



TOUCH *of*
FONDNESS
Joy Perry

STAY  TOUCH SERIES

Touch of Fondness

Stay in Touch

First Chapter Sampler

by

Joy Penny



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Chapter One

If there was one thing Brielle wasn't going to miss about college, it was the soggy, tepid tater tots the cafeteria in Bryant Hall offered students on Breakfast-for-Lunch-and-Dinner Saturdays.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'm going to miss everything, even these undercooked globs of potato.

"Are you crying? Bri, are you actually *crying*?" Lilac laughed like she was the only one in on the joke. Pembroke hastily scooped her compact out of her clutch and dabbed some more foundation on her cheeks to cover her own trail of tears and Gavin blew his nose on his scratchy cafeteria napkin.

Brielle smiled despite the miniature Niagara Falls taking up residence on her face and chomped on another tater, savoring its terribleness for good measure. "Just because some of us are made of stone doesn't mean the rest of us aren't going to miss this place."

Lilac lightly touched the tips of her fingers to her collarbone with one hand and held the other hand above her like a Shakespearean actor. "A college is but four walls and a roof, my dear." She grinned. "Albeit four *very expensive* walls and a roof, but walls and a roof nonetheless. No graduation is going to take away what this place meant to you." She tapped her left breast. "You'll always find it here."

Gavin cocked his head and flashed his best come-hither grin. "In your ginormous boob?"

"Har har." Lilac slapped him on the shoulder and picked up her fork again, pushing her tater tots to the side of her tray. They crumbled into an unappealing mess in the corner of one of the squares. "I don't know," she said, staring at her food instead of eating it. "I think it's about time we move on. Crappy French toast and tater tots served on a divided tray? What are we, middle schoolers or soon-to-be-independent adults?"

Brielle took a sip of her orange juice. "Says the soon-to-be elementary school teacher." She tapped her tray. "Get used to these."

Lilac shrugged. “Maybe someday. Maybe not. I don’t have to anytime soon.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pembroke. She’d been especially quiet today, not that being quiet was especially odd for Pembroke. “Aren’t you going to be teaching at Jacobson Primary this fall?”

“Nope.” Lilac popped a mouthful of egg into her mouth.

“*Shut up,*” said Gavin. He nudged her. “Are you serious?”

“Would I joke about something like that?” Lilac smiled sweetly, then laughed. “Don’t answer that.”

“When were you going to tell us?” Brielle was somehow both surprised and not surprised at all at this piece of information. Lilac always did things in the most dramatic way possible. Why not make the last meal they shared before their parents arrived all about her?

She took a deep breath. This was not how she wanted to remember today. Sometimes she wondered if Lilac was her enemy or one of her best friends. But that was just part of the territory that came with being friends with Lilac. And besides, it wasn’t like they were going to be able to see each other much after graduation anyway. Or so Brielle had thought. Last she knew, Lilac was moving to a suburb outside of Minneapolis and putting her early education degree to good use. Honestly, what on earth was the point of all of that hard work Lilac had put into getting licensed in another state if she wasn’t going to go through with it? She even had her apartment picked out, was interviewing prospective roommates, had made the deposit... No, no. Brielle cradled her forehead. She wasn’t going to do this. Not today.

“Don’t have a conniption over it.” Lilac obviously saw something in Brielle’s countenance that made her train of thought more apparent than she’d intended. Lilac shrugged. “Something better came along.”

“Better than a firm job offer?” Gavin asked. “A *paying* firm job offer, I might add?” Poor Gavin got to work at the place of his dreams... as an unpaid intern. After graduation. With only a tiny chance of getting offered a paid position by the end of the summer. Brielle had no idea how Gavin could summon the courage to move to Chicago on the hope that he’d be working for this marketing firm as a paid employee by summer’s end, even if he was just crashing on a couple of friends’ couch until then.

Not that he had much to take with him other than the clothes in his closet and that winning smile of his. His parents were assholes who’d disowned him and thrown out all his stuff

last summer after he'd come out to them. His grandma was the only one in his entire family who even spoke to him anymore—other than his little sister, who tried to text him in secret. But, to quote the man himself, there was “no way I'm moving into my grandmother's basement in the middle of bumfuck nowhere and trying for a job at the local hardware-slash-convenience-slash-crafting store that's the only place for miles. Assuming they don't drive me out of town before I step foot into it. Do they even want gay people selling their cakes they don't want sold to gay people?”

Lilac cleared her throat and drummed her fingers on the table. “I repeat: Something better.”

Pembroke gasped. “Did you... get a job offer abroad?”

