with being Type I Diabetic. Hate. Everything. And I've only been dealing with it for a year, but unless there's some miracle cure, I'll be dealing with it for the rest of my life. Mostly I'd rather think about how inconvenient it is right now. A future with it is too overwhelming.

"Okay, so he mentioned it to Toby last night, who mentioned it to me this morning, so I knew it was coming." She cringes in the driver's seat as if I'd hit her or something.

"And you couldn't *warn* me?"

She grimaces. "My phone...remember? And I tried to find you between classes but you were totally MIA."

Right. She got caught texting me in class yesterday, so her parents took her phone after the teacher called...*Oops*.

"I gotta make a stop at my house for Honor Society stuff."

"Fine." I slump lower in the seat. "But I'm staying in the car."

“Because you’re grouchy. I know.” Jen smirks before stopping in the driveway.

I want to smile at her expression, but I’m determined to wallow in my sucky day for at least a little longer.

“Be right back!” She leaps out of the car and runs to her front door.

I slump in my seat and stare at her enormous, grey house. We’re parked under the separated garage, and someone peers out from the apartment above. Our eyes catch—his blue eyes are pale, and I suck in a breath. The curtain drops and his face disappears. I didn’t know anyone was living in there. We use it for late movie nights and sleepovers. It’s awesome ‘cause it’s not attached to the house, and we have privacy.

How many late nights did Shelton and I have in that apartment? The thought sends another hard stab through my chest.

“Okay. I have that Honor Society Meeting at Shelton’s house.” Jen frowns as she jumps back in the car.

“Don’t look like that. You’re in Honor Society leadership. He’s Mr. President. I get it.” Maybe I should be mad, but that’s ridiculous. They work together. Them and like five other people. I know this.

She blows her hair off her face. “I really need my phone. Writing down all my calendar schedule stuff in a paper planner is really getting old.”

I roll my eyes. Only Jen would miss her phone for the *calendar*.

“Ready for home?” She pulls back into the roadway, so I guess it’s good that I *am* ready for home.

“Who’s in the apartment?”

Jen shifts in her seat, but doesn't make eye contact, which isn't like her. "My cousin's with us for a little while."

"Which cousin?" Since she's reluctant to share, I want info.

"Aidan?"

I think I met him once, but I'm not sure. He's a year or two older if I remember right. I'm about to ask more, but we stop in front of my house (which looks like a brown one-story toy after being parked in front of Jen's). I want to be mad about my day, but really it all still hurts too much.

I stand up out of the car and the world spins. Crap. My blood sugar probably *is* off. I'll need to take care of that before Mom thinks to ask. I had an almost pass out two weeks ago, and she suddenly feels the need to check ALL the time. Since I was in her car and ran into the light post at the mall parking lot, it turned into this big deal. Mom's telling me that I'm not doing a good job of managing my own blood sugar, which means I'm not allowed to drive until I do. Today probably isn't going to help any.

"Come on in, Kate!" Mom opens the door. "Let's get you checked so we know what you can eat!"

I hate her artificially bright voice.

So much for avoiding the blood sugar test.



"I'm not sure what to do about the car situation," Mom says as she runs a hand through her short hair. "But you and I both know your level was extremely high when you came home today."

I take another bite of chicken thinking *extremely* is a drastic overstatement. Dad will chime in any moment. He's a doctor and knows about this stuff, though I swear Mom knows more about diabetes after all the research she's done since I was diagnosed.

"Kate." Dad breathes out. This is his exasperated one. Breathing out is what my dad does.

"Yes, Dad?" I'm still not sure if it's good or really sucky that he's a doctor. Mostly, for me, it's sucky. Especially now.

He adjusts his wire-rimmed glasses. "This is serious, honey. You take shots. You give yourself shots. You prick your finger. I'd think all of these things would help you realize the seriousness of your situation." He tries to make his deep voice serious and authoritative, but Dad's too much of a softie for me to be actually afraid of him.

"Thanks, Dad." Seems like a neutral and nice enough thing to say.

"I know you're just agreeing with me. And I also know that Dr. Masen's going to ask you about online groups, or if you've gotten in contact with anyone dealing with the same thing you are."

