



TOUCH of
HEARTACHE

Jay Penn

STAY IN TOUCH SERIES

TOUCH OF HEARTACHE: CHAPTER ONE SAMPLER

Stay in Touch

JOY PENNY



Touch of Heartache by Joy Penny

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CHAPTER ONE



Lilac had been sitting on her big news for days—well, more like hours, but it certainly felt like days. She’d wanted to tell Gavin almost immediately, but she hadn’t been in the mood for one of his mood-killing—though well-intentioned—lectures, and waiting until Brielle and Pembroke joined them seemed like the smarter idea. They’d act as a buffer for Gavin’s paternal instincts coming to fore and then she wouldn’t have to repeat herself to each one individually.

Besides, she wanted her college life to go out with a bang. And boy, would this be a bang.

She hadn’t eaten much of her farewell-cafeteria-food lunch. Instead, she opened her mouth, about to deliver the news, when she noticed Brielle staring down at her lunch tray as if it were the ashes of a recently-lost pet. “Are you crying?” she asked, the wind knocked out of her sails just a bit. “Bri, are you actually *crying*?”

Laughing, she looked at Gavin and Pembroke, hoping to share her amusement with them, but one was blowing his nose and the other was trying to touch up her makeup. *Okay, everyone is crying...*

“Just because some of us are made of stone doesn’t mean the rest of us aren’t going to miss this place,” said Brielle, her mouth full of a tater tot she was chomping with *way* too much relish.

Sometimes Brielle really got on Lilac's nerves. But not today. No, she wouldn't let her get to her today.

"A college is but four walls and a roof, my dear," Lilac said, putting some of her high school drama teacher's advice into effect by gesturing grandly as if about to deliver a Shakespearean monologue. "Albeit four very *expensive* walls and a roof, but walls and a roof nonetheless. No graduation is going to take away what this place means to you." She put her palm to her heart. "You'll always find it here."

Gavin gave Lilac such a mischievous grin at that, she could have recited what he said next if she'd been so inclined. "In your ginormous boob?" he asked.

"Har har," retorted Lilac, whapping his shoulder. Gavin was the only one she'd ever let get away with talking to her like that. He had a heart of gold and was as sweet as a grandma—to everyone except her. But that's why she knew she was his best friend. Suddenly hit with the realization that she wasn't going to be seeing her bestie every day from now on, she started playing with her food, mushing the greasy tater tots into one corner of her tray. *It doesn't matter, she thought. This is just how life goes. We'll never not be friends. You can't get stuck in the past.*

She nodded to herself more than to anyone in particular. "I don't know. 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?"

"Says the soon-to-be elementary school teacher," said Brielle between sips of her orange juice. "Get used to these," she added, pointing to the crumbs left in the squares on her tray.

Ha! The perfect segue. Thank you, Brielle's need to rub things in.

Lilac shrugged. "Maybe someday. Maybe not. I don't have to anytime soon."

Pembroke spoke up then—Lilac had almost forgotten she was even there. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Aren't you going to be teaching at Jacobson Primary this fall?"

“Nope.” Lilac dug into her scrambled eggs with glee. *Let them chew on that*, she thought, taking her time to swallow her food.

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

“Would I joke about something like that?” Lilac grinned, doing her best toddler-caught-breaking-Mommy’s-favorite-lamp impression. Then she laughed. *On second thought...* “Don’t answer that.”

Brielle practically threw her fork down on her tray before crossing her arms. “When were you going to tell us?”

Ah, Brielle. She’d been Lilac’s roommate the first two years of college before Lilac had spent a semester her junior year in Spain. When she’d come back, she’d wheedled her daddy into splurging on an apartment off-campus for her and Gavin. Not because she hated Brielle or anything, but because she’d preferred spending time with Gavin. And frankly, after she’d come home from living in another corner of the world, Gavin—with his broader horizons, his love for big cities—had seemed like more sophisticated company.

Brielle cradled her head. *Cradled* her head. Like what Lilac did was any concern of hers. And what was *she* planning on doing that was evidence she had her life any more together than the rest of them? Job hunting. While working her high school job, cleaning for old folks and snobs with cash to burn and slobs too lazy to do it for themselves. True, Lilac’s mom and daddy usually hired cleaners after throwing one of their soirees or when they’d be gone for a while—which was pretty often. But there was something about having strangers going through your house on that kind of intimate level that gave Lilac the willies. But that was what Brielle had to show for herself. Going through other peoples’ garbage.

