

sync

ellen hopkins



Nancy Paulsen Books

NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS

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[Dedication t.k.]

STORM

ARE YOU SAFE TONIGHT, LAKE?

It's my job to keep you that way.
I decided that when we were three.
I remember like it was yesterday,
now almost fourteen years ago.

We were locked in the closet.
Shivering fear. Every time we heard
Beverly's footsteps outside the door
we'd shrink against the wall.

You got so scared you started
to hiccup. I put my arm around
your shoulder. "I'll protect you," I said.
"It's my job. I'm your big brother."

You whispered we were twins.
That made us the same age.
"No," I argued. "I came out
first. That makes me older."

Sometimes memories like that float
from the depths of my brain,
ascend like buoys before
submerging and sinking again.

I try to write them down, pass
them on to you so I'm sure
you won't forget about me,
understand how much I miss you.

It's our birthday eve. We turn

seventeen tomorrow. So of course
you're on my mind. It's the last day

of August. Senior year just started.

I have no clue where you are,
or how long you've been there.
New foster placement? Long time?
My gut tells me you're not too far away.

I hear from you when our caseworkers
manage to intersect paths, pass on
letters or cards. But it's been five
long years since we shared a home.

Well, unless you count that one time
Mom decided we should reunite.
That experiment lasted three weeks.
Honestly, longer than expected.

It was enough time for you
and me to forge our sync again.
Remember how we called it that—
the way our thoughts seemed synchronized?

I wonder which high school you go to.
Do you think, over the years,
we were ever at the same football
game, rooting for opposite teams?

Do you even watch football?
Maybe you're more into basketball
or totally hate sports. Does nurture
trump our shared nature?

Are you still acing your classes?
Despite all the crap in our childhood,
you vowed to succeed in school
find a way to live your dreams.

I'm afraid dreaming is a fool's game
I quit, cold turkey, years ago.
Gambling on dreams successfully
requires belief in tomorrow.

I can
barely
hold on
to today.

STRAIGHT UP

I programmed myself
to stop dreaming at night
after the last nightmare.

It was one of those
where you're running
and running and running
because someone's chasing you.
You don't know who, or why,
only that they want to hurt you.

No place to hide.
No one to turn to.
No help at all.

So you run.
Footsteps behind.
Closing in.
Don't turn to look.
Just get away.

The dream was a rerun.
Only this time
someone catches me,
and when I turn,
the grimacing stranger
claims he is my dad.

I've never met my father.
Have no clue who he is.

Occasionally, in deep of night
musings, I wonder if he
could be responsible

for the person I've become.

Is there a genetic lean
toward lockup?

I'VE BEEN LOCKED UP BEFORE

And I'm relatively sure
it will happen again.
Don't know when or why.
But it's waiting for me.
I've never expected
anything else.

Some people
are born marked
by fate, time-stamped
by destinies
beyond their control.

Life never offered
me many choices.
I've been prodded
toward trouble
by people I've known
and by total strangers.

My only decisions
seemed to be how low
I was willing to go
and whether to take
someone with me.

So, no.
I've never believed
in some fairy-tale future.
But I've always hoped
for happiness.

I've found a small
measure recently, with

my current foster, Jim.
Not only is he decent,
but he's cool with me
seeing Jaidyn, who lifts
the storm clouds
and lets her light in.

But I'll never feel whole
without my sister.

It's like a piece of me
has been excised,
carved out of my heart,
hidden away. If I find
it again someday,
can it be reattached?

When we were little,
we mostly only had each other.
We grew up without many friends.

Who'd want to hang out with us?

They could see it
in our thirdhand clothes,
in our unwashed hair,
in our vacant eyes.

I swear mothers would shoo
their kids across the street
to avoid passing us on the sidewalk.
As if neglect was contagious.

We were untethered.

Until the system anchored

us, "for our own good."

Maybe it was.

Maybe it wasn't.

How would we ever know?

MOM WAS HAPPY

The caseworker took us away.

I remember Mom leaning
against the building, relief
in her slanted smile.

Devin wouldn't let her inside

while he stuffed our clothes
in black garbage bags, told us
to grab our toothbrushes.

We were hurt. Confused.

Oh, we knew why we were
being removed, why the school
counselor called the police.

It wasn't how thin we were.

No one ever noticed that. No.
It was the fist prints we wore
on our skin like tattoos.

But at ten, that was our life.

Mom went after us from time
to time, but mostly it was Beverly.
She didn't like to be called Grandma.

