

the big picture



jenny b. jones



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This book is lovingly dedicated to Edith “Ninny” Hardy, my totally awesome grandmother. Thank you for all the stories you used to tell me and for always naming the main character “Jennifer.” Though the best stories were the real ones from your life . . . like the one about unknowingly camping out on an airport runway during your honeymoon. Thank you for all you’ve done for me and your family. You’ve created an amazing legacy.



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

THANK YOU, GOD, FOR BLESSING me with this series. That you chose me to write it still astounds me and makes me tear up. I have learned a lot on this journey as a writer, as a person, and as a Christian. Thank you for your mercy, your grace, and the opportunity to tell people about Jesus Christ in a way that wouldn't make me totally freak out (well, okay, occasionally I might have). I'm grateful for direction, creativity, and for discouraging me from driving down the highway at maximum speed and chucking all my pages out of the car.

I'm very appreciative to NavPress for the opportunity to bring Katie, Maxine, and all the crew to life. You opened doors I didn't even know existed. You're the Narnia to my . . . oh, never mind. Thank you.

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Jamie Chavez, my editor, you are one in a million. Though your

knack for realistic details is absolutely punishing (*Do you realize your character has three arms here? You have Katie swimming in February. You can't just make up a comet! Why would anyone go to bed at five thirty?*), I know the story is all the better for it. Thank you for your friendship, your supportive e-mails, and for “getting” Katie. And me. And if I ever decide to write sci-fi, where time and space do not matter, I'm probably not calling you.

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To my family, thank you, as always, for your support, love, and encouragement. Though this is my third novel. I think maybe it's time we (as in you) started treating me with a new level of respect. Who wants to volunteer to clean out the litter box? Anybody? . . . Hello?*

As with every book, I must express my deep appreciation to Erin Valentine and Erin Keeley Marshall. You're the best critique group ever, and I am so grateful for all your help, generous spirits, and the time you've invested in this series. Thank you for being there from the beginning. I could break out into song every time I think about all you've done for me.

I would also like to thank my readers, from strangers to students, who have picked up a copy of the KATIE PARKER PRODUCTION series and spent a little time in In Between, Texas. It thrills my heart to hear feedback. We authors tend to think only our mothers will like what we write. Thank you to everyone who put Katie Parker in schools and libraries. She has a message to bring, and I thank you for being a vital part of that ministry. I couldn't do it without you.

I am very appreciative of Erin Blaylock and all the students and staff at Washington Junior High School. I appreciate all you've done to encourage and support Katie Parker.

* I'm totally kidding.

Sheila Hall, thank you for being willing to brainstorm on command and share your brilliant ideas. And for remaining unfazed by e-mails at midnight that go a little something like this, “I need help now! E-mail me back in thirty seconds or our friendship is over and I will tell everyone about band camp in the eighties!”

I appreciate Kylan Savage, lead singer of The Truth About Movie Stars, for stepping off the stage long enough to mow my yard. You’re a huge help. When you teach *and* write, some things have to go . . . like mowing your own yard, reading the *Wall Street Journal*, the daily pursuit of clean underwear.*

My last offer of gratitude is for Brian Armas of Armas Photography and Angry Designs. Thank you for my new website, for Photo Botox, and for putting up with me during the photo shoot. (“You want me to smile? Again? Can’t you just take a picture of my elbow or something?”) I invite everyone to check out my new space at jennybjones.com and behold his brilliance.

Finally, let me depart from the norm and get a tiny bit serious. *The Big Picture* puts Katie right in the middle of her mother’s addiction. A student, who didn’t even know I was writing this book, recently asked me, “If your parent is an addict, are you destined to become one too?” The short answer is no. But is your road going to be harder? Yes. Anytime there’s dysfunction in your home, in any form, your road is harder. If you find yourself in this situation, please, please find a *trustworthy* adult to confide in and talk to—a school counselor, a family member, a friend’s parent, someone from a church. Don’t suffer in silence. There are people out there who want to help you.

* I’m mostly kidding.