“Don’t have a conniption over it,” said Lilac, shrugging as she gently placed her own fork on the table. “Something better came along.”

“Better than a job offer?” asked Gavin, studying Lilac like she had a screw loose, but grinning devilishly nonetheless. He knew her too well. He might not have approved of everything she did, but... “A *paying* firm

job offer, I might add?”

Therein lay the crux of the matter. Sweet Gavin, smart and handsome and ready to take on the world... But the world wasn't so ready to take him on. He'd gotten what could lead to the job of his dreams—in marketing, which, if she were being honest, Lilac thought dull and a waste of his talents—but he had to start off as an unpaid intern. If Gavin hadn't already known some friends in Chicago whose couch he could crash on until he started raking in the big bucks, there was no way he could have pulled it off. All because he was gambling on being hired by summer's end. He had nothing to fall back on, no one else to turn to if that didn't pan out. There was his grandma, but she lived in such a small town, Lilac had thought she'd phased through into another dimension—a dimension where people dug holes and only peeked out from under their rocks to spit out a strange sense of pride in their vitriol and hatred—the one time she'd gone with him there. Even though Gavin's grandma was a peach, there was no way Lilac would abandon Gavin to that place once more. No, if things didn't work out how Gavin hoped they would, she'd find a way to let him come stay with her and Aunt Frankie.

Clearing her throat, Lilac tapped her fingers on the table, trying to shove all thoughts of unpleasantness aside. “I repeat: Something better.”

“Did you... get a job offer abroad?” Pembroke didn't even try to hide her gasp as Lilac snorted.

Poor girl. Lilac knew Pembroke had been envious of her time in Spain—not because she'd wanted to go to Spain, but because her own plans to study abroad in Japan had fallen through. Lilac really had no idea what Pembroke planned on doing—that girl was quieter than a nun who'd taken a vow of silence. She didn't even remember how exactly Broke had started hanging out with their group. It had had something to do with Gavin, of course. Easily two-thirds of Gavin's day was devoted to taking care of others. Sometimes Lilac hated the fact that she had to share him.

“I *wish*,” she said, thinking about how nice it might have been to live in Spain long-term—or to live anywhere stylish, really. But she'd only

ever pictured herself lounging around in a Spanish villa, and Daddy had been quite clear he wasn't going to fund an extended vacation. As if he ever did anything *but* go on extended vacations himself. "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."

There. She'd said it. The whole and honest truth she'd been keeping even from herself for far too long.

Leave it to Brielle to shit all over that. "You're not going to be an elementary school teacher?" she asked, the acid practically dripping off her tongue. "After all the hard work you put into becoming one?"

"Maybe I wished I'd have taken a cue from you," Lilac said, forcing some friendliness she didn't feel at that moment into her tone. She loved Brielle—she really did. But sometimes... "And had studied something more useless so I didn't have to spend so much time in training and studying for my license."

"*Lilac*," said Gavin. He darted his gaze away and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe Lilac had gone so low.

But it was true. Brielle had a history *and* a philosophy major, and what was she going to do with those degrees? *Nada*, apparently.

Brielle bit her lip and kept quiet, a glaze covering her eyes. Lilac had gotten her right in the gonads—metaphorically, of course.

"I'm serious," said Lilac, her defensive shields lowering somewhat. "All that wasted time just showed me... I'm not cut out to be a teacher."

"That's not true!" Pembroke spoke up again, and Lilac smiled. She was sweet, for sure, although she couldn't remember if Broke had even seen Lilac around kids much. She might have, though. Basically, anytime Lilac was around kids, she got into a zone and the whole world around her melted away. Time flew by alarmingly fast between breaking up fights over toy cars and dispensing hugs on demand.

"That's nice of you to say, sweet pea," said Lilac, ready to finally drop the big news. "But wait until you hear what I'm going to be doing

instead." Shoving her tray aside, she leaned forward, as if ready to drop the juiciest piece of gossip imaginable. Only Gavin and Pembroke took the bait, though Brielle's eyes were still on her. "I'm. Going. To. Tildy. World," said Lilac, injecting pride into each word.

Brielle looked as if she'd been struck. "Wait, what?"

Yeah, yeah, it's not Disney World, thought Lilac, already ready to defend her choice. Growing up as a Tildy Tapir fan, Lilac knew just how rare it was to find someone who appreciated the happy-go-lucky cartoon tapir with quite the same fervor she did. All the other Orlando theme parks had nothing on Tildy World, small as it might be. She didn't care what her friends thought.

