

# A Love for the Pages

Joy Penny

## **A Love for the Pages** by Joy Penny

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## Chapter One

I just stepped off the train this morning, and already by the afternoon I'm a soccer mom. Well, the 'game' is track and field, not soccer, and Mom sold the Caravan while I was gone and replaced it with this compact sedan, but it's basically the same thing. I'm sitting here in the car parked with four vans one way and three vans the other, just another woman here to pick up her kid. Okay, my brother isn't 'my kid,' either. I'm a track and field sister, not a soccer mom. The point is, I'm already counting the days until summer is over. Huh. Never thought I'd say that. At least I didn't before college, anyway.

I get a glance every few seconds through the space between two bleachers of one scrawny high schooler after the other stumbling across the track, his arms scrunched against his chest, his mouth open in probably stilted breaths. If pressed to admit it, such a sight used to excite me. Now they all seem like little boys. I unscrew the bottle cap on my lemon tea and take a swig with one hand, rifling through my purse with the other. I find what I'm looking for and slip the well-worn copy of *Pride and*

*Prejudice* onto my lap. I open it one-handed to the page with the most recently bent corner, the book flopping open easily thanks to the wrinkles of the multiple creases peppering the spine. I take another drink, my gaze hitting the corner of my Kindle case sticking out of my purse on the passenger seat. A hundred e-books and counting, and one of my three beat-to-a-pulp favorites are almost always in my hand in those moments between doing something and doing something else. “*Now maybe you can get rid of the books taking up all that space in your room.*” Mom beamed as she handed me the graduation gift—it was definitely thoughtful of her. Surprisingly thoughtful. Until Mr. Wonderful opened his mouth and revealed it was less about celebrating my interests and more about being practical, as usual. “*You can’t bring a bookshelf to a dorm. You’re going to share the space with someone new, and it’s rude to bring a bunch of junk that’ll just take up space.*” Cooper always seemed to forget I was rooming with Deana. Still, he had a point. The books stayed behind mostly. Except for the three books practically starting to disintegrate.

There’s a pounding at my window. I jump, sloshing the open tea bottle all over my lap—all over *my book*. I scream and am rewarded with muffled laughter. I slam the bottle into the cup holder and am ready to shoot Owen my most ‘you’re moronic’ look and immediately feel my face flush as I come face-to-face with Sinjin through the driver’s side window. I look away quickly, like staring at the steering wheel and ignoring the drops of tea on my lap will make the whole situation disappear. There’s more laughter from the other side of the car and more pounding, too. I just keep staring ahead.

“Open up!”

I snap out of it, flicking the unlock button on my side and crossing my arms as Owen opens the back passenger door and tosses his filthy gym bag onto the back seat. I can't bring myself to look to see if Sinjin is still standing there, but even so, I feel this *presence*, like the shivers running down my spine are my own Spidey sense warning me, "He's here. He's here. Don't make a fool of yourself."

*Too late for that.*

"Yo, earth to Spoon! Guess you killed her, SJ." I hate when Owen calls him that. I hate when Owen calls me Spoon. No one else needs to turn every name on the planet into something new.

My own personal your-ex-boyfriend-okay-you-just-went-to-three-dances-together-and-never-officially-became-an-item-so-is-that-really-an-ex-boyfriend-is-nearby Spidey sense relaxes—and where exactly was that superpower before he pounded on the car window?—and I breathe a sigh of relief. I suddenly remember my wounded (paperback) warrior on my lap and scramble for the Kleenex box on the floor behind the seat, grabbing one tissue after another in painstaking single serve doses, and I look up just in time to see Sinjin bumping his fist against Owen's shoulder, laughing, smiling that chiseled Greek-god smile that lights up his gorgeous dark skin, and I freeze again.