It was no secret how much Lilac had loved spending a semester in Spain her junior year. Just as it was no secret that Pembroke had so badly wanted to spend the year in Japan but had chickened out at the last minute. And how fixated on Lilac's changed-her-life experience Pembroke seemed to be as a result.

Lilac snorted. “I *wish*. About the only thing that would guarantee me that is a job teaching English, and I don't think a change in venue would make enough of a difference when I really wanted a... change in job.”

Brielle couldn't keep biting her tongue. “You're not going to be an elementary school teacher? After all the hard work you put into becoming one?”

Lilac raised her eyebrows. “Maybe I wished I'd taken a cue from you,” she said, and although her tone seemed cheerful, there was something a little darker under her words, “and had studied something more useless so I didn't have to spend so much time in training and studying for my license.”

“*Lilac.*” Gavin shook his head.

Brielle didn't really have a comeback. She knew her philosophy and history dual majors were utterly pointless—she had no ambitions to be a professor or teacher, and that narrowed her already-narrow list of possible ways to put her degree to use—even if she really, really loved studying the subjects. But even her own mom didn't seem happy with her plan of moving back home to work for her mom's cleaning service, just like she had every summer as a teenager and every summer since. No matter how much Brielle tried to convince everyone it wasn't her “forever, ever” plan, that she'd continue to look for something resembling a post-college career

between scrubbing mildew out of grout and vacuuming up Mrs. Tanaka's odious cats' scattered kitty litter, no one seemed to believe her that come this time next year, her life would be so much different.

Brielle wasn't sure she believed that, either.

"I'm serious," countered Lilac. "All that wasted time just showed me... I'm not cut out to be a teacher."

"That's not true!" Pembroke frowned. It *was* sometimes hard for Brielle as well to associate unpredictable, party hardy Lilac with reliable daytime guardian of rambunctious seven-year-olds, but she was a different person around kids. She was *really good* with kids.

"That's nice of you to say, sweet pea," said Lilac, almost inevitably going into "teacher mode" around too-quiet Pembroke, "but wait until you hear what I'm going to be doing instead." She pushed her tray to the side slightly so she could lean forward and place both hands on the table for emphasis. "I'm. Going. To. Tildy World."

"Wait, what?" This was not at all what Brielle had expected Lilac to say. Sure, she had a soft spot for Tildy Tapir—she'd practically grown up on Tildy Tapir cartoons and defended them as being better than Mickey Mouse's; it was practically the only outwardly childish thing about her—but she'd been to Tildy World a dozen times throughout her life already. And she still dubiously claimed that the park was better than the nearby Disney World. She'd yet to find anyone who agreed with her, even though, to be fair, the park seemed to give Disney a run for its money.

"Doesn't your aunt live in Orlando?" asked Gavin. How he kept track of insignificant details like that, Brielle would never understand.

"She does! And Mom and Daddy only *approved* of this venture because I'm going to move in with her, at least for the first few months. Not that I need their approval exactly."

"But... are you going to be on vacation for *that* long?" Pembroke couldn't keep the confusion out of her voice. Ah, poor, dear Pembroke. Brielle sometimes herself forgot the petite blue-streaked blonde wasn't a little girl.

Lilac blew an audible breath out. "It's not a vacation." She shrugged. "Well, not that I won't ever just hang out at the park or head to the beach. Kind of the whole point of relocating to Florida instead of even-worse-winters-than-here-like-that's-somehow-possible Minnesota."

Brielle knew that was definitely one thing that Lilac hadn't been happy about when she'd accepted that job offer. But rejecting it now—after she'd already committed to so much of her life there—would probably hurt her resume. Not that *Lilac* needed to worry about that, apparently.

“Aunt Frankie knows someone who works at one of the resorts as a manager. She knew he was looking for an assistant manager and voila.” She gestured at herself. “I became available for the job in an instant.”

“They hired you as *an assistant manager*?” said Brielle. “Right out of college? With a degree that has nothing to do with running a hotel at all?”

Lilac smiled. “What can I say? I'm a charming interviewee, even over Skype.” Brielle's eyes flitted to Lilac's chest, which even when covered was hard not to notice, and she instantly felt guilty. But she did say “*he*” had been looking for an assistant manager. Lilac's voice interrupted the guilty nature of Brielle's thoughts. “And I'm just in training to start. Earl was especially keen to hear about my experience with elementary school children, since running interference between the resort's childcare center and the management office would be a big part of my duties.”

Gavin wrinkled his nose. “You're working for a guy named Earl. *Earl*.”

Lilac waved a hand. “He could be named Billy Bob Jimbo for all I care if he got me a job in Florida.”

“I don't know,” said Gavin. “There's just something ominous about a guy named Earl.”

Lilac punched his shoulder. “I'll behave. It's a thin-haired, chubby-faced man old enough to be my father named Earl. And I'm sure there's a Mrs. Earl.”