"Doesn't your aunt live in Orlando?" asked Gavin. Aunt Frankie and Gavin had hit it off big the few times they'd both been over to her parents' for a get-together. Two souls in harmony, like peanut butter and jelly.

"She does!" said Lilac. "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."

Pembroke tucked a strand of her blue-streaked blonde hair behind her ears as she stared at Lilac, clearly completely lost. "But... are you going to be on vacation for *that* long?"

Okay, this was taking more to explain than Lilac had thought necessary. "It's not a vacation," she said, sighing and shrugging at once. "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." Lilac threw her hands up, ready to lay it all on the table. "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 rotated her hand to gesture to herself. "I became available in an instant."

Maybe she didn't want to have any regrets. Was that so hard for her friends to believe? Something sharp tugged beneath her breastbone, a

little voice at the back of her head telling her she was headed for disaster.

“They hired you as an *assistant manager*?” asked Brielle, oblivious to Lilac’s attempts to squash her own regrets. “Right out of college? With a degree that has nothing to do with running a hotel at all?”

Lilac smiled. Brielle of little faith. “What can I say? I’m a charming interviewee, even over Skype.”

She paused, taking in the scene around her. *Okay, is everyone at this table now staring at my breasts?*

Lilac was no stranger to people staring at her double-Ds, but she expected more from her friends of all people. She cleared her throat, eager to stop associating her figure with her success. She’d worked hard at preparing for that interview, even if—especially since—it had all been last-minute. “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 made a face like he’d just sniffed sour milk. “You’re working for a guy named Earl. *Earl.*”

Lilac dismissed him, waving 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, injecting something sly into his words. “There’s just something ominous about a guy named Earl.”

“I’ll behave,” said Lilac, smacking her fist into his shoulder. “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,” said Gavin, that beleaguered-dad-about-to-lecture tone in his voice clearer than ever. He exchanged a look with Brielle and something silent passed between them, as if they’d spoken about Lilac and men many times before.

They probably had, the traitors. Gavin better not have told her that Lilac’s tastes usually strayed toward the older gentleman. In theory anyway, if not in practice yet. But not this guy regardless. Charming, he

wasn't.

"Stop being such a drama queen," said Lilac. "So *anyway*, enough about me." *Time to steer the conversation away. Far away.* She wasn't going to end her college experience arguing with her closest friends about things that didn't even really concern them. "Pem, what about you? I know Brielle's got a plan for the summer until she finds that *amazing job* that awaits her, but you've never let us know what you have planned. Did you ever find anything?"

Cue Pembroke shutdown. "No. Not really."

"What?" said Gavin, clearly surprised but still gentle. "A catch like you, with honors in biology? There wasn't any lab or something that would take you?"

Staring at her lunch tray like it was her toast that had posed the question, Pembroke shrugged. "Nothing local, anyway."

Ah. Pembroke had been a commuter—a resident of this college town since the day she'd been born. Japan had been her one shot at widening her horizons just a bit. But even now, as she was about to cross that stage tomorrow and graduate college, she apparently had no interest in broadening her horizons. Lilac never could understand people like that. "And you can't move because...?"

Pembroke snapped her eyes up at that. "I didn't apply to any jobs outside the area," she said curtly, as if that were the end of it.

Gavin wouldn't let her shut the conversation down. "Well, maybe you can think about med school or nursing school. They need medical professionals everywhere."

Lilac couldn't picture Pembroke as a doctor or a nurse—she had no personality to speak of. She knew Brielle and Pembroke bonded over all their TV shows and geeky movies, but she had never gotten into that herself, so she hadn't been able to follow along. Still, those types of conversations seemed to be the only reason Pembroke ever came to life. Little help that would be in a medical emergency, though.

Pembroke nodded and Lilac decided to throw her a bone and pivot

the discussion. “Well, good luck with whatever you decide.” She was more certain than ever now that she’d made the right decision. Sure, Minnesota was still a new place to move to, but Florida? Beaches and sunbathing, year-round heat and the cuddly cute tapir named Tildy. She was going to be living the dream—her childhood dream come true.

Gavin mumbled something about “trouble at 3:00,” and Lilac’s feet floated back to the floor. “Is it 3:00 already? I thought all our parents weren’t coming until after dinner anyway.” They were all coming for one last hurrah, a grade-wide graduation dinner and campus tour followed by the ceremony tomorrow morning.