Chapter one

“IF I EAT ANY MORE popcorn, I’m gonna hurl.”

I shove the bucket away, and Charlie Benson, my date for the evening, takes it and peers inside.

“In other words, you ate the top layer where the butter was, and now you’re done?”

I lean back in my chair and smile up at him. *Smart boy.*

The town of In Between doesn’t have much to offer, but I will give it points for a cool hangout spot for warm Friday nights. The drive-in. There are very few left in the country, but In Between hangs onto its classics, including the rusty water tower, the home-grown shops downtown, and Bubba’s Big Picture Cinema.

Slurping sounds come from Frances’s direction.

“Nash,” I call to her boyfriend. “Get her another root beer so I can hear the previews.”

Charlie’s fingers intertwine with mine, and he whispers close to my ear. “The previews are twenty years old.”

And that’s what makes them perfect.

The four of us sit beneath a sky crowded with stars and watch the screen pop and crackle to life. Bubba’s only shows old movies, and tonight

is eighties night. And with our chairs arranged in the back of Charlie's truck, we settle in for the first flick of the evening, *Sixteen Candles*.

Frances spouts off some useless facts about Molly Ringwald, and while my ears are trained on my best friend, my eyes are totally glued to Charlie.

Charlie Benson, Mr. Four-Point-Oh and quarterback for the In Between Chihuahuas, is some pretty fine stuff. He and I have been spending a lot of time together lately. And you'd think that would be great. I mean, he's hot, he's brilliant, and he has some well-defined, 'roid-free muscles that make a girl want to just drool.

Sometimes I wonder if we're just friends.

Who occasionally hold hands.

"Actually"—I bat my eyes at the boy beside me—"I could use another drink myself."

Charlie steps toward the cab and digs into the cooler until he finds a Diet Dr Pepper. He pops the top then places it in my waiting hand.

Aww, he's sweet like that. All the time. Except when he avoids me at school. Like he has this past week.

Did I mention he's *not* my boyfriend? But I want to rectify that tonight. You know, make him define what exactly we are. Maybe he thinks we're exclusively dating and assumes I think the same? *Or* what if he thinks we're just really close friends and is under the impression that I know that's all we are? But let me tell you, Frances and I are close friends, and *she* doesn't open my cans and hold my hand.

As Charlie sits down, my green eyes lock onto his gray peepers. My expression says, *Thanks for the drink. You're so thoughtful. By the way, do you plan on kissing me anytime this century?*

Behind us Frances and Nash break out the cookies as Frances continues her list of everything she knows about the movie. Which is too much.

"Did you know the cake at the end of this movie is actually made of cardboard? And it's interesting to note that when the girls are in the lunch line . . ."

Charlie looks back at the two of them then leans closer to me. “Frances still gets a little nervous around Nash, doesn’t she?”

I inhale his light scent and smile. “At least she no longer requires a paper bag every time he’s around. I’d say that’s progress. We did pretty well hooking those two up.”

His brown hair blows in the evening breeze. “Yeah, we’re a good team.”

See? He’s always saying things like that. We’re a good team? What does that mean? A good team as in Bert and Ernie? Or as in Spider-Man and Mary Jane?

Like I said, the last few weeks Charlie and I have been hanging out. A lot. We’re at that point where we call each other every night. And my foster mom told me if I didn’t cut down on the texting, I was going to have to sell an organ to pay for the next bill. I love a good text message—but maybe not enough to sacrifice a kidney.

But lately Charlie’s been acting strangely. I’ve barely seen him at all this week at school. A suspicious girl would wonder if he’s avoiding her. But then tonight he acts like there’s no place he’d rather be than out here with me, watching a girl from the eighties try to figure out her life while wearing hideous blue eye shadow.

“Um . . . Charlie?” That’s it. I’m just going to put it out there. Lay it on the line.

“Yeah?” His eyes never leave the screen.

“I was wondering if maybe—”

He shifts in his seat. “Are you hungry?”

Hungry for us to move on to the next level? *Why, yes, I am!*

“I packed some sandwiches for us. Er, for all of us.”

