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“I suspect *In Between* will be the first in a long line of hits for Jenny B. Jones. I enjoyed every delicious word!”

—EVA MARIE EVERSON, author of THE POTLUCK CLUB series

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jenny b. jones



TH1NK
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To my mother.

This still is not enough to thank you for your love and sacrifice. I hope when you see a cover with my name on it you think to yourself, *That girl wouldn't be anywhere without me.* Because I sure wouldn't. Love you!



A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

FIRST AND FOREMOST, THANK YOU, God, creator of all things, including opportunities. I am amazed and humbled by what you have blessed me with. I pray your hand would continue to be with me as you expand my borders Jabez-style. Sometimes it's scary to get what you want.

I would like to thank every teacher I've ever had, even the bad ones (like the one who gave me detention), but especially the good teachers—the ones who encouraged me (translation: the ones who didn't find me totally annoying).

A big shout out to my students, past and present (especially those Blackhawks). Remember, dream big, and don't settle for less than everything you want. Don't forget Jeremiah 29:11-13.

Thank you to Madison, Annie, Taylor, Emily, and Tara for previewing the book and being my sounding board. But seriously, girls, it hurt me to remove the word *incontinent*. Get a dictionary. You're gonna need to know this word one day. . . .

To Mike Daniels and Dr. Ronnie Floyd, thank you for being such hard-nosed pastors and pushing me. I have grown so much

in the last five years. This book never would've happened had I not heard you teach the Word.

Kristin Billerbeck, may God richly bless you for placing me in the hands of NavPress.

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Much love goes out to my family. You're so blessed to be related to me. Oops, I mean *I'm* so blessed to be related to *you*. Seriously, but for the grace of God, I could be a Katie. I'm so lucky to have your love and support, your faithfulness, and your willingness to move heavy furniture.


Thank you, Ninny, for telling me stories as a child. Look what you started!

I am profoundly grateful to Nicci Hubert. Bless you for taking a chance, believing in me, and going with your temporary moment of insanity when you said, "Hey, let's sign her on."

Muchas gracias to Kate Epperson. I don't know how you put up with all my questions, but you do, and you do it with style. I am in major debt to you for all the help.

God bless all of NavPress. I appreciate how you guys are taking care of me and Katie.

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The title 'Chapter one' is centered within three overlapping, hand-drawn circles. The circles are light gray and have a slightly irregular, sketchy appearance. The text 'Chapter one' is written in a black, cursive-style font across the middle of the circles.

Chapter one

I'M WHAT YOU CALL AN orphan, I guess. Officially, I'm a ward of the state of Texas. Knowing that your greatest achievement to date is becoming a dependent of an entire state can totally blow a girl's confidence.

Life can change so fast. One minute I'm living the single-wide-trailer dream with my mom and a few stray cats, and the next I'm sleeping in a room with eight other girls at the Sunny Haven Home for Girls. And just as soon as I get my sock drawer organized and figure out which girls at Sunny will do me the least amount of bodily harm, I find myself shipped out again. It was just last week Mrs. Iola Smartly, the director, laid the news on me. I would be leaving.

Leaving.

And how did I feel about that? Scared, confused, worried. Oh, and don't forget nauseous. I mean, I have been a resident of Sunny for six months, and then Mrs. Smartly tells me I'm getting new parents. Foster parents.

Pretend-o-parents.

Fast forward one week, one nail-biting week, and here I am, with Mrs. Smartly at the wheel, riding in the finest on-four-wheels the Texas Department of Child Services has to offer (translation: one nasty minivan), zipping down the highway, bound for some hole in the earth called In Between.

“You’re going to love In Between, Katie.” Mrs. Smartly adjusts the volume on the radio so I can hear her.

I turn my head and look out the window. “Great. I’m going to live in a town inhabited by citizens not even smart enough to pick a decent name for their city. Why couldn’t I be going to Dallas?”

Dallas—now those people know what they’re doing.

“You’re going to live with some wonderful people.”

“I guess it gets me out of the state home.”

She gives my knee a playful shake. “Now, Sunny Haven is a fine establishment. It wasn’t that bad.”

My jaw drops. “Are we talking about the same place? The very name is sheer irony. *Sunny* Haven?” I laugh. “Puh-lease. There is not a single sunny thing about that place.”

Mrs. Smartly dismisses me with a snort, which ticks me off even more.

“And what particular aspect of the home do you find so endearing, Mrs. Smartly? Could it be the dingy gray walls? And I mean ick gray. That’s not a color Lowe’s is carrying these days. Or maybe you’re all about the lights that run up and down the halls? You know, the ones that hum and whine at decibel levels bound to disturb the local dog population.”