Beverly watched us when Mom worked.

They traded shifts at the club
where they "danced." That's what

they called taking off their clothes.

Yes, our grandmother stripped, too.

That might seem weird, but she was
only sixteen when she had Mom,
who was seventeen when we were born.

Fortyish strippers get day shifts.

Mom got nights, which was better
for her bank account, but not
so great for my sister and me.

Beverly drank at night.

Sometimes that was good.
If she passed out in her recliner,
we could raid the refrigerator.

We were always hungry.

Other times, something would
set her off—a dish, left on a table,
a stray sock, a random whim.

She always came for Lake first.

I was her brother, I swore
I'd protect her. I managed
to save her a bruise or two.

Mom pretended she didn't see.

But she just didn't care enough
to stop it. So maybe that's why

she didn't bother to say goodbye.

THAT IS BRANDED INTO MEMORY

Mom stood there, just outside,
under the eaves, dodging
the steady bullets of rain.

She looked down at us
with frosted-glass eyes.

“Mom?”

One three-letter word.
That was my entreaty,
not that it mattered.

It's for the best, she said.

I turned my back
on my mother,
like she'd turned hers
on my sister and me.

Devin loaded us into
the back seat
of his ugly white car.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

*To my office for now. We're looking
for someone who can take the two
of you for a couple of days.*

Then we can go home?

*No, Lake. Not for a while.
But we need keep you safe*

until we secure a longer placement.

Placement.

It was the first time

we heard that word.

It wouldn't be the last.

THE TOYS

In Devin's office were meant
for littler kids, so he put on
a Disney movie while he made
about a hundred phone calls.

Finally, success.
We drove across the city
to a little house with a broken
fence around a potholed yard.

Inside, the place was neat,
but threadbare. The furniture
looked overused, and the carpet
needed to be replaced.

But Kelly, the lady who lived
there, was pretty nice. She held
a baby, and a girl, who was
maybe three, clung to her pant leg.

*Come in, come in, she said.
Bet you're hungry, huh?*

It was almost eight
by then. I took a chance
that she'd really feed us
and said, "I'm starving."

Lake didn't say anything,
but she ate every bite
of the chicken nuggets
and Tater Tots Kelly cooked.

After we ate, Kelly made

us take showers
and brush our teeth,
then she put us to bed.

*I'm not really supposed
to let you sleep in the same
room, she told us. But since
this is an emergency placement,
I think I can make an exception.*

What about school?

Lake was always worried
about being late and was
proud of her zero absences.

*No school for you until
we settle you in somewhere
more permanent, I'm afraid.*

*Will we go to the same one?
And who will tell my teacher?*

*I don't know if you'll go to
the same school, but someone
will tell your teacher, okay?*

Nothing would be the same
after that day. Nothing at all.

There were two beds, but once
the lights were out, I pulled
my blanket and pillow over
next to Lake's, slept on the floor.

It was always my job

to keep her safe.

TWO DAYS LATER

Lake and I, aged almost eleven,
moved in with Molly and Pete,
their daughter, Alora, and Rex,
the best dog in the universe.

The Whittingtons made us
feel like we belonged
in a storybook family.

A mom who baked.
A dad who mowed the grass.
A big sister who helped with home-
work.
A K9 who aced tricks.

Too bad, like anything too good
to be true, it didn't last longer.
Too bad it was the first step
toward our separation,
not that we knew it then.

I learned a few things
while we lived there.

I love amusement parks.
I prefer dogs to most people I've met.
Maybe I have a talent or two.
Including debate, something previously
denied me.

Pete sometimes told me
I should be a lawyer
because I argued so much,
and more than once

I actually won.

It was the happiest year
of our lives, or at least
it was for me, right up until
I moved in here with Jim.

JIM'S OLD-GUY COOL

Smart, without acting
like he knows everything.
Kind of quiet, but funny
as hell when he does talk.

He used to be a reporter
for the *San Francisco Chronicle*,
“back when writing for a newspaper
was a dignified profession.”

Started fostering with his wife,
and when Brenda died, he kept
right on caring for hard kids like me.

I try not to get in his face.
In the almost year since
I've been here, we've only
gotten into it a couple of times.

I've been working on my temper,
but once in a while, I lose it.
Jim doesn't back down, but neither
does he threaten to send me packing.

He's good about handing over
my monthly allowance, and even
gave me a phone, the first foster
who's ever been that generous.