I lay my hand on his arm and scoot closer. “I don’t want a sandwich.” *I want you telling the world I’m your girlfriend. I want to scribble your name on my notebook and have other girls look on with envy.*

“I know we just had popcorn, but I thought maybe . . .”

“Charlie, I think we should talk.” I look behind us to make sure Frances and Nash aren’t listening in. “I was wondering if you and I—”

The trill of my phone cuts off my big moment.

I hold up a finger, silently telling Charlie to wait. *I'm not through with you.*

I check the number as I flip the phone open. "Hi, Millie."

"Hi, sweetie. Are you having a good time?"

Oh, yeah, sure. I was just about to break out into a Céline Dion song and declare my undying devotion to Charlie. Great timing.

"Hon, I know you've looked forward to tonight all week, but I need you to have Charlie bring you home." My foster mother pauses. "Now."

The heart I was about to hand over to Charlie triples in speed. "Are you okay? What's wrong?" My foster mom has been doing intense chemo treatments in the last month for breast cancer. It kinda freaks me out.

"Nothing's wrong. No emergency. James and I just need you to come home. We'll explain when you get here."

I end the call and relay the message to my friends.

"Hop in the truck." Charlie's hand rubs my upper arm. "I'll take you home and come back for Nash and Frances later."

He opens my door as my best friend and her date set up their chairs on the ground. I wave good-bye and promise to call Frances later. Charlie pulls his Ford out of the drive-in lot, and we head toward home.

"Sorry you're having to miss the movie." I tap my fingers on my knees. "You can just drop me off."

Charlie pins me with an intense look. "Katie, I'm staying with you. I want to make sure everything's all right."

"Oh . . . um." Now is *so* not a good time for this, but I blurt it out anyway. "Charlie, what *are* we?"

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . are we friends?"

"Of course we're friends. You're a good friend."

"No." Boys are dumb. Boys are stupid. "I mean is that all we are? I don't know how to read you lately. Are we going out?" I feel my face flame.

He stares straight ahead at the road. Speechless. I feel my stomach sink to the floorboards.

“I think we’re probably heading in that direction,” he finally says. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is at school you’ve been pretty distant lately. But then we’ll spend two hours on the phone and hang out on the weekends. Are you embarrassed by me at school?” It’s not like *I* wear blue eye shadow.

“No. Of course not.” His face clouds. “I like hanging out with you.”

And here’s where he sticks in the big *but*.

“But I just don’t want anybody to get hurt.”

“Who’s going to get hurt?”

He turns on his blinker and navigates a turn. “I don’t want to lose this—us. But you probably need to know something.”

For the second time tonight, my body floods with panic. “Oh, my gosh, do you wear women’s underwear?”

“No.”

“You like boys too?”

“No!”

“You secretly listen to Clay Aiken and make up your own dance moves?”

“Katie, I’ve started spending time with Chelsea again.”

Like Voldemort to Harry Potter, I suck in my breath at the mere mention of this name. Chelsea Blake—his ex-girlfriend. A girl born with a silver spoon in her mouth and pompoms between her ears.

He reaches for my hand, but I move toward the door. “Why?”

“She’s been going through some pretty tough times lately.”

“Who hasn’t?” Plus, all she has to do is shop her troubles away. *I feel blue! Come to me, oh, MasterCard and Visa!* “Why does Chelsea need you?”

“I’m practically all she’s got. She doesn’t really have many friends.”

“Because she eats them for dinner,” I hiss.

“That’s not fair.”

“Need I remind you I was *with* you the day you saw Chelsea lip-locked with Trevor Jackson last month? She cheated on you. You don’t owe her anything. Let Trevor help her.”

“They were over before they started. She’s just so alone. You don’t know all the dysfunction she’s got going on.”

“Oh, what, did Mommy buy her a Dooney and Bourke instead of a Coach?”

“There’s more to Chelsea than that.”

Yeah, a couple hundred dollars’ worth of highlights. “What does she have to do with us anyway?”

“I need you to be okay with me hanging out with her. It’s the right thing to do.”