"Hey, how's it going, June?" Sinjin runs a hand through his short black hair and speaks to me casually, as if we see each other regularly, even though we haven't seen each other for months—that little blip over Spring Break while hanging with Margot and Deana hardly counts. His tone gives no indication I'm a laughing stock for falling head over heels at first sight with my best

friends' brother. My best friends' *younger* brother. My best friends' he-was-a-freshman-and-I-was-a-junior-the-first-time-I-saw-him-but-how-was-I-to-know-since-he-just-transferred-in younger brother.

I will my hand to finish pulling the fifth tissue out of the box and add it to the crumpled wad forming in my fist. "Great," I lie, mumbling.

Owen finds this hilarious. But Owen finds most things to do with me hilarious. I'm *so* glad to see the last few weeks haven't changed him. As if somehow when I felt like I'd aged a decade as I was cramming like mad for finals and writing half a dozen papers, the world would have also progressed a dozen years and I could look forward to finding a far more mature brother when I got home for more than the occasional weekend visit. No such luck.

Sinjin walks away, and I twist myself back into my seat and dab my book and lap with the tissues. *Okay, good. Bye. Take your Greek-god smile and your smooth, silky, gorgeous jet black hair to some other hapless victim.*

The passenger door opens beside me. "I'm sorry about that." Sinjin pokes his head in. I cringe and do my best to smile. "I didn't mean to scare you. You just didn't notice us beside the car. Here, let me—" He scoops my purse up and lays it on the dashboard, climbing onto the seat. His fingers disappear around his side as he reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small washcloth.

I know what my Spidey sense should tell me. An athlete's hand towel. Probably used for mopping up sweat. About fifteen kinds of oh-my-god-gross. But Sinjin's hand is on my thigh, dabbing the tea stains as casually as if the liquid had spilled on the floor or on the seat. His palm lingers on my thigh—true, there's my pant leg and the

washcloth between his skin and mine—but dear lord, his *hand* is on my *thigh* and I just about meld with the upholstery. He reaches his other hand out. “Let me.”

I don’t know what he wants—I almost hand him my wad of tissues—when he grabs the book from my hand. He raises his eyebrows. “You’ve got Kleenex on your book.” He removes his hand and washcloth from my thigh and dabs at the book with it instead. “I’m so sorry.” I don’t bother telling him the book has already been soaked a time or two in the bathtub and there’s no more damage that little tea spill could really have done to it. I just watch him at work, like a doctor and his patient, treating each wrinkled page with as much care as if it were made of silk.

“Wow.” Owen slides into the back seat and shuts the door. “You’re about thirty shades of red right now, June. What you’re thinking is probably illegal in forty-eight states.”

I don’t bother asking where he came up with that number. I don’t bother pointing out that at nineteen, there’s probably some leniency for me to be fantasizing about a seventeen-year-old I used to sort of date. Instead I snort and grip the steering wheel, trying to fluff it off like the ribbing it’s meant to be. “If you’re guessing I’m thinking about murdering you right now for trying to embarrass me, I’d have to point out that’s illegal in all fifty states.”

The freeze in my spine lessens a bit as Sinjin shifts backward to exchange a look with Owen. They chuckle. “Finals didn’t happen to give you a nervous breakdown, did they, June?” asks Sinjin.

“No, but seeing this place again almost did.” I gesture at the bleachers and the two-story-brick-nightmare that is the high school I spent four years at far behind the

field and the baseball diamond. I bite my lip as I look over. It's not so nightmare-inducing when I no longer have to spend my days there. At least back then, I didn't have to worry about so much. I didn't have to worry about practically anything. I smile awkwardly at Sinjin. "Thanks," I say reaching my hand out for the book. "That's, uh, good enough. It's nice seeing you."

"Oo, shot down, SJ. Shot down." Owen taps his palms against the back of the passenger seat. "But just as well. This whole sister-slash-best-friend thing has always kind of creeped me out."

I clear my throat. "There was no sister-slash-best-friend *thing*, Owen."

I can't help but notice Sinjin stiffen just a little out of the corner of my eye.

Owen reaches up to pat him on the shoulder. "College boys, SJ. No competing with them. Not when they're just a hallway away."