Brielle jumped to her feet, her attention drawn over her shoulder. “Right. Thanks for the heads-up. See you guys tomorrow!” She gathered up her tray and left.

Lilac supposed Brielle might be so busy with her mom and sister’s arrival that she hadn’t planned to sit with them at dinner. All the better. Both sets of Lilac’s grandparents were coming and she knew that between them, her parents, and Gavin and his grandma, there wouldn’t be room for any more.

“I hate that guy,” said Gavin, wiping his hands with his napkin and shaking his head.

“What guy?” asked Lilac.

Gavin nodded in Brielle’s direction and Lilac witnessed Brielle storming off angrily toward the cafeteria doors with a lanky, gangly guy in a Hershey’s T-shirt hot on her tail. “Oh. The ex?” said Lilac, only half-sure.

“Daniel...” said Pembroke, who stared a *little* too intensely after them as they vanished from sight. *Ew*, thought Lilac. Was Pembroke—*Pembroke* of all people, who hadn’t so much as glanced at a boy in all her four years here—checking out that skin-and-bones jerk? That made for two women in Lilac’s circle with no taste. Not to mention, he was younger than them. Not her type at all. All her college relationships had been short and sweet—they’d scratched an itch, but they hadn’t really

done much for her. But seeing as how the only older men in her social circle here were professors—which, *no*, despite any leers she may have detected coming from that way on occasion—it had been frat boys with commitment issues or nothing. Good thing she hadn't cared about any of them committing.

"Why can't he leave her alone? Honestly." Gavin let out a breath as if Brielle's love life affected him deeply. "He's such an asshole."

Pembroke's face flushed and she stood, gathering her own tray. "Yeah," she said, almost as an afterthought. "So I... I'm going to get ready for my dad," she added, not meeting either Gavin's or Lilac's eyes.

"See you later, sweetie," said Gavin, as if she were a kindergartner. Not that Lilac could blame him. She often found herself acting like the tiny blonde-with-blue-streaks was a kid as well.

"Bye," said Lilac, and Pembroke mumbled her farewells before retreating to the dishwashing station to deposit her things.

"So," said Gavin, inching his chair back so he could pivot to face Lilac entirely, one elbow on the back of the chair, his other hand clasping his wrist.

"So," said Lilac, grinning and echoing his posture.

Gavin batted his eyelashes. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I just did."

"Yeah, you *sprung* it on me. That's cold, Li."

Lilac pouted. "I just didn't want to repeat myself," she said, then turned to say, "*¡Hola! ¡Felicitaciones!*" to a couple of other senior girls from her advanced Spanish classes who'd walked by and wished her the same.

Gavin rolled his eyes at her as he waved and smiled at a group of guys and girls who sat down a table away. "Lilac Townsend, a woman of few words. Hates to have to repeat herself—especially when it comes to juicy gossip." He didn't drop the friendly, greeting smile off his face or even turn to look at Lilac the entire time he spoke.

"Stuff it," said Lilac, who went to playfully slug his arm. Instead, she

gave him a big hug. "I'm going to miss you, Gavvy." She'd never call him that in front of the others. It was too embarrassing. But whenever she was alone with Gavin, she could feel her defenses melting.

"I'll miss you," said Gavin, running a gentle hand down the length of her blonde hair. It came down to her mid-back when not tied up, though she usually preferred a bun. Today she hadn't been dressed to impress. Just her school sweatshirt and pajama pants. She'd look smarter by the time her family arrived. The family who had shaken their heads and sighed but had all said, "That's our Li" when she'd told them about Florida, as if "impulsive" and "reckless" were her middle names. Grandma Violet had put the blame all on "Daisy Francesca," or "Aunt Frankie," as she preferred Lilac to call her (she insisted so because she wanted to buck the Townsend-women-flower tradition), who had always been a wild, impetuous child, as her grandparents liked to remind her. Lilac liked that about Frankie, though.

"Am I... doing the right thing?" asked Lilac, almost afraid to ask.

"You're asking me *now*?" said Gavin, a hint of humor beneath his words. "Now that you've already gone and committed to it?" He winced as he said that, as if remembering that she'd committed to Minnesota, too, and he grabbed her by the upper arms, pushing her gently away. "Have you committed?"