“Tell me how you really feel.” Mrs. Smartly turns on the windshield wipers to swipe some bug guts away.

Well, since you asked . . . “The floors are always cold. My tootsies are too sensitive for that. And in line with the whole prison décor theme, the floors are a color that tends to remind me of vomit.”

She pulls out her directions for a quick check. “Go on. Don’t hold back now.”

“Okay, Sunny Haven a *home* for girls? *Whatever*. That place is an insult to the word *home*.”

Many of us girls at Sunny may not have had a real accurate sense of what home should be, but if Sunny Haven is it, please find me a pack of wolves or some killer bees to reside with instead.

“You had a roof over your head, you were fed, and most important, you were safe.” She slaps my feet off the scarred dashboard.

“Safe? Are you kidding me?”

Mrs. Smartly takes her eyes off the road for a brief moment and looks my way. “You appear fine to me. When, Miss Parker, did you think your well-being was in question?”

“Okay, I offer up exhibit A: Trina.” Enough said.

Trina, one of my roommates, would just as soon slit you with the knife she hides under her King James Bible as she would befriend you. Mrs. Smartly knows this.

See, Sunny Haven houses twelve- to seventeen-year-old girls, like Ms. Prison-Bound Trina or just plain ol’ strays like me, who have been taken out of their parents’ custody for one reason or another.

I like to say my mom and dad ran off and joined the circus, and due to the fact that I’m allergic to spandex and heavy stage make-up, I could not join their trapeze act. Sometimes I add that I’m just hanging out at Sunny until I can perfect my fire-eating routine.

“Even though we may not be up to your Pottery Barn standards, Katie, I think we provide a pretty good home for girls who don’t have one of their own.”

I bristle at this. My mother happens to be in prison right now. The only bright side about that is she is probably getting better

food than I have been. My mother was one of those high-rolling entrepreneurs. She was doing so well, and it just all caved in on her. One of those dot-com businesses, you might inquire? Corporate takeover, perhaps? You know, those are all really great suggestions, but the fact is Mrs. Parker (a.k.a. my mom) found not everyone liked her products or appreciated her business skills.

Funny how the police just don't see all the potential in drugs that people like Mrs. Bobbie Ann Parker do.

If my mom had pushed Mary Kay cosmetics with as much zeal as she had the narcotics, I'd be living the pink-Cadillac life and never have darkened the doors of Sunny Haven Home for Girls. And I sure wouldn't be on the way to Nowhere, Texas, to live with two complete strangers.

Mrs. Smartly's comment bothers me, but I'll run naked at high noon through my new hometown before I admit it.

I rest my head on the window, getting sleepier by the minute. I was a little worked up last night and didn't exactly get all my beauty rest. I could've counted sheep, but even they don't dare visit Sunny.

"This is some pretty country, isn't it, Katie?"

Pieces of Texas pass us by. Restaurants, shops, houses. I don't know any of them. I guess I don't get out much.

After my dad left, I wrote a letter to one Miss Reese Witherspoon, asking her to come get me and let me live with her in Hollywood. While she did mail me a nice eight-by-ten glossy, she never sent a stretch limo to my house to pick me up. I really think we would've gotten along quite well. It's not like I carry knives in *my* King James Bible.

I clear my throat and decide to broach the topic of my new guardians. "So . . . Mrs. Smartly. James and Millie Scott?" (That's who read my file and said, "We'll take her.")

It's like I want to know about these people, but I don't want Mrs. Smartly to think I'm too interested. Or scared. The thing with foster care is you have way too much uncertainty. I knew where I stood at the girls' home. I knew who to be nice to, who to totally avoid, and what the lumps in the dining hall mashed potatoes really consisted of. But foster care? Ugh. I don't know.

"Are you worried?"

"No," I mutter in my best *dub* voice.

"Okay, then." She returns her attention to the road and bobs her head to the beat of the radio, completely dismissing me.

Well, how rude. She could tell me a bit more about the Scotts. You know, just for the sake of small talk to pass the time.

Mrs. Smartly shoves her big, totally unfashionable sunglasses down and stares at me for a few seconds. "You sure? No fears at all?"

I shake my head and raise my chin. "Not even a little."

She turns the radio up a few notches and begins to sing.

I lurch out of the seat and punch buttons until the music is off. "Okay." I take a deep breath. "First, Mr. and Mrs. Scott could be total lunatics. Kooks. They could be scary, scary people with evil, evil plans." All right, let's not even delve into that line of thought.