“Hasn't stopped the type before.” Gavin sent Brielle a look. Lilac's ability to attract all the wrong kinds of attention—with or without her intention to do so—was about the number one thing the two friends had to discuss on the rare occasions they were left alone.

“Stop being such a drama queen,” said Lilac. “So *anyway*, enough about me. Pem, what about you? I know Brielle's got a plan for the summer until she finds that *amazing job* that awaits her”—Brielle didn't fail to notice the sarcasm dripping in her words—“but you've never let us know what you have planned. Did you ever find anything?”

Pembroke stared at her lunch tray and the food that was only half-eaten. “No. Not really.”

“What?” said Gavin, trying as usual to coax Pembroke out of her shell. “A catch like you with honors in biology? There wasn’t any lab or something that would take you?”

Pembroke shrugged. “Nothing local, anyway.” Given how much time Pembroke spent on campus, it was easy to forget she was a commuter who’d lived in the area her whole life. Not that Brielle had fared much better, since she was from a suburb only about an hour away and she technically still lived at home, even if she lived in a dorm when school was in session. Lilac had been her roommate the first couple of years—it was how they’d met and how Brielle had become friends with Lilac’s instant bestie Gavin—but Lilac’s parents had more money than they knew what to do with and had paid for an apartment for Lilac and Gavin to live in off-campus after Lilac had come back from Spain. Just as well, since Brielle had finally gotten into one of those tiny-but-peaceful solo dorm rooms in Lilac’s absence.

“And you can’t move because...?” Lilac really never had any tact.

Brielle knew better than to pry. Pembroke had family issues, or she was just too shy to break out of her shell entirely, or maybe she was just happy where she was. From what little hints Pembroke dropped of her private life, Brielle imagined it was perhaps a mixture of all three that led the girl to be so unadventurous. It really wasn’t Brielle’s business anyway.

“I didn’t even apply to any jobs outside the area,” said Pembroke, as if that answered the question. But no one pried further.

“Well, maybe you can think about med school or nursing school,” suggested Gavin. “They need medical professionals everywhere.”

Pembroke nodded, but her eyes drifted elsewhere. It wasn’t the first time Gavin had tried to be helpful by tossing out career advice Pembroke would likely never bother to take. Gavin certainly wasn’t rolling in it, even before his parents had cut him off, but Brielle suspected finances would prove a huge obstacle to Pembroke pursuing any further degrees. If she was even interested in the medical field at all. Brielle realized she wasn’t really sure. She didn’t talk much to Pembroke outside of social media, and those conversations were usually reserved for gushing about the latest *The Walking Dead* or superhero movie with her.

“Well, good luck with whatever you decide,” said Lilac, and Brielle was certain Lilac really couldn’t care less about Pembroke’s situation. Her eyes were glossing over and her expression was faraway, like she could smell the ocean air and feel the sand beneath her toes already.

Brielle shook her head. Lilac doing an about-face at this point in time was shocking, but it was *so Lilac*.

“Uh-oh, trouble at 3:00,” said Gavin. “Bri, isn’t it about time you see if your mom’s made it here yet?”

“Is it 3:00 already?” asked Lilac dreamily. “I thought all our parents weren’t coming until after dinner anyway.”

Brielle turned to look in the direction Gavin indicated. *Oh. That kind of 3:00. That kind of trouble.* Brielle bolted upright and gathered her utensils and napkins hastily atop her tray. “Right. Thanks for the heads-up. See you guys tomorrow!” She turned around, ready to put her blinders on, but Daniel managed to meet her halfway to the dishwashing station, where she attempted to deposit her tray.

“Hey! Elle! Congrats.”

It was hard to act like a bitch to someone when they were dripping with pleasantness.

A chill coursed through Brielle’s body and she settled for dropping the tray on the counter a little too loudly. “Thanks,” she mumbled, turning around and staring at Daniel’s faded Hershey’s Chocolate T-shirt. “And it’s ‘Brielle’ or ‘Bri,’ not ‘Elle.’”

“You’ll always be ‘Elle’ to me.” Daniel did this annoying thing where he clutched both hands together over his heart and his voice took on an exaggeratedly dramatic tone, like it was all a big joke. Everything was a big joke with him. “Elle, my *belle*, my sweet little spicy pepper.”

Brielle groaned and pushed past him, still not giving him the decency of looking at his face. Ever since the genius had figured out her father—the father who hadn’t been a part of her life since she was eight—was Puerto Rican, he hadn’t let go of the gross, insensitive jokes. How Brielle could have been stupid enough to date him not once—but *twice*—over the course of these past several years, she would never know. That was a total of four or five months, give or take, she’d never be able to get back. The only year she’d been entirely free of him was freshman year, and that was just because he was a year younger than her and hadn’t started school yet.