Plus, he's got a dog.
Not a great dog like Rex.
Morley is a cocker mix, more
couch surfer than ball fetcher.
But he's okay to watch TV with.

And he wags his tail when
I come through the door.

And the fact that Jim
takes excellent care of Morley
makes me respect him more.

BETWEEN THE WHITTINGTONS AND JIM

Came several years.
Several placements.
Including the one
right after Mom's failed
attempt at reunification.

What I witnessed there
taught me justice
isn't weighed with a balanced scale.

It was a random placement,
one I knew right away would be
transient. Too many boys—six—
with a single house parent,
a squirrely dude named Russ.

One day I found this guy
Sammy rifling through my stuff.
Wouldn't have minded
much if it was only my clothes.

But he'd opened the envelope
of pics I kept, my only solid reminders
of Lake and Molly, Pete and Rex,
who I missed almost as much
as my sister. Rage mushroomed.

Sammy was bigger, but I lit
into him. I connected a punch
or two, and so did he.
Russ broke us apart, could've left
it there. Instead, he called the cops.

My first lockup was sixty days.

I was officially a “problem kid.”

THE PROBLEM

With locking up a “problem kid”
is you grow up real fast
in “residential placement.”
That’s a pleasant-sounding
term for juvenile jail.

First-time offenders
with real parents who care
might wind up on probation.

Without them, chances
are you’ll end up killing
time behind bolted doors
and plexiglass windows,
like animals at the zoo.

And like them, you pace,
think way too much
about all the wrong things,
or seek ways to relieve
the boredom, too many
of which aren’t healthy.

You could walk on out
of there in better shape
than when you arrived.

But it’s likelier you’ll tumble
straight down into the repeat
offender gopher tunnel.

(Some visual, huh?)

Mostly because of the other

stuff you'll learn, if you didn't
already know it.

I hope none of this has touched
my sister. I hope it never will.
It's way too late for me.

AGE THIRTEEN

First time in lockup, I learned
the Five Commandments.

One:

Mind your own fucking business.

Whatever you see,

Whatever you hear.

Look away, plug your ears.

Two:

If trouble knocks, answer the door.

Don't run. Don't hide.

Make no excuses.

Wade straight on in, fists flying.

Three:

It's easier to get by when high.

Scoring meds in lockup requires acting.

Act edgy. Like you can't focus.

Pretend you just might pounce.

Four:

Almost anything can be a weapon.

If it can poke you. Slice you.

Even a book, if it's heavy
enough, can cause severe damage.

Five:

Trust absolutely no one.

Not your fellow detainees.

Not the guards or social workers.

And not the judges who are supposed
to dispense justice with an even hand.

Clue for the clueless: they don't.

POST DETENTION

Count on a new placement.
It won't be decent.
Not for a problem kid.
Not even if he's only thirteen.

I knew I was in trouble
when my caseworker, Pam,
wouldn't look me in the eye
on our ride to the condo-from-hell.

I got out of her car, eyed
the listing stairs, littered
with cigarette butts and
pigeon shit. What kind of foster
parent lived in a place like that?

It's temporary, okay?

"They're all temporary."

I mean, short term. It's difficult . . .

"Yeah, yeah. I get it."

I did. But still I was not totally
prepared for a stand-in
"father" like Desmond.

He was an ex-marine
(picture soldier buff, gone
flabby) surviving on disability
and whatever money
he could make from the state,
taking in hard-core strays.

Boys like me.

I WAS THE ONLY ONE THERE

Which was good, since
his “apartment” was more
like one big ratty room
with a curtained-off “bedroom,”
and a bathroom the size of a closet.

The fridge worked, and so did
the hotplate and microwave.
But the chipped kitchen table
served as Desmond’s office.
We ate on TV trays sitting
on the sectional sofa I also slept on.

I guess social services looked
the other way, if they bothered
to open their eyes at all.
Seems doubtful because Desmond
was a scammer, cruising dating sites
targeting hungry older women.

He claimed to be deployed overseas,
and the unretouched photo he sent them
was actually him in his uniform, fifty
pounds lighter and twenty years younger.

He played them patiently.
Convinced them a lonely marine
half their age was crazy about them.
Once they were totally hooked,
he’d reel them in with more lies.

Tell them he took leave
and was on his way to see them.
Except he got rolled.

Lost every damn thing.
If they could just send him
a prepaid Visa, he'd reimburse
them with his next paycheck.

Unbelievably, it worked every time.