"There were no *college boys*," I hiss. I turn around to face him, not sure whether to throttle my little brother or just play it cool by not assaulting him despite the ever-present desire to do so. A lecture about how much *work* college actually is—well, for some of us anyway, those of us who just don't have time to date and mess around—is forming on my tongue when my purse starts shaking on the dashboard. I shut my mouth and hope my eyes are enough to convey the world of hurt Owen just escaped. I toss the book atop the dashboard and scramble for the purse, my hand resting on Sinjin's as he reaches at the same moment. We smile at one another like we'd just been caught doing something very wrong and I let go so he can pass me the purse.



"Thanks," I squeak, my voice hardly registering the calm and confidence I meant for it to. I fumble inside and pull out my phone to read the all-important text waiting there: WHR R U 2? DINNER and what's probably a frosty, shivering emoticon but looks more like a blue blob of water. It likely took Mom twice as long to compose that text as it did for her to make dinner.

"It's Mom," I say, shoving the phone back into the purse. I grab *Pride and Prejudice* and shove that inside, too, tea stains or no.

"Let me guess," says Owen. "She sent you to pick me up so she can make a 'Welcome home, June' dinner. And she timed it so we'd start eating about one second after my practice ended."

"Pretty much." I grimace and turn my head just slightly to give Sinjin a smile. "We should get going."

"Sure." Sinjin takes the hint and nods, sliding out the door. "Mamma probably has her own 'Welcome home, twins, make your own dinner' planned." I pinch my lips picturing Margot and Deana coming home to an empty house this afternoon. A gloriously relaxing empty house. Sinjin does this informal salute thing, like he's saying 'hats off to you.' "See ya!"

I grunt something back. Maybe it's the "see ya" I meant to say. Maybe it's some other language. My hands are kind of shaking on the steering wheel.

Owen shuts the door. "Well, are you going to start the car or should I drive?"

"Ha," I say, snapping out of it. I toss my purse back on the seat so recently vacated by the walking reminder of a simpler life, a life where I could have a little crush without feeling like some perv and without worrying I'm wasting my time even expending brain cells on anything

but the future and work and research. I shake my head and start the engine, looking behind me to make sure there's no one I'm about to hit with my vehicle. "Mom told me you're not driving until you're forty-three."

Owen crosses his arms and leans back into the seat, squishing his damp blond curls against the headrest. "Mom's just being anal." He shrugs, closing his eyes. "Show me a junior in high school who hasn't snuck out in the middle of the night with his parents' car and a learner's permit, and I'll show you this little horned horse I've been keeping under my bed called a unicorn." He snorts. "That is, an actual human junior. Not Spoon from two years ago, who wouldn't come up for air from a book."

Is it too late to get back on the train to Chicago? I'm sensing I won't be able to make it through the summer without 'accidentally' hitting my brother with a vehicle.

## Chapter Two

“So two As and three Bs.” Cooper states this fact as if he’s the first one to give me the news, instead of echoing what I just said in answer to his question. He’d waited until Owen had wolfed down his fish, rice and veggies and excused himself from the table, tossing his plate and utensils into the dishwasher, eager to get upstairs to his world of Xbox and headset gaming. Since I eat at the rate of a normal human, I’m not so lucky to escape just yet. Cooper ponders the broccoli on his fork a minute, trying to divine my future from five final grades and steamed greens. “That’s decent, Junie.” He sticks his fortune-telling vegetable into his mouth. “Decent enough.”

I take a deep breath and decide not to point out that I doubt very much he got straight As while studying to do something I don’t even understand in sales for a plastic container company that has to do with ‘business intelligence.’ Because you’d have to be able to spell ‘business intelligence’ to pull off anything more than a C. I decide to put another forkful of fish into my mouth instead. Mom was right. It’s cold.

