

“Warm and sensitive, Day’s deft depiction of difficult siblings and blended family relationships will make you laugh, cry, and sigh. A wonderful book!”

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Fade

TO US

JULIA DAY



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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
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Definite Opinions

I had been chasing the Thomas twins around their house for a half hour, begging them to put on their clothes, when the garage door whined up. Their mother was home.

“Guys, come here,” I shouted as I flung myself onto the carpet. Five seconds later, I had two tiny bare butts bouncing on my belly. “Gotcha.” I sat up, locked my arms around their squirmy bodies, and shifted them onto my lap. I’d just wiggled a pair of Pull-Ups onto both boys when Mrs. Thomas walked in the door.

She hugged them as she smiled at me. “Were my little men good today?”

“Absolutely adorable.” I took the wad of cash she held out and shoved it into my pocket. “Thanks.”

“Brooke?” She squinted at the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall. “Can you babysit next Saturday morning? Eight to eleven?”

“Sure. See you then.” I kissed the twins on the tops of their heads and left. Once I got home, I locked up my bike in the backyard and collapsed into my hammock. A nap had just become my top priority. Eyes shut. Swaying in the breeze. Surrounded by the scent of roses.

A screen door slammed, followed by thuds across the deck and the soft swoosh of footsteps on the lawn. Maybe if I pretended not to be here, the footsteps would change direction.

“Brooke,” Mom said.

Guess not. “I’m hiding.”

“Not very well, since this was the first place I looked.”

I smiled drowsily without opening my eyes. “Are you saying I’m predictable?”

“Completely. How were the boys?”

“Busy. And naked.” I sighed. Loudly. In a way that made it obvious I would rather not be talking.

“It’s time to eat.”

“Now?” It couldn’t be any later than five p.m. I peered at her through half-closed eyes. “What about Jeff?”

“He’s home. We’re having fried chicken.”

Mom rarely fried chicken, even though it was one of my favorites. Too messy and unhealthy, which made today’s choice highly suspicious. “Why?”

“We’re holding a family meeting.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

I rolled from the hammock, my heartbeat jumping into overdrive. “About . . . ?”

“Come and see.” She jogged back to the house, her blonde ponytail bouncing behind her.

A family meeting on a Friday in the middle of June? When

nothing was going on? Mom and I had been a team long enough for me to know this meeting meant something big—and happy—for me.

Fighting off the burn of anticipation, I trailed her into the kitchen. The table looked gorgeous. Lace tablecloth. Roses in a vase. The “company” china. And not only had my only-cooks-from-scratch-under-duress mother made fried chicken, she’d added creamed potatoes and biscuits, too.

Oh, yeah. Something *big*. And there was only one thing it could be.

Jeff was holding Mom’s chair for her. When he was done, I inched around him.

“Hello, Brooke.” He held up his fist.

My stepfather and I had been fist-bumping for the whole time he’d been in my life. I’d hoped after their wedding that he would progress to hugging. But nine months later, I was still waiting. “Hi, Jeff.” I touched my fist to his and slid onto a chair.

It quickly became apparent that the two of them had a conspiracy going to keep me in suspense during the meal. We talked about ordinary stuff, like . . . our jobs. The weather. The Chicago Cubs’s chances of reaching the World Series. And after every topic, Mom and Jeff would smirk at each other and then me. Fine. I could survive on hope for a few more minutes.

As soon as they put down their forks, I pounced. “Okay, guys . . . ?”

My stepfather’s phone buzzed.

Mom and I exchanged grins. Because of course. The best moments of my life were always interrupted before they happened. Like a hyper dog ruining the cookout for my ninth birthday.

Or the hurricane that canceled my first dance recital. Or the badly placed candle that torched the decorations at Mom's wedding to Jeff. At least tonight, the destruction of property wasn't involved.

He glanced at the phone and then at my mother. "It's Mei." His ex-wife. He would have to answer, although his reluctance to delay the family meeting was kind of sweet.

Mom sniffed. "Go ahead."

Jeff accepted the call. "Mei, what is it?" He narrowed his eyes, then frowned. Rocketing from his chair, he left the kitchen and disappeared into the den.

"I wonder what she wants," I said.

"Me, too." Mom covered the leftover potatoes with a piece of plastic wrap and carried them to the fridge. "Dessert?"

"Should we wait for Jeff?"

"Nope." She added the *p* with a lot of attitude.

I reached for the biscuits. Might as well clean up, too.

Jeff was gone for ten minutes. Mom and I had already finished our peach cobbler when he returned. After slipping his phone into his pocket, he stood behind his chair, gripping the seat back. He looked uncertain. Hesitant. Two words I'd never thought of for my stepfather before.

My mother rose and crossed to his side. "What's happened?"