Right. No way. Now I'm the one holding in my exasperated breath. "How's Deena?" My sister is newly pregnant, throwing up everything, and her husband not only works full-time, but is also a grad student. Hopefully Deena's life will take some of the focus off me.

"Oh!" Mom's smile is immediate. "I spoke with her this morning. She goes in on Friday to hear the baby's heartbeat! And

she may come stay with us for a couple of weeks while Lane's doing midterms!"

Perfect. A puking sister for two weeks. I should probably be excited to help.

"Kate." Dad again. Of course. He won't be distracted by baby talk. "Maybe taking away the car isn't enough of a deterrent. Serious things can happen to your body without the right amount of insulin."

"I'm aware of the list, Dad." Words like blindness, diabetic coma, kidney damage, nerve issues...None of it feels real. It's like this problem belongs to someone else.

Their eyes are on me. I feel them. Searching my face for more answers or explanations or *something*. I don't want to think about any of this right now.

What I really want is a night like the night Shelton and I had when my parents left town. I mean, it wasn't that big of a deal, but it was huge to me. He came and slept with me all night. All night I rested in his warm arms and felt his lips on my forehead, and I suddenly understood why people get married. Who wouldn't want to sleep like that every night?

"Kate?" Mom leans forward over the table. "Are you crying?"

"Just tired." I push to standing and start for my room, and neither Mom or Dad stops me.

I pull open my bedroom door and the familiar pale blue of my room calms me. But now I'm on the bed and it was the bed that

Shelton and I laid on. I hate this, and have no idea how I'm going to handle school tomorrow with Shelton there.

2

AIDAN CONNELLY

I flip open my phone, but don't actually get a chance to answer.

"How the hell are ya?" The loud, male voice sounds far away.

"Who is this? And do you know it's like three a.m.?" I roll onto my stomach, stretching the sheets around me. Gotta be one of the guys. Gotta be. At least I'm in the apartment over the garage instead of in my uncle's house where my phone would have woken everyone up.

"Hell, Connelly, you forget me already? Lost your brain with your arm?"

Fabulous. Arm jokes are starting already. Only Roberts knows me well enough to do that. I feel like an ass for not knowing who it was right away. "Hey, Rob. What's up?"

"What do you mean what's up? We're freezing our asses off one minute, hot as hell the next, and ducking when we're told to duck. You know Afghanistan. It wasn't that long ago you were one of us."

One of them. *Was*. It was like yesterday, but also a lifetime ago.

Three months.

Four surgeries.

Two hospitals.

One rehab clinic.

The apartment over my uncle's garage.

"Yeah. So, where are you now?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill ya." He laughs. Loud. He almost sounds drunk, but I know better.

"You guys still near Bagram Airfield?" I wonder if they're still close to where I was a few months ago.

"In the middle of fucking nowhere."

"No one," I correct.

"What?"

"You can't fuck nowhere."

"See? I knew you were smart. Fucking no one." He laughs more. "You heading to school? Everyone wants to know what you're up to, man."

"I'm..." *up to nothing*. I don't know what to be up to right now. I know what I *should* be up to. I should be getting ready for college, looking for a job. But I don't know how to do shit with one arm.

"Being a lazy ass?" he teases.

"You got it." Might as well play back, there's nothing else to do at this point.

He laughs again. I can picture him now, shaved head, pinched little weasel face always in a smile. And when he wasn't smiling, it

meant he was about to pull something big. Like stealing all the steaks from the freezer before going on a weeklong “walk”. Our first dinner and breakfast out of camp were awesome. Roberts is the best kind of guy to be friends with, and we’ve been friends since basic training. Since we learned we’d be in the same post. Same infantry unit.

“How much time you guys got left in country?”

“Four more weeks, Con! Can you believe it?” He sounds excited. After a whole year, four weeks feels like nothing.

Wow. “Sweet.”

“Maybe I’ll come to the great state of Oregon and find ya.”

No, no, no. If I can’t have the Army anymore, I don’t want to be faced with it. “Where you stationed next?” I ask.

“I’ll be back at Ft. Lewis, Washington. So I’m only a few hours north.”

“Great,” I lie.

Silence fills the line for a few moments.

“Have you seen Melinda?” All the tease is gone from his voice now. “You know...”