"But those are just the finals, sweetie." Mom can't even choose a more adult nickname for her true love of six years. Every time she talks to him, I'm reminded of how she'd talk to Owen and me when we were in elementary school. "I'm sure when June gets her grades for the semester, they'll be even more impressive." Her tone is just so that I'm not sure if the faith she's putting in my term grades is more of a threat than a hope.

"We have those already," I say, putting down my fork. Better to get it over with now, so I don't have to draw out the disappointment. "The professors uploaded them online after they graded the finals. Three As, a B+ and a B-." I cringe, like I just admitted it was me who snuck home from college to take their car on a joy ride, not Owen.

At least their reaction is somewhat different than I imagine it was when they discovered Owen's attempt at auditioning for NASCAR. Mom nods and manages to twist the corner of her mouth up slightly. "Well, isn't that nice?" she says as if I'm six years old and she's commenting on a drawing I've shown her. "Good job, dear."

Cooper puts his fork down and his elbows on the table, folding his hands together. *Oh, lovely. Here it comes.* "Let me guess," he says, no preamble, no pat on the back. "The As are in your electives?"

I put my own fork down, suddenly craving salty ramen chicken noodles instead of cold broiled fish. "Pre-19<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature," I answer, taking just a little pleasure in the way I'm speaking a foreign language when it comes to Cooper. "English Composition. American Lit."

Cooper nods, leaning his lips against his steeped index fingers. “And didn’t I say if you focused so much on your minor now, you wouldn’t devote proper attention to the foundation courses in your major?”

Macroeconomics. Financial Accounting. I put my hands in my lap, focusing on how short I’ve cut my finger nails. “English Composition *is* required for a business administration major,” I mutter, not untruthfully. I don’t add, “Though it might not have been when you were in college, based on the way you compose an email.”

“Oh, sweetie, let her be.” I watch Mom push her chair back from the table, and she stacks her and Cooper’s plates together, piling his fork and knife atop hers. “We both agreed it made sense for her to hurry up and get her minor done and over with, if she wanted. Then she’d have her junior and senior years to focus entirely on her major and her thesis.”

*Joy. Can’t wait for that.*

Cooper shrugs and leans back in his chair, not offering to help Mom clean up after him—as usual. “I just don’t see why she’s bothering with a minor at all. Or if she must, why not something related to the major, like marketing?”

*Because I’m struggling just to hold onto that B- in Financial Accounting as is.* I clear my throat. “English interests me.” I don’t know why I say it. We’ve had this conversation before. What starts us talking is always different, but we end each conversation much the same.

“Are you going to be a teacher then?” Cooper asks not as if it’s a legitimate career option, but as if reminding me that I could wind up a—gasp, *teacher*—is enough to scare me straight.

"No," I say, shrugging. It wasn't really something I'd had in mind.

"What then? A librarian, in an age when people are more likely to read a text than read a book, and digital is leaving paper behind? A *writer*?" The last word leaves a sour taste in his mouth, and I watch him try to wring it off his tongue as he puckers his face. He puts a finger on the table. "College is an *investment*, Junie. You don't throw tens of thousands of dollars at something and aim to make next to nothing from your time there in return."

He has a point. Which I begrudgingly give him time and time again. Is he ever going to be satisfied that I'm following his prescribed secret-to-success? "It's just a minor," I say at last, pushing my chair back. I stack my utensils atop my plate in silence, staring at fish bones instead of my step-dad. Truth is, I don't know what I want to be. And even if I still have three years left to figure it all out, Cooper and Mom are never going to be happy with me admitting I have no clue how to get to that strange and foreign land called adulthood from where I'm sitting. College is a change from high school, sure, but I think being lectured to from a dinner table as I clean up my dishes is a clear reminder that life really hasn't changed that much just because I went to 'sleep away educational camp' an hour's train ride away.

"What's a minor but a waste of time and tuition?" says Cooper. I'm hoping it'll blow over, as it always does. I rinse my plate and utensils and drop them in the dishwasher, not even looking at Mom's face to see if she's listening. She hums and scoops two slices of chocolate cake onto plates without asking if I want some, which makes her lack of attention clear enough.