“Hey,” said Daniel, trailing after Brielle as she made her way to the cafeteria doors. “You didn’t seem to mind the name when we were dating.”

Brielle spun around, looking up at Daniel despite herself. He wasn’t even that good-looking, not *really*, not when you couldn’t *not* associate his skeezy smile with all the skeezy

things he'd done. She would never forgive herself for being so stupid. "Which name? 'Elle' or 'spicy pepper'?"

Daniel grinned, invisible slime practically oozing from the corners of his mouth. "Either one? There were a few lovely evenings in my dorm room betwixt the sheets that I even christened you my 'hot mama.'"

"Grow up." Brielle turned around so Daniel wouldn't mistake the flush on her cheeks for embarrassment because she found him charming. It was rage, pure and simple, but he'd be too simple-minded to figure that out.

Daniel followed her down the stairs. "I'm going to graduation tomorrow!"

"That's nice," clipped Brielle.

"Don't you want to know why?" At the bottom of the stairs, Daniel grabbed her arm and tugged her back toward him. She slammed against a passing student and mumbled her apologies.

"No," said Brielle, ripping her arm free of his grip. "But I figured if you didn't have a reason, you'd be gone by now. Most underclassmen don't stick around for graduation weekend. Or did you miss the fact that classes ended because you never attend them anyway?"

"Ouch." Daniel gripped his heart mockingly again. "Spicy pepper strikes again."

"Shut up," said Brielle. She poked a finger at his chest. "No, seriously, just *shut up*. I don't care why you're still here or that you're going to tomorrow's ceremony. I'm just glad that you're not going to be in my life at all after tomorrow." Brielle hated the words as soon as they tumbled from her mouth. Daniel had this habit of getting under her skin, of causing her to explode and making it seem like he was constantly on her mind when he *wasn't*. Not at all. He just burrowed into her mind when he wouldn't get out of her way and kept pushing and pushing her until...

"My fiancée is graduating." Daniel's gaze roved over her face. He was probably looking for some sort of reaction.

He didn't get one. "Good for her."

"Aren't you wondering how I got a fiancée since we just broke up three months ago?"

"Nope." "Broke up" was generous. The second time was more like a fling. An ill-advised, stupid, stupid fling.

"Seriously?" Daniel scoffed, loudly enough to catch several passersby's attention. "You know, you're one coldhearted bitch."

Brielle laughed. “You’re the bigoted asshole, but I’m the coldhearted bitch?”

“Bigoted?” Daniel shook his head. “If I were bigoted, would I have even dated you?”

Brielle imagined herself wringing his neck and then took a deep breath. “Fine.” Brielle waved a hand in the air and turned around. “Whatever.”

“Case in point!” said Daniel tauntingly.

But thanks to the energy from the anger coursing through her veins, Brielle summoned her super speed and managed to ditch him before he was compelled to follow and torment her any further.

Too bad she couldn’t stop thinking about the asshole the entire rest of the day.

Order *Touch of Fondness*



Four friends. Four college grads. Four people figuring out that life doesn't always turn out the way you expected.

Brielle Reyes may not have post-college life planned out like some of her friends do, but she figures she'll work for her mother's home cleaning service while job hunting for something that makes use of her history and philosophy degrees. It'll work out as long as she doesn't fall in love. Her last relationship was a disaster and she has no idea where she'll be in a few weeks, let alone the rest of her life. Since the only guy in her age range she sees now on a regular basis is cantankerous if handsome client Archer Ward, she probably won't have a hard time sticking to that vow. Probably.

Archer Ward likes very few things: illustrating as a somewhat-celebrated comic artist and his privacy. When his meddling mother hires him a cleaning service on an almost daily basis because she doesn't fully trust her son to live on his own with his disability, he's at first annoyed—even if his house cleaner is the most beautiful woman he's ever spent more than a few minutes with. When he realizes her dreams may take her far outside of his restricted orbit, he has to decide whether to stifle his interest in her or risk messing up her plans to explore if there's something more between them.

Neither can deny they're growing a little fond of each other, even if falling in love just now makes no sense whatsoever. But how often does love ever make perfect sense?

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About the Author

Joy Penny writes books, devours stories, and geeks out about everything from classic romance books to manga. When she's not working as a freelance writer and book editor, she's probably immersed in her favorite TV shows, period dramas, and anime series. She also writes YA speculative fiction as [Amy McNulty](#), and one of her books, *Nobody's Goddess*, won The Romance Reviews' Summer 2016 Readers' Choice Award for Young Adult Romance.

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