"It's all done," said Lilac, struggling to meet his eyes. "I've burned my bridges in Minnesota—they weren't happy to have to scramble to find someone else, and then there was the matter of the educational grant they'd offered me for taking the job last year, but Daddy paid it back and then some—and I have my plane ticket. I'm leaving Monday morning."

"So you've known about this new job for a while," said Gavin, pinching his lips into a straight line.

"No," said Lilac, honestly. "It all went down yesterday."

"Li," said Gavin, shaking his head. "That's... Wow."

Lilac pulled away from him. "I knew you wouldn't approve."

"What do you care if I approve or not?" There wasn't a hint of anger

in his words—in fact, there was encouragement more than anything. “You have to do you, Lilac.”

“This *is* me,” said Lilac. She dared to look back at Gavin and he didn’t seem angry or shocked or anything. This was why he was her best friend.

“Then you go be you,” said Gavin. He smiled. “And clear me some room on Frankie’s couch because the second I have some free time, I want to work on my tan alongside you.”

Lilac bopped his nose with one French-manicured finger. “You can sunbathe with me, but I’m going to slather you with sunscreen,” she said. “Melanoma, remember?”

Gavin laughed. “You think I’m going to be on a sunny, Florida beach and let *you* slather sunscreen on me?” Shaking his head, he grinned deviously. “I’m going to bump into my true love there and ever-so-innocently ask *him* for help reaching my back, thank you very much.”

Lilac chuckled and wiped her eyes, realizing tears had started to form there. “All right,” she said. “But he better have a hot, single father who’ll lather me up too.”

“No thank you and ew,” said Gavin, shaking his head. “You and your daddy issues...”

“Don’t call my taste in men that!” Lilac shuddered. “Especially when I’m going to see Daddy today.” She paused. “Okay, don’t say anything about me saying *Daddy*,” she added, knowing full well how calling her dad “Daddy” creeped Gavin out. But she couldn’t help it. Daddy had always been “Daddy” to her.

They stared at one another, a silent showdown, each waiting for the other to comment further. Then they both laughed. Leave it to Gavin to boost Lilac’s mood, to help her shove those doubts all the way deep down where they belonged.

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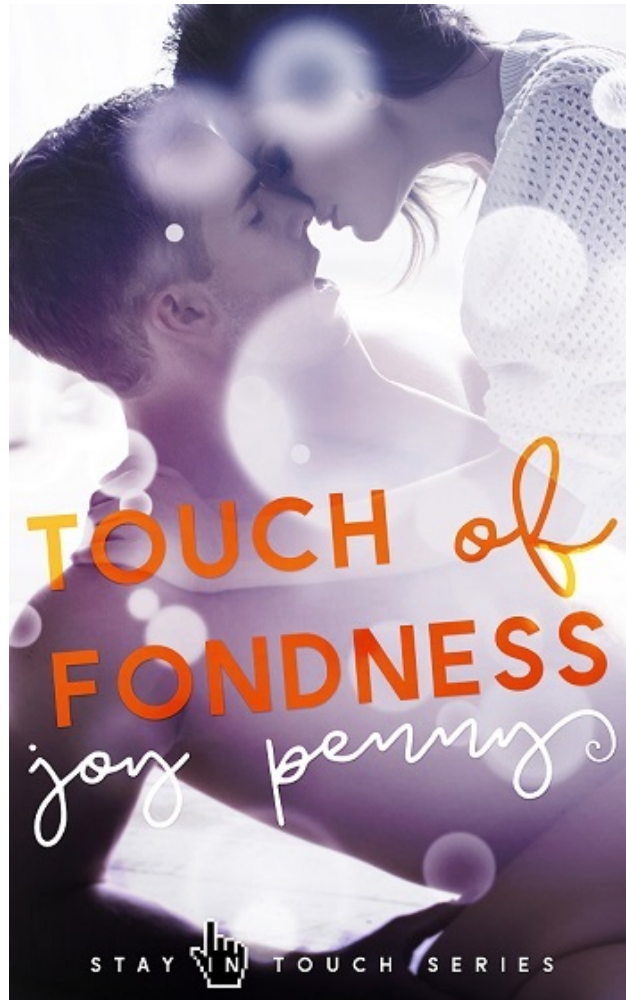
Just weeks before graduating, Lilac Townsend throws away her elementary school teacher job offer in Minnesota to work in Florida at the official resort of her favorite vacation spot, Tildy World. Pushing down

all second thoughts, she fills her mind with visions of sunny beaches and Tildy Tapir, the cartoon character who always promised to make her childhood dreams come true. Unfortunately, between a sleazy boss and a community college student in a character suit who manages to fray her last nerve, Lilac soon learns that working behind the scenes at the park is hardly “happily ever after.”