I turn to go and find Cooper standing, crossing his arms and looking down at me. He's at least a foot taller than me. Although most people are.

"I'll try harder next semester," I say at last, realizing there's no way I'm getting past him without some sort of under-duress promise.

"You better. That's *my* tuition money, too, you know." Cooper contributes to my college education. If I'm lucky, he won't launch into a rant about my sends-a-card-every-other-Christmas-without-a-return-address-so-Mom-can't-track-him-down-for-child-support father's lack of character for not doing the same. He reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder, and I have to stop myself from flinching. "And I'm *investing* in you. Because I believe in you, Junie."

He means well, I suppose. It's how he shows he cares. Not by doing something like maybe noticing that no one else has called me Junie since I was thirteen, but it's something.

"Thanks," I say, and I do my best to smile.

He lets his hand fall and I have four seconds to pass before he launches into some other new lecture.

Not fast enough. "I hope you have plans for a job this summer," I hear Cooper call from behind me before I can turn the corner and fly up the staircase. "Or an internship. Something productive." I'm about to cry, visions of a quiet, relaxing summer spent with my best friends on paper and my best friends in the flesh fluttering away. "Because if not, I can always find you a temp position at work."

Dear god, I better find a job this summer.

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Before I even consider shutting my bedroom door behind me, I'm at my DVD tower and pulling out the DVD case my fingers land on. *2006, good enough.* I have to blow a thin coating of dust off of the Blu-ray player before I load up the title screen and plop down at the foot of my bed to watch. I'm only a few minutes into it, and Rochester is still just an anticipated memory, when the bed bounces and I just about scream bloody murder.

"Whatcha watching?" Owen asks, although I don't have to be a mind-reader to know he really doesn't care.

I jam my finger on the pause button and turn. Owen's picking up the *Jane Eyre* TV series DVD case I dropped on the bed behind me and holding it out as he glances between the case in his hand and the cases on the tower. "Just how many versions of this movie do you have?" he asks, his tone suddenly genuinely curious.

I snatch the case out from his hand, knowing full well the top shelf of the tower is filled from one edge to the other with various TV and film versions of the same novel. "Not enough," I lie, considering the only other versions out there to add to my collection might be theatrical recordings or the Bollywood interpretation I've been eyeing. "And it's a book, not a movie."

Owen nods as if he's humoring me. "It must be one hell of a book to comprehend, since a dozen versions aren't enough for you to wrap your head around it."

I growl and push the power button on the remote to shut off the TV. "I *comprehend* it fine. Not everyone watches a movie instead of reading the book for a school assignment."



Owen shrugs. "Not everyone obsesses over books boring enough to *be* school assignments, either, so what's your point?"

I stand up and shut the Blu-ray player off manually, just so I can cross my arms and stare Owen down. When he's sitting, it's actually possible. "Do you need something from me?"

Owen stares intently at my comforter and picks at some of the threading. I notice for the first time that he's still wearing his track and field jersey. His sweaty, dirty jersey. Ugh. "Can't a brother spend some time with his sister freshly back from the big wide world?"

I sigh and sit back next to Owen. "Chicago is hardly 'the big wide world.'"

Owen grins and meets my eye. "But pretty much any college campus *is*."

I shake my head. "I don't know where you're getting these ideas about college life, Owen, but divide the underage drinking and endless sex by a thousand and multiply the studying and writing research papers and attending classes by five hundred thousand in your picture, and that's more like what I've had to deal with."

"Cute, Spoon, but math was never my strongest subject."

*Good luck facing Cooper's thou-shalt-be-practical-when-applying-for-college speeches this fall then.*

Owen gets up and walks over to the haphazardly stacked boxes I brought with me from Chicago earlier. He glances at the half-open tops like he's hoping to find some evidence of booze and condoms. "Sounds to me like there's plenty of fun to be had in college," he says. "You just chose not to participate in it."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Do you have an inside source or something?"