“I know who Melinda is,” I snap. Melinda’s the wife of the guy who died next to me. Two feet to my right. My body jumps at the black of the memory—the blast hits my ears making my stomach turn. “No.”

“What about the, uh, funeral?”

“I didn’t go. I was still in the hospital.” It’s mostly the truth. I was in the rehabilitation clinic.

“So, how’s life with one arm?”

“Peachy.” I need off the phone. I can’t believe he just asked me that dumbass question. Rolling over all the crap I spend every second of every minute of every day trying to *not* think about is not what I want to do this time of night.

Though, I also don’t want to be fighting away nightmares. No guy wants to admit to that. Well, no guy wants to admit a lot of the shit that’s in my head right now.

“Look, tell the guys I said hi. I need my beauty sleep.”

He laughs, again. “I knew it, I knew it! You’re already going soft. Got a girl in bed with you?”

“Three. Night Rob.”

I hang up the phone, reach around with my left hand, and feel the thick stub where my arm used to be. It still hurts like hell when I move wrong. My hand aches sometimes too, but it’s not there anymore, and shouldn’t be aching. Barely nineteen, no idea what I want to do with my life outside of the military, and now, because of the military, I *have* to live my life outside of it. Why the hell did he have to wake me up?



Aunt Beth and Uncle Foster are at the breakfast table looking at me like they always do—like they want to say something, but have no idea how to start. Aunt Beth is the slightly older version of my mom, and it still throws me. We all have the family blue eyes and blond hair, but Beth’s hair is even cut in the same shoulder length hair as

Mom's, making them look almost like twins. I step into the massive kitchen and pull a bowl from the cupboard. Everything for me now requires multiple steps. Open cupboard door wide enough that it stays open. Let go of door. Pull out bowl. Set bowl down. Reach back up to cupboard door to close it. Pull open silverware drawer. Let go of drawer. Pick out spoon. Set spoon down. Close silverware drawer.

One damn thing at a time. Three months without my arm, and there isn't a second of the day I don't think about it. The thing is, no one in this house has yet to comment on it. Not my cousin Jen. Not my cousin Will. Not my aunt. Not my uncle. There's no way they're not curious. No way they're not at least a little curious.

Not that I really want to talk about it, but I definitely don't forget. It's not like someone asking me what it's like will make me suddenly remember I'm missing my arm.

"What are your plans today, Aidan?" Foster asks as he adjusts his tie.

"I'm not sure yet." I shrug, but it feels weird to only shrug one arm, and my shoulder's still really stiff. "I'll head to the pool for a while."

The swimming pool is what's keeping me out of physical therapy. Well, not out of it, but lessens it.

"You need my car?" he asks.

"Yeah. You can, uh, take mine today if you want." I love my car. Saved up since I was thirteen, bought it when I turned sixteen, and spent time on the thing almost every day until I left for Afghanistan.

It's a 1972 Chevelle Super Sport convertible. Grey with black racing stripes. The car is perfect. After years of scrounging through scrap yards and buffing out every fender, *everything* on my car is perfect.

He shifts in his seat. The words right at the edge of his mouth. I know it. *Why don't you sell your car, Aidan? You can't drive a stick with one arm. Definitely when the arm missing is your right one.*

Why couldn't I have lost the arm I don't know how to use?



I lie on my back and float in the pool. I know this isn't going to help me get out of physical therapy any faster, but it might keep me out of the shrink's office.

The pool is my safe place. No one here knows me as anything but the guy with one arm. They don't know it just happened. They don't know I haven't been this way for years. It seems crazy that I don't mind being somewhere that my lack of arm is completely on display, but there's no point in hiding something this obvious.

I have my stupid shrink visit tomorrow. *Recommended counseling.* Whatever. Like any one of those guys I go talk to have any idea what it's like to be walking out in the middle of the desert, in the middle of the night, knowing they're not alone. Like any of them watched their sergeant get blown up next to them, and felt around in the dark, only to find body parts instead of the real guy.

That thought sinks me. I blow out my air, and let myself drop to the bottom of the pool. My assignment this week is to think about what I want, and what I don't want.

It's all the same thing right now.

Sort of.