I study his face, honing in on his nose and considering tweaking it off his pretty face. “So we *are* just friends then. Because what you’re *not* saying is that you’re not sure your feelings for her are totally dead, am I right?”

I count the fence posts we pass until he answers.

“I’m not dating Chelsea.”

“But you’re also not dating me?”

“I do want to see where you and I—”

“You can’t have both of us. What’s wrong with Chelsea that she needs you so much?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I nod and process this. “Fine.”

“You know I can’t turn my back on Chelsea. That’s not the God thing to do.”

“But it’s okay to date me while you sort out which one of us you like?”

“I said this wasn’t about liking Chelsea.”

The truck pulls into my driveway.

“And I don’t believe you.” I grab my purse.

He hops out to open my door, but I beat him to it, slamming it shut and stomping toward the front porch.

“Go home, Charlie. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hear him running to catch up with me. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

Yes, because that *would* be the polite thing to do after stomping on my heart. I speed up my pace, staying two steps ahead of him, and race up the sidewalk.

“Katie, wait. Please, I want to talk to you.”

“Now is obviously not a good time. Go check on Chelsea and—” I halt in my tracks and Charlie smacks into the back of me, grabbing my waist with both arms to avoid a fall.

The front door swings open and Millie files out. Followed by James. And the dog.


And one more person, who shoves past them all and holds her arms out wide.

“Hello, Katie.”

Bobbie Ann Parker.

“I’ve come to take you home.”

My mother.



Chapter two

MY MOTHER RUSHES TO MEET me, throws her arms around me, and squeezes tight. Soothing words come from her mouth, but I can't decipher any of them. Too dazed. Too numb. Instantly, overwhelmingly confused.

Mom steps back, her hands still clutching my shoulders. "Let me get a look at you." She smiles, revealing teeth that never saw the luxury of braces. "I can't believe it. You look so grown-up, so beautiful."

She pulls me close again, and as I rest my head on her shoulder, I look to the porch where Millie and James stand. James has his arm draped around my foster mom, who clutches her hands and frowns.

I clear my throat and step out of the embrace. "I didn't know you were coming."

My mom tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear. "It was pretty sudden. I just got in the car and came to In Between." She leans in and whispers. "Did you know their mascot is a Chihuahua?"

"Yes, I believe I've heard that somewhere."

Mom's eyes dart behind me. "And who is this nice-looking young man? I'm Bobbie Ann Parker, Katie's mom." She sticks her hand out, and Charlie shakes it.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Charlie Benson. I’m a . . . uh . . .”

Yeah, you’re a what? My nonboyfriend? My great disappointment? My let’s-just-be-friends friend?

“He’s a friend.” I level my glare at him. “Just a friend.”

My mom nods, setting her ponytail to swinging. “How nice.” She focuses on me again, and unease prickles along my spine. “I met the Scotts. They seem real nice.”

“They are.” Millie’s face is still pinched in a frown. So unlike her not to have her gentle pastor’s wife face on. “They’ve taken very good care of me.”

“And I’m glad. But it’s time to go home.”

“This *is* home.” The words fly out my mouth before I can even fully process the thought.

My mother’s face darkens. “No. It’s not.” She stretches her smile back into place. “Home is with me—your mother.”

I nod mutely as my thoughts swim in my head like sharks in a frenzy; yet none of them comes to the surface long enough to grab onto.

Millie and James walk into the yard and join us. “Why don’t we go inside—have something to drink, sit down, and talk,” Millie suggests, placing her hand at my back.

Everyone steps toward the porch. When I see Charlie following me, I stop. “Thanks for the movie. I’ll see you later.”

“I can’t leave you right now.” He tilts his head toward my mom. “Don’t you want me to stay?”

I shake my head. “No.” I walk off, but he catches my hand in his. It feels so right there, but I rip it out of his grip.

“Katie, wait. I—”

“I think Chelsea has first dibs on your help.” My eyes burn into his. “I don’t need you.”