Owen looks down the bridge of his nose. "Your own roommate made college seem plenty fun."

Of course. Though I can't picture Deana bothering to become text buddies with my brother, I'm sure she told Sinjin a few things, who no doubt told Owen. Although why two nerdy older sisters who went off to college and stopped embarrassing their younger brothers at school should be a topic of conversation between the two, I can't figure. I let out a rather exaggerated breath of air. "Well, you'd know better than I would apparently. I hardly saw her after the first semester."

There. I'd said it aloud. The other reason why my first year of college was hell: one of my best friends became a stranger to me.

"Uh oh. Trouble in nerdy book lover paradise?" Owen might be genuinely concerned. He *seems* genuinely intrigued anyway as he plops onto the desk chair beside the boxes.

I bend my fingers inward, mulling over how dull my nails have gotten. "Deana didn't say anything about me to Sinjin?"

Owen snorts. "If she did, do you think he'd tell me?"

I drop my hand and grip the comforter. "He wouldn't?"

Owen rolls his eyes and leans back in the chair, his arms folded behind his head. "After the whole it's-awkward-you're-dating-my-sister thing we went through? No way."

"We weren't *dating*," I tell him for the millionth time. But I can feel the flush biting my cheeks.

Owen brings one arm down on the armrests and rolls one of his shoulders under his hand, cradling some apparent athletic soreness. “Well, whatever. Inviting you into our pre-Homecoming get-togethers when he couldn’t bring himself to go to *your* people’s and hang out with *his* sisters about proves my point.”

“Hanging with underclassmen was awkward for me too.” But that’s old news. It doesn’t mean anything anymore. I’m not going to see Sinjin much before it’s back to Chicago and probably a new roommate, so it’s over. And it *is* over. Even though I’d sort of hoped we could be friends again, I can’t picture Deana wanting to hang this summer after ignoring me the first half of the year. Margot would be back from U of M, but somehow my other best friend had become some sort of online pen pal, a person you check in with every few weeks to share some edited version of your life. “Studying hard for exams!” “Twelve inches of snow! It’s going to be a pain walking to classes!” No “My classes suck ass.” No “Your sister isn’t who I thought she was, and the last time I talked to her she reminded me how pathetic it was that I could count the dates I’ve had on one hand since getting here—and I pointed out she doesn’t have enough fingers and toes to count her one-night stands.” No “Every day is a pain, and the only thing standing between me and jumping into that mountain of snow and never resurfacing is my imaginary book boyfriends and some crinkly almost-destroyed paperbacks.”

I find myself picking at the open DVD case, like maybe the answers to everything are hidden in there.

Owen gets bored with my moping and stands. “I take it I can’t ask you for a lift to SJ’s for Deana and Margot’s farewell party then?”

My fingers freeze on Rochester's scowl. "Their *what?*"

"Uh oh." Owen laughs, and there's more than just a little pity in his chuckle. "I take it Deana didn't tell you then?"

"She hasn't told me much of *anything*." I grit my teeth, hurling insults at her in my head. "What do you mean 'farewell'?"

"They're going on a European tour this summer." Owen cocks his head and crosses his arms. "I wondered why you didn't say anything to Mom and Cooper. But then I figured you might not want to figure out how to have the conversation with them about how wasting the summer in Europe could somehow prove beneficial to becoming Great Businessperson in the Family Mach II."

He has a point. I probably wouldn't have bothered to ask their blessing to go to Europe. I wouldn't have had the money to go either, really. But still. "I wasn't *invited*." I pinch my lips. "But it's a Ravi family thing?"

"Nope." Owen's grin is forced, and I can't help but notice his face is the perfect representation of 'sheepish.' "Just the twins. Maybe some friends, too."

Well, there's the rub, to quote the Bard. *Friends*. Friends actually talk to each other without arguing on occasion. Friends actually talk to each other period. Friends can rely on each other, can send more than the barest of "Yay, look at the surface of my not-at-all-this-happy life!" messages to one another.