I was not supposed to know
that, of course, but for a con,
Desmond wasn't exactly careful.
He'd leave his computer on,
chat windows wide open,
while he took a pee or grabbed a beer.

He was also a little deaf,
thanks to previous proximity
to artillery fire. That made
his "private conversations" a bit
louder than he might have preferred.

Honestly, I didn't care.
In fact, I took notes.
Who knew when I might
need a little leverage?

As for the women, I figured anyone
gullible enough to fall for Desmond's
routine deserved what they got.
The idea that they might love him
seemed like a terrible joke.

The only love I'd experienced
was what I felt for Lake.
And maybe something close with Rex.

Sister love.

Dog love.
And look what it got me.

Pain.
Tears.
Loneliness.
Resentment.

No, I never believed
in the power of love.
Until Jaidyn.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US

How I wish Storm and I
were blowing out candles
on the same birthday cake
or opening presents together.

Not sure about my brother,
whose current circumstances
I can't even guess, but there will be
no gifts nor special desserts for me.
Not here with Colleen and Jay.

They are uber religious.
Like, the kind who hang
Jesus pictures all over
the house and say grace
for twenty minutes,
and insist we go to church
every Sunday.

Beyond all that, they believe
the only "birthday"
that should be celebrated
is Christmas. With worship.

They're at Bible study right
now. On Saturday.
Leaving me alone in my room
(where did Parker run off to?)
with a mountain of memories.

I remember when we turned
twelve. Molly and Pete threw
a party for Storm and me.
It was the second birthday

we celebrated there,
in the best foster home ever.

WHEN WE FIRST ARRIVED

We were freaking out.
Storm didn't show it, but
my whole body shook.

We didn't even know
if living there would be
better or worse than
surviving at home.

Our caseworker—can't think
of his name, but he was this
big guy, with skin the color
of milky oatmeal—walked
us through the front door,
gave Pete our stuff, and that
was the last time we ever saw him.

Molly came over, extended
her hand. Storm figured out
we were supposed to shake it.

*I'm Molly. Welcome to our home.
And now it's your home, too.*

It sounded like bullshit.
Who expected strangers to believe
they'd fit right in?

We didn't know what to do
or say, so we just stood there.

Finally, Pete cleared his throat.
*Let's take your things to your rooms.
Then you can meet the rest of the family.*

"We can't stay together?"

I already knew the answer.

*Afraid not, said Molly. It's against
foster care regulations for boys and
girls to sleep in the same bedroom.*

*You'll share a room with our daughter,
Alora. And Storm will have a place
all to himself for the time being.*

We followed Molly and Pete
down a long hallway. Molly pointed
to a bathroom we'd share with Alora.

The white porcelain fixtures
and cream-colored tile
were spotless. Not a hint
of mildew or pee or dirt.

Next stop: Storm's room.
It wasn't big, but it had two beds.

Pick one, Molly said.

When Storm chose the one
by the window, Pete dropped
his bag on the opposite bed.

Suddenly, there were scratchy
noises and in bounded a big, fluffy
golden-furred dog, all sniffy
and waggy and happy.

Easy, Rex, said Pete.

The dog ignored me,
but went straight over
and sat on Storm's feet.
He reached down and stroked
the retriever's face.

Rex, huh? Good name.

IN THAT MOMENT

Rex adopted Storm.

*Wow, said Molly. Do you like dogs?
Because Rex obviously likes you.*

I've never been around them much.

We'd never been around
them at all, and I could tell
at first, he made Storm nervous.
But Rex didn't give my brother a choice.

The dog dashed out of the room
and returned thirty seconds
later, slobbering all over
his favorite tennis ball.

*I hope you're good with fetch, Pete
said, because it's Rex's favorite game.*

If Storm hadn't thrown the ball,
maybe the two wouldn't have
connected so quickly.
But they did.

Whenever Storm left the house,
Rex was the first one to welcome
him back. And, starting that very
first night, Rex slept beside Storm's bed.

The retriever already knew how to sit
and stay and stuff. But within
a couple of weeks, Storm had him
climbing ladders, bringing his

(and only his) shoes, and turning
light switches on and off.

*I knew Rex was smart, Pete
observed. But I had no idea
he was so clever. He must have
been waiting for you to teach him.*

STORM GOT THE DOG

I was rewarded with a close
approximation of a friend.

Alora was a couple of years
older, and she treated me like
her little sister. She didn't even
mind sharing her closet. Not that
I had very much to put in it.