"Mei has been having some health problems since she had her baby." He shook his head as if dazed.

"I'm sorry."

"The doctors want her to reduce her stress."

Mom and I said in unison, "Natalie."

He gave a sharp nod.

My stepsister and I chatted online often, and one of her fa-

favorite topics was her baby brother. But she'd never mentioned her mom being sick.

Jeff rubbed a hand over his nearly bald scalp. "Natalie is coming to live with us for a while."

What? I stared at him in disbelief. Natalie would be *living* here? He'd invited her without checking?

Mom recovered first. "That will be . . . an adjustment."

He wasn't looking in my direction, which bought me a few seconds to control myself. Weekends with Natalie were usually good. But when she opposed something, she became the queen of difficult. Natalie was guaranteed to oppose this. "How long is a while?" My voice cracked on the last word.

"It's undetermined. A month or two."

Emotions flashed over my mother's face in rapid succession. Concern. Sympathy. And something else that I couldn't identify. "When will you pick her up?"

"Tomorrow."

Mom and I looked at each other with widened eyes. That was too soon. There was hardly enough time to get the house ready. Or to get *us* ready.

"What else could I do, Jill? I couldn't say no."

"Of course you couldn't, sweetheart. We'll figure this out."

He switched his gaze to me. "This isn't what you expected for your summer."

It certainly wasn't. We'd been planning to have Natalie with us for two weeks in August, so I'd been mentally preparing for that. But *tomorrow*?

Jeff's daughter had Asperger's. She hadn't learned to drive, didn't cook, and couldn't be left alone for very long. She had definite opinions about how her world should be organized, and

she expected her family to provide it. Our summer would be consumed with making life easy for Natalie.

I could totally understand why she had to get out of there. I also understood that she had nowhere else to go, but it stung that Jeff hadn't even asked. Mom and I would've done the right thing. Natalie was family.

Clutching my hands together in my lap, I pasted on a smile, as if everything were okay. "I'm with Mom. We'll make it work."

His answering smile was full of relief. "Thank you. That means a lot to me." He kissed Mom's forehead and took a step back. "I have a few details to puzzle through. If you need me, I'll be in the workshop."

"Wait," I said in a rush. Jeff couldn't leave yet. We had to go back to where we'd been when Mei interrupted. "We haven't finished the family meeting."

Mom and Jeff visibly flinched. They turned to each other, silent communication passing between them. He flexed his jaw. She winced. He nodded. She sighed.

When Jeff looked back at me, his gaze flickered with regret. "I'm sorry, Brooke. We'll have to delay that discussion." He strode to the back door. It clicked shut seconds later.

My mother slumped onto a chair.

Frustration twisted in my gut. They might not have used the word *car*, but it had to be the reason for the home-cooked meal and the smirks. After years of saving, I was only six thousand dollars away from my goal. I'd never asked for help, but tonight it seemed like they'd been about to offer.

I stared at my mother with enough intensity that she had to hear my thoughts begging her to look at me, but she was doing a pretty good job of resisting. "Mom?"

“Honey, I’m sorry, but we can’t do it now.”

She hadn’t needed to hear the question. The disappointment was crushing. “You were going to help me buy a car.”

“Yeah. A friend of Jeff’s offered us a good deal on a used vehicle.”

“A Ford Fiesta?” The perfect intersection of safe, efficient, and affordable.

“A Toyota RAV4.”

I blinked with shock. I’d planned on a Fiesta because it was a realistic goal. I’d dreamed about a RAV4, but always in secret. “How did you know?”

“Jeff.”

I swallowed hard. *Jeff* had noticed?

“He said you would get whiplash every time one drove by.” Mom sighed. “We thought we could cover the difference, but not now. Not with Jeff starting his own business *and* Natalie living here. Until we see how much they affect our finances, we need to hold off on obligating that kind of money.”

I wished I didn’t know how tantalizingly close I’d been. It was easier to live with dreams when they stayed out of reach. “We’ll have four people and two vehicles.”

“I know. It’ll be a mess.”

Even though Mom and Jeff had retired to their room hours ago, their lights were on. Mom must have had some details of her own “to puzzle through” with her husband.

I was too restless to sleep. A three-mile run, a soaking bath, my happy playlist—nothing worked.

Prowling around my room, my gaze landed on the nightstand.

My scrapbook might help. I reached into the bottom drawer and lifted it out carefully, not wanting anything to spill out.

When I was younger, Mom had gone through a scrapbooking phase, where she'd memorialized everything about me through photos and bits of junk. When she lost interest, she gave me a leftover scrapbook. I'd been using it since as my secret journal. Just to be safe, I'd scrawled *Fashion Ideas* across the front. My mother wasn't interested in fashion. She would never look inside.