And then my phone buzzes from the desk. Owen reaches across the boxes to grab it and hand it to me. "Can't be Mom," he jokes. "Unless she forgot you're upstairs."

I take the phone from him, although I have no idea who it could be. A last-minute invite to this apparently so-secret-Sinjin-sort-of-lied-to-cover-for-it party? My stomach flutters a moment when I see it's a text from Margot, complete with an emoticon claspng its hands together above its head:

*Can I ask a HUGE favor?*

Favors don't usually involve going to parties.

## Chapter Three

“So you’re cool with this? I knew you would be!” Margot doesn’t even wait for my reply. Not that she doesn’t already have it. But it’s all she says to me this evening, posing the question and answering it herself every few minutes like she’s run out of anything else to say. And she probably has. I know I have.

We spent the first ten minutes or so sharing awkward, stilted stories about how finals went and what else we’d been up to on our respective campuses since we’d last checked in with each other. Well, we were always ‘checking in’ with each other every few days on Facebook, Tumblr or Twitter. There were the photos she posted of her sorority banquet, the occasional famous figure quotes that *truly* moved her that morning, and the inside jokes tagged with her U of M friends and sisters. That about summed up all I needed to know apparently.

Between patting my thigh and smiling like a supermodel, she’d somehow glossed over how the European tour came about and whether or not anyone else was invited. But she certainly didn’t skimp when it came

to the favor she so desperately needed from me: “Do you have any plans this summer?”

I’d eyed the plastic cup she’d given me full of some sort of disgusting knockoff cola suspiciously when she’d asked. She certainly wasn’t inviting me along with her and Deana—especially after I’d learned they were leaving *tomorrow*. “No,” I’d said at last, truthfully. “Mom and Cooper want me to get a job, but I haven’t even started applying.”

Margot clapped her hands together like she found the news delightful. Glad someone did. “How about a volunteer experience instead?” She winked. “It’d look great on a resume!”

Somehow I wasn’t sure Mom and Cooper would weigh the value of experience with the value of doing something that actually earns you money, but then again, I supposed it depended on the experience. Cooper had mentioned internships as being acceptable. I took a swig more out of the need for something to do than a genuine thirst for flat bubbly sugar water. “Doing what?”

“At the library!” Margot laughed. “I kind of promised I would help out all summer before the European plans became a thing.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, it’s a volunteer thing, but they’re very strict about who’s doing what for what hours. And I’d feel bad if I didn’t have an equally qualified candidate to recommend to take my place.”

I wasn’t sure what qualified me other than a love of classic literature, and how that might translate to practical work experience. Still, staring at the liquid sloshing in my cup, I felt the tension in my muscles lighten just a bit. I had to do *something* this summer, and if I didn’t find something to do fairly quick, that *something* was bound to be working

at Cooper's office. And a *library*. "Sounds ... cool." I responded. I wasn't at all sure how I'd pitch it to Mom and Cooper, but after the welcome home I'd already had, there might have been just the smallest rebellion boiling over inside me.

"Awesome!" Margot's lips became Van-Gogh's-perfect-smile-on-woman again. "Sinjin will be so glad you're the one to volunteer with him!"

*Oh, shit.*

Margot is just about done telling me she'll make the arrangements with 'Violet' tomorrow like I have any idea who Violet is even though she'll be *so insanely* busy last-minute packing and getting to the airport and catching her flight, and I have the feeling I'm supposed to be grateful she's going to make the arrangements. She suggests I report at '8 a.m. sharp' on Monday because *Violet* is a stickler for rules, and I suddenly have no idea how Margot knows the library staff so well she's even got an idea of their need for punctuality. I run through summer jobs my best friends have had in my head, and 'librarian volunteer' pops up as a rather a minor blip in Margot and Deana's lives the summer before senior year—I specifically remember because they said they'd first fallen in love with the library during a brief summer they lived in the area while their dad consulted for a local company, years before they moved more permanently. They'd asked if I'd wanted to help out, and then before I even showed up, they told me the library had 'enough volunteers,' like too much free labor was ever a bad thing.