“Come on. Don’t—”

I dare one final look back as I walk away. “Bye.” Part of me wants to totally unleash and tell him off. How dare he jerk me around? He led me to believe we were on our way to something great together. Yet the

other side of me wants to turn around, launch myself into his arms, and just stay there forever, blocking out the reality that my mom is back, I'm probably leaving, and I can't stand the idea of losing the Scotts.

The screen door screeches closed behind me as I turn off the porch light and step into the entryway.

God, help me. I know I should be glad my mom is here. What normal person wouldn't be? But this place has become my home. And these people have become my family. I feel like I'm being torn in two. Show me what to do, what to say. I can't do this alone.

Millie walks out of the kitchen carrying a tray of coffee and cookies. "We're in the living room, Katie." The blonde waves in her wig bounce around her face. Millie's not even through with her chemo. She needs me.

I follow my foster mom and join everyone in the living room. Rocky, the resident guard dog, who actually serves no real purpose other than shedding and taking up more than his share of personal space, plops down at my feet as I collapse into the couch. My mom rises from her seat and sits beside me. Rocky stares her down with his dark eyes.

Millie hands my mom a cup of coffee and me a Diet Dr Pepper. Now I know something is seriously wrong. Millie rarely lets me have diet drinks and only on special occasions, like Christmas or getting an A on a test, two events that don't come around nearly enough.

"Thank you, Mrs. Scott." My mom puts two sugars in her coffee, something that catches Millie's eye.

"That's a nice organic blend, so you might not need to add too much to it." Millie watches my mother pour in heaping amounts of creamer.

"Millie's into natural remedies and organic foods." I take a swig from my can. "She's a health nut."

"Oh, how interesting." Mom stirs her coffee and blows on it. "I tried organic gardening once a long time ago."

But then she decided growing marijuana was much easier and ripped up all the vegetables.

"Mrs. Smartly didn't tell us you were coming." James looks at my

mom over the rim of his glasses.

“Yeah, I know I should’ve called, but I just couldn’t stand to be away from Katie any longer. I’ve lived without this kid long enough.” She pats my leg.

“Why didn’t you write me?” I cross my leg away from her.

My mom swallows. “I did.”

“I didn’t get any letters. I’ve been here over nine months—not a single letter, card, or phone call.”

“My letters must’ve gotten lost in the mail.”

I reach down and pet Rocky, staring at his fur. “Right.” Because between the United States Postal Service and my mom, the post office is definitely the more unreliable. Whatever.

“So . . .” Mom sets her cup and saucer on the coffee table. “I thought maybe I’d get a hotel here in town, and we could head out in the morning. Thought you could come back with me—just for the weekend. You’ll be coming to stay for good soon, you know.”

“Whoa, now.” James holds up a hand. “Nobody’s going anywhere just yet. Ms. Parker, we can’t just let Katie go with you. We are her legal guardians right now. There’s a whole process that must be followed in order for you to take her with you.” James’s serious eyes meet mine, and I try to read them but can’t.

“Well . . . I . . . guess I didn’t think that far.” Mom selects an almond cookie and takes a small bite. “I suppose I just thought I would pick up my daughter—since she is mine. You *are* still my daughter, aren’t you?” My mom laughs, but nobody joins her.

This awkward moment courtesy of Bobbie Ann Parker.

“Ms. Parker—”

“It’s Bobbie Ann,” Mom interrupts Millie. “Please call me Bobbie Ann.”

“Bobbie Ann.” The line between Millie’s brows deepens. “We understand you have been . . . er, out . . . since March. We even hoped you would come to Katie’s last play with Iola Smartly.”

Mom dabs at her mouth with a napkin. “Yeah, I heard about the

play. I wasn't able to attend. I had a lot going on. It's a bit overwhelming to be back in the outside world."

My face flushes red. I can't believe we're all sitting in the living room chatting about my mom's incarceration like we're discussing the weather.

"Katie expected you there. It was upsetting to her that you couldn't make it." James levels his gaze on Mom.

"I do regret not being able to attend. And it was so nice of the director of the girls' home to invite me—Mrs. Smartie or whatever her name is."