I rotate my shoulder a few times forward, and then a few times back before standing up and breaking the surface. My feet push off the bottom and I start a sidestroke. Left side down. The only way I can do it.

What I want:

I *want* to not wake up in the middle of the night in a puddle of my own sweat. It makes me feel like a fucking kid.

I want to talk about how much it sucks to use one arm, but not to someone who feels bad for me.

I want to sort all this mess out in my head about Pilot, his death, his family, and what the right thing to do is.

What I don't want:

I *don't want* the nightmares anymore.

I don't want to remember this forever.

I don't want to be without my arm.

I don't want to do nothing for the rest of my life.

I don't want to be pitied.

A loud bang and a shriek tense me into a rock, and I spin to face the noise. A kid, crying over a broken balloon on the sidelines as part of a birthday party, and me, ready to fight. I have something else to add to my list:

I don't want to panic over things that don't matter.

I want to be normal again.

It all feels impossible.



“Hey.” My cousin Jen sits next to me on the couch, flipping her long blond hair over her shoulder. She’s a senior this year, and is almost never home. Jen also got all the cool genes in the family. Her twin brother spends a lot of time in the basement with his friends and their games. I don’t even try. You need two thumbs for most of them, and I’m a right-handed guy with a left hand.

“What’s up?” We’ve hardly spoken since I got here a couple weeks ago.

“Our big senior picnic—carnival night—is this Friday. I kind of hoped you’d come?”

No part of this makes sense. I’ve gone out with her and Will two times. Both to the grocery store for my aunt.

“A *high school* thing?” High school was a lifetime ago. Two lifetimes ago. But really just over a year.

“Yeah.” The word is drawn out enough that I know she wants to ask me more. And also that there’s a catch.

All signs point to me not going along with this.

“No thanks.” It’s probably just a reason to get me out of the house anyway. I don’t really need to be the guy with one arm back from war. I don’t want to be dragged out of the house because she feels bad for me. I’m just not into it.

“Okay, look.” She sits sideways and faces me. “I have this best friend—”

“Kate.” She was probably the sulky girl who sat in her car the other day.

“Yeah.” She smiles just a tad too wide. “You remember her?”

“Have I *met* her? The only person who calls this house is her and your boyfriend Toby. You know with the whole cell-phone loss and all.”

“Oh. Right.” She looks around.

There’s something else. I wait for it.

“Okay, look. She’s a big mopey pile of crap after her boyfriend dumped her.”

“How does this concern me?” Not to be a total ass, but we’re talking about some ridiculous high school drama that I do not need or want to be in the middle of.

“Oh, come on. You’re not heartless.”

“Again, what do you need?” I smile a little because I know I might be coming off a little harsh, and I don’t mean to be. I’ve sort of lost patience with everything this trivial.

“Just another body. Please? I want to make sure we’re even with girls and guys.”

“You want me to go on a date with your best friend who’s in high school, whose boyfriend just dumped her, because she’s completely mental over their breakup. Is that right?”

“Um...” She chews on her lower lip. “Yeah? Only I swear it’s not a date. She totally won’t be interested in you, and...”

“Wow, thank you.”

Jen's already flustered, and now it's kind of a game to see how much more awkward I can make our conversation.

"Oh, no." Her face turns red, and her hands start gesturing at nothing in front of her. "I didn't mean anything against you. It's that her and Shelton have been together—"

"I don't know." I shake my head. It all sounds so damn ridiculous.

"Think about it. Please?"

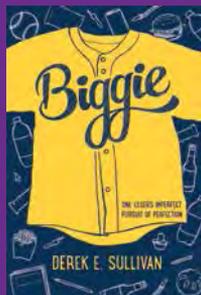
"I'll think about it."

Somehow between now and Friday I need to come up with a reason why I can't go.

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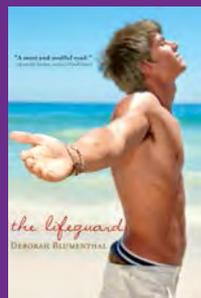
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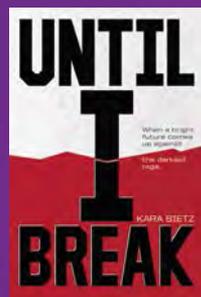
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