I set my scrapbook on the bed and flipped it open. Taped to the last page was a tattered sheet of paper, a fourth grade assignment that I'd never thrown away. During American literature month, our language arts teacher had gushed over her favorite author, Louisa May Alcott, and asked us to think about one of her most famous quotes:

Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations . . .

The assignment was to list our aspirations and explain why we had chosen them. My classmates had raced to scribble item after item. Not me. I'd sat frozen at my desk, staring miserably at the blank page. Totally certain what my highest aspirations were. Equally certain there was no chance I would ever share them with a teacher or anyone else.

She'd stopped by my desk and tapped my paper with a bright red fingernail. "Can't think of anything?"

"No, ma'am."

"Try, Brooke. You don't want a zero."

I'd picked up a pencil and written in cursive:

Tap shoes—I'm tired of ballet

A corner bedroom with two windows—to see more of the world

The big red *C* at the top of the sheet was a faded reminder that the teacher hadn't been impressed. What would she have thought if she'd seen the two items I'd added later that night, in the privacy of my room?

A dad—to love me

A sister—to be my best friend

I'd received the tap shoes for my next birthday. Not long after that, Mom and I moved to this town, into this house. My corner bedroom had two windows.

But the other two? I didn't really have them yet. While the "step" part of stepdad and stepsister didn't matter to me, apparently it did to them.

I hadn't given up hope, though. It *would* change. Someday.

The Awful Silence

The smell of coffee teased me awake Saturday morning. I blinked open my eyes and glanced at my desk clock. Five till eight. Jeff would be leaving for Durham soon.

I stayed where I was, not quite ready to blast myself out of bed. A single phone call had transformed my well-ordered summer into chaos. For one more minute, I would breathe in the peace of what might have been.

After a bathroom stop, I skipped down the stairs and into the kitchen. Mom stood by the coffeepot, cradling a cup. Jeff lounged beside her, sipping from a travel mug.

“Morning,” I said.

He fist-bumped me. “Good morning.”

“When will you be back?”

“No later than noon.”

“Good luck with the state troopers on that one.” I crossed to the fridge to get the cream. “We’ll have everything ready.”

“I appreciate how much you’re pitching in.” He wrapped an arm around Mom’s tiny body and nuzzled her hair. She kissed his chin.

My mother and Jeff were so affectionate that it made me wistful. I was glad to see her so happy. Really. But sometimes it felt like I’d been . . . Not left behind, exactly. More like I’d become an afterthought—as if the fact that I wasn’t speaking up meant that everything was going great for me. And mostly it was. But why couldn’t they ask?

Mom had dated often throughout my childhood, but she’d only been serious with two guys. I’d liked both of them and thought they liked me. But they had each vanished, practically overnight and without saying good-bye. That had hurt more than I’d ever admitted to my mom.

Then Jeff appeared eighteen months ago. He seemed different from the moment she’d brought him home to meet me. I’d liked him well enough, but I’d remained wary—not wanting to be burned when this one disappeared, too.

Jeff hadn’t been her “type,” but I could see why he’d caught her eye. He was a retired Army engineer and matched the stereotype. Fit, strong, confident, with beautifully old-fashioned manners. He kept his clothes neat and precise and his haircut high and tight.

After Mom and Jeff married in September and he moved in, things seemed to go smoothly for them, but not so much for me. For sixteen years, it had simply been the Jill & Brooke Show. Mom had taken care of the income, and I’d taken care of everything else. It had been strange to have a man around, disrupting the way we did things and taking over my responsibilities. So, yeah, there had been a bit of a tug-of-war at first, but we’d worked

things out. Jeff and I were getting along pretty well now, although not as far along as I wished.

“Enjoy your morning, Brooke,” he said. After kissing Mom, he headed into the utility room. The door to the carport slammed.

Mom stared after him for a few seconds, then frowned at her coffee cup, her mood deflating. “How are you feeling about this?”

Worried. Upset. But all I said was, “Nervous.”

“Me, too.” She drained her cup and set it on the counter with a click. “Okay, let’s get started on the chores.” She pointed to a pad of paper on the counter near me.

Good. Projects were something I could handle. I skimmed the list. “You can do the shopping. I’ll do the upstairs.”

“Deal,” she said so fast that we both laughed.

Once I was showered and dressed, I went into my stepsister’s bedroom and looked around. Compared to my yellow room with its crowded shelves of cute baseball souvenirs, hers was stark. Gray walls. White furniture. No decorations except for one poster from a Broadway show she’d seen with Mei. Natalie’s bedroom was soothing rather than interesting.

After opening the windows and cranking up the ceiling fan, I stripped the spare quilt off the bed and stuffed it into her closet. When I came out again, my cat blinked at me from the middle of the bare mattress.