"We should chat," says Margot, even though we're already doing just that and failing miserably. "You've got an iPhone, too, right? When I'm in Europe, let's video chat so you can see the sights along with me!"



I know I'm probably smiling—what else can I do in a situation like this one?—but I don't feel very happy. "Sure," I say. Maybe she won't be calling so much once she bothers talking to Deana about me. I'm not sure why she doesn't know already.

"Margot! You're not going with us to Nice next month?!" A girl I don't know swoops in and sits on Margot's other side, her little mouth pinched and her eyes focused like this is serious business.

Margot doesn't introduce me and instead starts discussing her plans with the new friend, how she's spending an extra day in Paris with people I've never heard of, how she and Deana have got a homestay lined up while some of the group splits off to other parts of France and Italy. I hear just enough to wonder whether Margot and Deana are really going on their own vacation and just happen to be meeting up with others along the way or if she's off tomorrow with a large group that somehow breaks apart and disperses to various parts of the continent as the months pass. I don't feel much like asking.

I get up to toss the cup in the garbage and nibble on one of the stale pretzels in a bowl in the corner of the room. I rifle through my purse for the paperback and realize I shelved it when I grabbed the smaller purse from the back of my closet that I used to use for parties. And I didn't even pack my Kindle. Well, the light isn't exactly the brightest in this corner of the living room; Margot and Deana seem to have tried for some venue halfway between 'teen party without the pizza' and 'grown up wine and cheese noshing' and that entails a dimmer switch, the light barely emanating a glow. Still, I feel awkward with a pretzel and nothing else in my hand, in the corner while

everyone else is chatting. I don't feel like looking for Owen and getting out of this place just yet because I know he's in the basement with Sinjin. I take my phone out of my pocket and pull up Google book search.

*"He evidently wished no repetition of my intrusion,"* I read Lockwood say. Poor Lockwood, the most forgotten character in all of *Wuthering Heights*, despite the fact that about half the story is told from his narration. *"I shall go, notwithstanding. It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him."*

It's a sad evening indeed when I'm comparing myself to Heathcliff, but even invisible Lockwood would probably say the same of me.

"Important texts or something?"

I'm so lost in the well-tread world of the opening to the third story in my most cherished collection that I don't even notice Deana standing beside me until she speaks. She grabs a mouthful of pretzels and jams them between her teeth.

I clear my throat and stuff the phone awkwardly into my purse. "Or something," I say. It sounds bitchy even though I don't mean it to. At least I don't think I do.

Deana's eyebrow arches. "Well, it can't be research even now that school's let out, can it?"

"No," I answer, and I can tell I'm not going to be able to keep calm around her. "I don't have a strong desire to study macroeconomics now that I'm free of the subject for a few months, thank you very much."

"You could have fooled me." Deana laughs, but even I can tell she doesn't really find it funny. "At least you don't have your nose in an old, decrepit book for once." She crinkles her nose at the idea, although we used

to stay up late during weekend sleepovers watching the very same stories together on DVD.

I say nothing. I adjust my purse strap further up my shoulder and wonder how best to make my exit. Even if it might mean leaving my little brother behind.

“Margot tells me she got you to take over for her volunteer position with Sinjin.” Deana grabs a handful of M&Ms and pops them into her mouth one at a time.

“Yeah,” I say. If anyone’s going to bring up the reason I’ve been asked, the little trip to Europe I’ve been unaware of until several hours earlier, it’s not going to be me. “I start Monday.”

Deana shakes her head. “Good luck.” She speaks as if I’m really going to *need* it, and she’s not all that sure I’m not going to fail.

“It’s just a volunteer position,” I mumble. I don’t bother to add that if I fail to take it much more seriously than that, I’m probably not going to have luck justifying it to my parents.