Our room was a dream,
with rose-pink walls, mauve
comforters, and white sheets
that smelled like lavender.

It took a couple of weeks
to feel comfortable. I waited
for someone to knock
on the door, take us away.

Just in case, I kept my garbage
bag folded up in the bottom
drawer of my dresser.

Mostly, I fretted about missing
school. But Molly helped me
catch up, and Alora did, too.
She was kinder than she needed to be.
I mean, it was like Storm and I stole
pieces of her mom and dad.

Their time.
Their attention.
Their . . .

I hesitate to say love,
although they were loving
enough. In fact, we'd never
experienced such affection.

We did test them.
But they never reacted
to any of our dares with violence.

THAT SUMMER

For the first time in our lives
we went to Six Flags.

Storm loved the coasters,
I tolerated them,
but just being there
was so . . . normal kiddish.

Pete and Molly
also took us to

Fisherman's Wharf
two Giants games
the Monterey Bay Aquarium

We rode

cable cars
ponies
whale watching boats
water slides

We played

miniature golf
arcade games
carnival rip-offs

All of those things
were closer to Beverly's place
than to the Whittingtons'.

They went out of their way
to take us.

To make us believe
we meant something to them.

SIX YEARS AGO

We spent our eleventh
birthday with the Whittingtons.

They threw us a party.
It wasn't fancy
but it was the only one
we'd ever had with other kids
and presents and cake.

I wonder if Storm remembers
that cake.

He wanted chocolate.
I asked for strawberry.
Molly baked a mash-up.

It looked weird but tasted amazing.

We were only two weeks
into a new school year,
but almost our whole class
came. With gifts.

It didn't matter
that they weren't expensive.
Like, Legos for Storm
and craft kits for me.

They were wrapped!
And they belonged to us!

We opened them
together.
We blew out the candles

together.
We smashed the piñata
together.
We celebrated
together.

WE HAD THE NEXT YEAR TOGETHER

In one place.

One home

with straightforward
expectations, fair rules,
and rewards in favor
of punishments.

One school

with supportive teachers,
minimal judgments,
relatively few upsets,
and kids who'd play with us.

One Rex

who mostly loved Storm,
but would let me throw a ball
for him. Once in a while
he'd even bring it back.

One family

that began to feel like ours.
More ours, in fact, than
the approximation of one
we'd been taken away from.

It was all so normal.

If I've learned
a single thing since,
it's that nothing
that comes easy
is permanent.

TURNING TWELVE

Felt important to me,
and maybe that was prescient
because I had my first period
not long after.

I wish it would've happened
with Molly there to counsel
me, but that was not to be.

Three days after our birthday party,
Molly and Pete sat us down.

Rain pelted the kitchen window,
rolling down the glass
in thin silver streams.

*We've got some news to share, Pete
said, and I'm afraid it isn't all good.*

Molly couldn't look us in the eye,
but I could sense her regret.
Storm started petting Rex,
who whimpered as if he knew.

*I got a new job, one I couldn't turn
down. Unfortunately, it's in Texas.*

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Storm answered. *They're leaving.
And we're not going with them.*

"Why not?"

I still didn't understand
the way the system worked.

California is your custodial state,
explained Molly. *We can't take you.*

I COULD BARELY BREATHE

“What happens to us?”

*A new placement. We're so sorry,
kids. I wish there was something
more we could do. But there's not.*

How long until we go?

End of the week.

“What about school?”

*Fortunately, we're only a couple
of weeks into the year.
The transition should be smooth.*

Molly came over to hug me.
I'd never shrugged one off
before, but that time I ducked.

“I'm going to read.”

I went to Alora's room—
no longer half-mine.

Lay down on my—no,
the—bed. Closed my eyes,
seeking the comfort of the dark.
But light through the window
made everything gray.

I got up, went over
to the dresser, and found
the garbage bag,

still neatly folded.

End of the week
was five days away.

I started packing.

I WRITE

These vivid recollections
in a long, rambling letter
to my brother, trying to regain
some small sense of connection.

I ask if there have been other
dogs in any of his placements.
Tell him about Jeffrey, a weird
old poodle at one of mine.

He kind of matched his owner,
Rose, who was a strange old lady,
but not in a super bad way.
Mostly, she was forgetful.

Like, sometimes she'd be talking,
and halfway through a sentence,
she'd totally lose track, wander
into a whole different sentence.

And sometimes she'd fix the same
dinner three or four nights in a row.
Then she'd say, "Bet you've never
had that before. It's my special recipe."