"Mrs. Smartly," I growl.

"What have the last few months been like for you?" Millie touches a hand to her blonde wig. "Did you move back to your previous town? Where are you working?"

My mom's eyes dart to me then to the floor. "We lost our old trailer when I was . . . um, incarcerated. So I decided to just start over fresh." She grins and pats my leg again. "We'll be living in a nicer trailer park this time. You'll have your own room. And I'm working at a local beauty shop. I'm a shampoo girl. But if I like it, I may go back to school and get my cosmetology license." Mom beams with pride. "Things are gonna be different, Katie. You'll see."

Maybe she is making an effort to turn her life around. Maybe things will be better.

"Due to good behavior, there's a chance Katie could live with me sooner than we thought. Maybe in a few weeks."

"Well, we'll have to call Mrs. Smartly, of course. Arrangements will need to be made, the proper procedures followed." Millie twirls the wedding ring on her finger.

"And Katie only has three weeks of school left. You wouldn't want her to miss her semester finals. It could be detrimental to her grades."

Mom chuckles at James's words. "Grades were never Katie's thing anyway, so I don't really see it would matter where she finishes her semester at."

“I have good grades.” Ice shoots through my veins. “I’ve worked really hard. It just so happens I’m smart.” *Take that, Mother.* And I plan to grow up to be more than an entrepreneur of drugs.

“Katie has worked very hard. My husband and I are extremely proud of her.”

James nods. “We are proud of her for many reasons. She’s learned to drive and is doing well.”

Yeah, haven’t hit anything in days.

My foster dad continues, “Did you know she got saved last month?”

“No, I don’t believe I did.”

“I told you about it in my last letter.” You know, one of the many you didn’t respond to. “Maybe the mailman lost that, too.”

“Katie is quite involved in our church. She did some mission work with the youth over spring break.” Millie sends a wink my way. “She’s just an absolute joy and—”

Slam!

“Everybody freeze!” Maxine’s voice carries from the foyer into the living room. “Big news! *Big*, big news!”

“We’re in here,” James calls, then turns back to my mom. “My mother-in-law.” James and I share a look of amusement. Mom’s about to endure Hurricane Maxine. Only the strong survive.

Maxine runs into the living room, skidding to a halt on the hardwood floor. “Sam asked me to marry him.” She grabs her daughter and gives her a shake. “Did you hear me? Sam asked me to be his Mrs. Dayberry!” Maxine plants a smacking kiss on Millie’s lips.

“Oh, good. You’ll have a daddy again, Mil.” James sips his coffee. “Can I help you pack, Maxine?”

Maxine cackles. “*Bah!* Not so fast. Sam wants to get married next week.” Maxine turns a little green at the idea. “But I don’t know. My schedule’s pretty booked with a pedicure and a foil highlight.”

Millie frowns. “Next week? Is there a reason for the rush?”

James coughs. “I could think of about seventy-eight of them.”

Maxine ignores him. “Millie . . .”

“Yes?”

“I’m pregnant.” Maxine throws herself into a chair and chuckles. She wipes her eyes, surveys the room, and stops cold. “Who are you?” Her blue eyes narrow on my mother.

“Mom, this is Katie’s mother, Bobbie Ann Parker.”

Maxine stands up and instead of offering Mom a hand to shake, she paces in front of her, staring Mom up and down. “You can’t take her.”

“Mother!” Millie gasps.

“She can’t!” Maxine clutches her chest. “How can I get married without Katie?” She grabs my hand. “You have to be my maid of honor.”

I smile, despite the weird tension in the room. “Don’t you have friends more your own age?”

“They’re all dead.”

I squeeze her hand back. “No butt bows.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Maxine returns her attention to my mom. “Are you staying in town long? I’m afraid all our rooms here are occupied. We had some storm damage from a tornado in February, and the repairs have yet to be completely finished. I’m Katie’s roommate.”

Mom shifts uncomfortably beside me. “I had planned to take Katie back for the weekend, but the Scotts pointed out it will have to wait a few weeks until I fully regain custody. I guess I was just so excited to have a weekend off and see my daughter, I didn’t think. Is there a hotel in town I could stay at tonight?”