Nolan Gregosky had plans after graduating high school a few years back: go to college, join a fraternity, and make some memories before earning a degree. Instead, tragedy sidelined those dreams, but his job posing for pictures with drooling, snot-nosed kids as Silly Sandgrouse gives him a chance to unload some pent-up energy. When the stunning but uptight new assistant manager at the resort proves a distraction in more ways than one, Nolan realizes it's up to him to show her what it means to eat, live, and breathe life at the park.

A relationship at this unsteady stage of their lives might not be the brightest idea for either of them, but it's hard to ignore that tingling sensation whenever the paths of this plush-suit beast and naïve beauty collide.

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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.

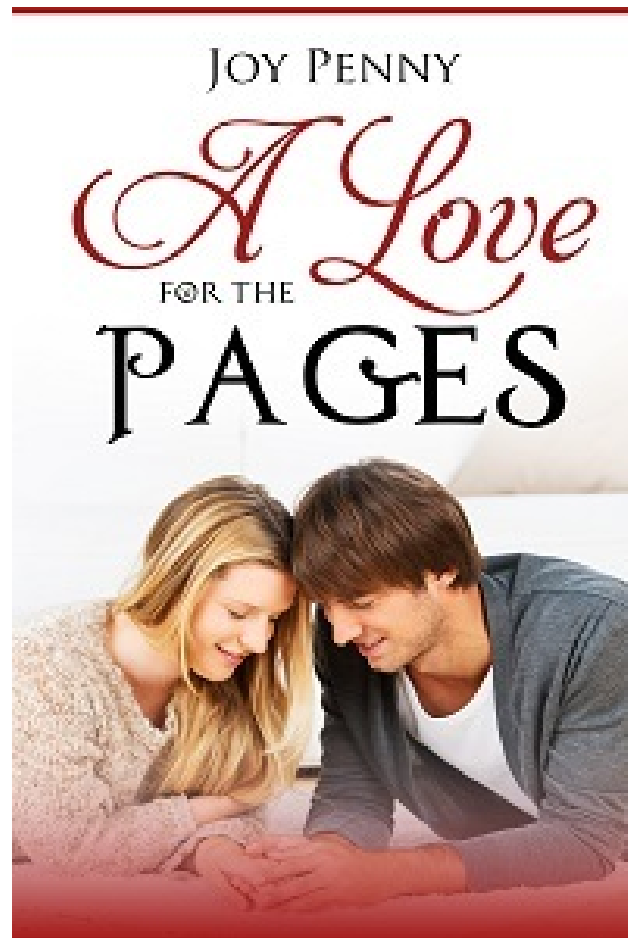
Archer Ward likes very few things: illustrating as a somewhat-celebrated comic artist and his privacy. When his meddling mother hires him a cleaning service on an almost daily basis because she doesn't fully trust her son to live on his own with his disability, he's at first annoyed—even if his house 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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A LOVE FOR THE PAGES

Also by Joy Penny



Kiss. Marry. Kill. Nineteen-year-old June Eyermann has always known exactly which of her favorite Byronic heroes goes where. She'd kiss moody and possessive Rochester from *Jane Eyre* and marry prideful but

repentant Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*, leaving obsessive and spiteful Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* to be chucked off a cliff—but no. She couldn't leave any of her heroes behind. She lives for her favorite fictional worlds.

But June is about to get a serious wake up call when she returns home for the summer after her college freshman year. Stuck somewhere between feeling like a kid again under her parents' roof and being forced to start acting like an adult with worries about her future career, June looks at the library volunteer position offered to her as a way to keep her sanity for the next few months before she can go back to school.

What June doesn't expect to find at the library is her favorite romantic heroes brought to life—all in the same man. Obstinate, prideful and even a bit rude, Everett Rockford shouldn't exactly be "dating material," even if June's heart rate accelerates whenever she's near him. But after discovering his enigmatic past and witnessing a few fiery moments of tenderness, June can't help but see Rochester, Darcy and even Heathcliff in Everett. If she's going to make it through the summer without becoming a tragic heroine in her own story, she has to separate the man from the ideals of fiction in her head. Because if there's one thing she knows about Byronic love stories, it's that they don't always end happily ever after.

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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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