I keep on babbling. "Next, there is the idea they only get foster children for slave labor. I mean, I am their temporary kid, and since they will be my temporary parents, I am expected to obey their every command. Like 'No dinner for you until you've cleaned the refrigerator!' Or how about 'No water for you until you've filed our taxes, waxed our vehicles, washed the dog, patched the roof, and given Grandma Scott her pedicure.'"

"Or maybe they are do-gooders who think *I'm* the evil one, and they'll try to mold me into some goody-goody freak of nature,

who never stops smiling, sings show tunes, and says crazy stuff like, “Yes, ma’am, I’d love to watch more public television tonight.”

The possibilities are endless.

“Are you done?” With one hand Mrs. Smartly turns the tunes back up, then reaches into her purse between the seats and grabs a pack of gum. She holds the package out to me.

I shake my head, refusing her pity gum.

I close my eyes for a moment, embarrassed at my little outburst. Inhale . . . and exhale. Okay, I’m better. No more freak outs from this point on.

Wait, is that Ricky Martin on the radio? Is Mrs. Iola Smartly belting out Ricky Martin at the top of her lungs? Oh, no way. I’m sticking some tissue in my ears and forcing myself to go to sleep.

Maybe when I wake up, this car ride will be over, and the sight of Mrs. Smartly shaking her bon-bon in her bucket seat will be just a dim memory.

“KATIE,” A VOICE CALLS from the driver’s seat.

I’m ignoring this voice.

“Katie, wake up. We’re almost to the Scotts’ house.”

The fog in my head clears as I wake up, and I remember I’m in a shabby minivan bound for a life of sheer bliss and sunshine at my new “parents” house in Wacko, Texas. Mrs. Smartly nudges my leg, trying to wake the sleeping beauty I am. I give her my possum routine. Plus, I’ve been asleep in the same position so long I can’t seem to move my head.

“Katie Parker, you’re drooling on your seat belt. Now wake up.”

Ew. Gross.

After I readjust my neck, which got stuck in that awkward sleeping-in-the-car position, I tidy up my ponytail and remove all

traces of saliva from my face. I arise to see we are zooming past a big red sign indicating we have arrived in good old In Between, Texas. It says, *Welcome to In Between. At the center, you'll find we're all heart.* They may be all heart, but they're certainly not all brainiacs. Did a first-grader come up with that slogan?

"Well, Miss Parker, what do you think?" Mrs. Smartly takes off her sunglasses to look at me.

What do I think? I think she has some ketchup on her chin from her lunch value meal, that's what I think.

"Are you excited? Nervous? Scared?"

She regards me with genuine interest and concern. If it weren't for the fact that I'm probably gonna be right back at Sunny Haven within six weeks, I would miss Iola Smartly. The poor woman was given the job of operating a run-down orphanage in a building that hasn't seen improvements since a guy named Abe Lincoln was in office. Mrs. Smartly had to contend with one ornery building, plus make sure none of us girls skipped school, ran away, or robbed any convenience stores. No wonder she has so much gray in that dark hair she keeps piled up on top of her head.

"Katie, I'm talking to you." My driving companion wears her exasperated look. She is quite used to my daydreaming and my tendency to ignore people.

I search my brain for a response and give her what I've got.

All I've got.

"I don't know, Mrs. Smartly. I just don't know."

We pass a park where children are playing and running. I try not to think how lucky those children are. Moms to push their swings. Dads to wipe the dirt off scraped knees.

Beyond the park there's a water tower just suffering for a paint job. Mrs. Smartly and I eye the tower and can't help but simultaneously read aloud the poorly painted lettering on it, *Home*

of the In Between Chihuahuas. Oh, this is getting worse by the minute. Their school mascot is the Chihuahua?

“Well, Katie, you’ll be a Chihuahua, it seems,” Mrs. Smartly says with a friendly smirk. The last school I was at, their mascot was a tiger. Tigers eat Chihuahuas.

“Maybe my foster parents will be into homeschooling.”

“No such luck, sweetie. I’m sure you’ll adjust.”

City hall. May’s Quilt Shop. Gus’s Getcher Gas. Tucker’s Grocery and More. In Between Public Library. Bright Mornings Daycare. Micky’s Diner. I’m in a small town nightmare. Can you call it a town if there isn’t even a McDonald’s? How does a person survive without easy access to chicken nuggets?

Mrs. Smartly squints hard at her directions and passing street signs, making lefts and rights with her prized minivan. As we wind through the town, my panic builds with every new sight. Are we going too fast for me to jump out of the van? I think I could live with a broken arm. But on second thought, what if she’s going at the speed just prime for a broken neck?

Deciding I like my neck right where it is, I resign myself to the fact that *In Between* is where I’m at.

Where I’m staying.

Ready or not.