“We can find room for you here, Bobbie Ann.” Millie stands and collects the coffee cups. “You can have our room.”

“Their bed has lumps.” Maxine runs a hand through her yellow-blond hair. “It’s a good bed to jump on, but won’t do much for you if you want a good night’s sleep.”

James rises and puts an arm around his wife. “Of course you can stay with us. Spend some time with Katie here.”

“Supervised time you mean? With my own daughter?”

James nods, his eyes on me. “Yes.”

Mom chews on her lip and watches me. Does she see all the confusion on my face? The doubts scrolling across my forehead?

“If you could direct me to a hotel, that would be nice. I think I’ve probably crowded you all enough today.” She laughs nervously. “I’ll see you in the morning though, Katie. Okay?” My mom pulls me into a hug, and I catch the faint whiff of cigarette smoke. I guess I can’t expect her to give up every vice.

We walk my mother to the door, and I stand there behind the screen and watch her drive away in an old Mercury.

“Wow, who saw *that* coming?” Maxine slaps me on the back.

“I know. I had begun to believe she would never contact me.”

Maxine frowns. “No, I meant this.” She sticks her hand in my face, and a giant diamond glitters on her finger. Maxine walks upstairs, singing an off-key rendition of “Going to the Chapel.”

Hours later I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling in the dark. A million thoughts explode like fireworks in my head.

“Katie?” Maxine whispers from her bed across the room.


“What?”

“I can’t do it. I can’t marry Sam.”

The knot in my stomach tightens as I add one more problem to my list. “Maxine?”

“Yes, sweet pea?”

“I can’t go home.”



Chapter three

SIX THIRTY.

Saturday.

I'm awake at a time when most roosters are just thinking about crowing and no self-respecting teen would be up.

I jerk the covers over my head and groan.

God, what are you doing with my life? I hand it over to you, and then you totally detonate it?

Tossing off the blankets, I swing my feet onto the floor and quietly tiptoe to the bathroom, careful not to wake up my newly engaged roommate.

I try not to focus on the sick feeling occupying space in my stomach as I wash my face, brush my teeth, and throw my hair into a ponytail. Nice bags under my eyes. The swollen, puffy, no-sleep look is *so* hot. But what do I care? Not like I have a boyfriend.

But I do have two mothers.

And one foster dad. One foster grandma.

One foster dog.

And one heart pulled in opposite directions like a tug-of-war.

After changing into some shorts and grabbing my iPod, I walk

downstairs into the kitchen. I scribble a note for James and Millie and head out the front door.

The early morning Texas sun seems to hesitate in rising today, but I know the gray clouds will burn off soon. Wish my bad mood would.

I scroll through the iPod until it blasts some up-tempo Black-Eyed Peas in my ears.

And then I run.

Soaring up the driveway and striding onto our road, I run like the wind.

A very slow, tired wind.

Okay, so running is not my thing.

I have a side-stitch, and I've barely made it past the mailbox. I suck in air and force it back out, desperate to drag up some energy from somewhere in this tired, sad body.

My Nikes pound the pavement, and I work to clear my head. To focus on the light breeze. The spring flowers. The glisten of the morning dew. The sight of—

Ew. The dog poo I nearly stepped in.

Ring-a-ling! Ring-a-ling!

I rip out an ear bud and look behind me.

Maxine. Doing figure eights in the street with her tandem bike.

“Hey, Toots!” She rings her little bike bell again and smiles big. “Thought you could use a little company.”

I face straight ahead again and continue my determined attempt at running.

She pedals ahead then swoops around me in a circle. “You’re up awfully early. Training for the Olympics?”

I had been so quiet when I had gotten up so I wouldn’t wake her. Why did I even bother? It’s like she has some sort of inner radar and knows where I am at all times. Like a few months ago when she caught me at a party I was *definitely* not supposed to be at.

“Since when did you start running?” She stands up on her pedals and the breeze ruffles her yellow bob.