“Leave, Tigger.”

He swished his orange tail in defiance.

“Fine, but you’ve been warned.” I plugged in the vacuum cleaner. He was gone before I turned around.

Two hours later, I’d cleaned and aired her room, made the bed with her five-zillion-thread sheets, and plumped her four hypoallergenic pillows. I’d also vacuumed or mopped the floors and

switched out the soap and shampoo in the bathroom that Natalie and I shared. I'd earned a break, so I charged down the stairs and erupted into the kitchen. "I've finished my part of the list."

"We're ready for her." Mom poured two glasses of tea and handed one to me.

We sipped together quietly, waiting for time to pass. For life to change. Somehow, though, my attitude had improved. Preparing for Natalie's arrival had helped. We were as ready for her as we could be, and the rest of the summer would just have to work itself out. "What will Natalie do on weekdays?"

"Jeff and I brainstormed some ideas last night, but nothing is concrete. We'll have to wait and see how she adjusts." Mom leaned over and kissed my cheek. "All will be well."

"Is that a promise?"

"It's a prayer."

Jeff and Natalie would be getting here soon. I had to finish checking her room.

Tigger yawned disdainfully from the top of her dresser. He jumped down and strutted over, only to hiss in reproach when I scooped him up and carried him from the room. "Sorry, but you can't be in there." I shut Natalie's door behind me.

As I was going back downstairs, my phone buzzed. It was a text from my best friend Kaylynn.

Want to hang out?

I would like to, but not today, not when I had to be here for my family. I threw myself onto the couch before answering.

Can't. Natalie is moving in

Moving? Like living there?

Yes

Permanently?

Not sure how long

A truck rumbled into our driveway. My stepfather had estimated they'd be here by noon, and with his typical military precision, they'd arrived with three minutes to spare.

Why?

Her mom's really sick

Sorry. Call me if you need to escape

Thanks

Two doors ka-thunked. Before I could stand, the front door banged open. Footsteps squeaked across the hardwood floor of the foyer and up the staircase.

Next came my stepfather's heavier tread. I entered the foyer as Jeff was shutting the front door with his foot.

"How are things?" I asked.

"Hard." He plodded up the stairs.

I hovered behind him as he rapped on her door and nudged it open. She lay on her bed, curled in the fetal position, facing the wall. Her dark ponytail snaked across the quilt. Thin legs and dirty, bare feet peeked from black yoga pants.

"Natalie?" He paused. "Where should I put your bags?"

"Don't care," she said.

The hollowness of her tone filled me with compassion. I'd thought a lot about how this change affected me, and Mom, and

Jeff. Even Mei. But I hadn't spent much time wondering about how it affected Natalie. She thrived on routine and stability, and that had been ripped away from her.

Natalie's mom was her rock. Her safe place to go when the world went out of control. How had Natalie been told that she was moving? No matter what Mei had said, it would feel like *I'm well enough to be around my husband, my parents, and a baby. But I'm not well enough to be around you.* Maybe Natalie's head could understand that it was more complicated than that, but her heart wouldn't.

Well, she would be okay here. I could be her new safe place to go.

"Hi, Natalie," I said.

She rolled to her back and stared at the ceiling, hands folded across her belly, motionless as a corpse. Desolation surrounded her like a fog.

I ought to get her talking, to fill the awful silence with sound. "When did your high school let out?"

Her hazel eyes shifted toward me, dull and hopeless. "You already know the answer."

Well, okay then. Jeff said that whenever she sounded rude, she was actually "being blunt." He claimed it wasn't intentional. It was probably best to believe him. "Ten days ago?"

"Yes."

"Mine ended last Friday."

No reaction.

Jeff set the bags beside the dresser. "Here are your things."

She shut her eyes, her mouth slack.

His gaze lingered on her, full of love and yearning. "Should I bring in the other two boxes?"

“Don’t care.”

Seconds ticked by, with all of us frozen into place. Abruptly, he turned and brushed past me, his huge shoulders hunched.

“We’ll have lunch in a half hour, Natalie. Lasagna.”

There was a long pause, as if she slogged through my comment word by word, trying to absorb it. “That’s my favorite.”

“Which is the reason Mom made it.”

“Huh.” Her eyelids fluttered. “Is Jill trying to make me feel better?”

“Yeah. We’re glad you’re here.”

“No, you’re not.” Her left hand reached for her right and twisted the skin on her knuckles. “But we agree, because I don’t want to be here either.”

My gaze swept her long, thin body and returned to those pinching fingers. Natalie was right. I wasn’t *glad* that she was here, although I didn’t know what the correct adjective was. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Nothing except leave.”

Yeah, I could do that.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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