As for the poodle, not sure if dogs
can catch forgetfulness from people,
but Jeffrey barked at Melanie and me
every time we came through the door.

Then Rose would say, "It's just
the girls." And Jeffrey would wag
his tail, like no big deal. Melanie
and I would laugh and laugh.

Oh. Melanie. I haven't thought about her in a while. She was the first girl I got to be really close to. Like, even closer than Alora . . .

WAY CLOSER

I pause my writing.
Melanie is a private
recollection, one I
wouldn't want Colleen
and Jay to discover
should they come
across this letter.

I was thirteen
when I was placed with
Rose and moved into
a room with Melanie.
My attraction to her
was immediate.

I wouldn't say confusing,
exactly, though most
of my adolescent longing
had been directed toward boys.
Not that I'd acted on any of it.
Not until Melanie.

She was two years older,
and reminded me of a lynx.
Tawny. Green-eyed. Wild.
I fell hard in love with her.

I knew she didn't feel
the same. Didn't care.
Enough that she wanted
to kiss me. Caress me.
Gift me with a sense
of importance.

Of course, that meant
losing someone I cared
about when Rose's daughter
arrived, decided foster was
too much work for her mother.

MY CURRENT BEDROOM DOOR OPENS

Parker sings her way across the room.
She's always singing in a crisp soprano.
Everything from Julie Andrews to Pink.

Happy birthday! Whatcha doin'?

"Attempting communication."

*Lost cause. Cool. Anyway, asters
are the official September birthday
flower. This is for you. I love you!*

In her hand is a single small
blue-purple bloom, the only
floral birthday gift I've ever
received. It has no scent.
Its power is in its beauty.

I put the pencil into my desk
drawer, where it joins maybe
fifty more in my obsession,
as Parker calls it. I've collected
pencils over the years, souvenirs
of schools, social workers' offices,
and abundant foster homes.

Parker swivels around in front
of me, pushes the chair away
from the desk, carrying me with it.
Now she straddles my lap.
Lowers her eyes to meet mine.

The weirdos are gone.

Her silk lips are slick with gloss
and licorice-flavored spit.
I sigh. "Are you sure?"

If our fosters catch us, we're cooked.

*Bible study. We've got two hours
for sure. Think that's enough?*

"How slow can you go?"

Let's find out.

"My bed or yours?"

She smiles, and damn, she's pretty
when her eyes shimmer like that.

We could get weird and do it in theirs.

"Mine, then."
We move in that direction,
shedding clothes.

I have always been thin,
narrow, straight up and down.

Parker is all sensuous
curves. I find pleasure
in simply tracing them
with my fingers, circling
them with my tongue.

She's been out in the sun.
It perfumes her toasted skin.
I soak it in, secondhand.

In.
Out.
Over.
Under.

There.
Yes, there.
More of that.
More, more, more.

We lift each other
out of the realm of ordinary,
and into deliverance.

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW

The shadows slant long,
and still we lie on my bed,
arms and legs tangled.

Parker sighs. *You ever think
about aging out?*

At eighteen, we can either stay
tethered to the system for a couple
of years or it will dump us with
a small stipend to make it on our own.

"I try not to. Why, do you?"

Yeah. She animates. We'll be free.

"Free to do what? Starve?"

No. No. We'll get checks every month.

"Only if we go to college or find
some crummy job. And eight hundred
bucks won't go very far. You have
any idea what rent's like in California?"

She clucks her tongue. *Duh.
Colleen has made that pretty clear.*

Foster requires Colleen to teach us
a financial literacy course. Budgeting
to cover \$1,500 a month for a little
apartment requires mental gymnastics.

"How do you know? You never

pay attention to what she says.”

*Hearing and paying attention
are two different things. Anyway,
considering how she always complains
about not having enough money
makes me doubt her own financial literacy.*

I have to laugh. “Good point.”

*You and I could move in together.
Get jobs. Pool our resources. I know
you want to go to college, but . . .*

She lets the thought dissolve.

“See, the *buts* are why I try not
to think about aging out.”

I prop myself up on one elbow.
Sink down into the violet blue
of her eyes. Push damp blond
strands off her face.

“Hard enough to figure out now.”

*Okay then, let’s just pretend we can
do anything we want. Forget about
how we’d pay for it. Close your eyes.*

She pushes me back down
against the pillow.

*We’ll get, like, a van. Something
we can live in. We’ll travel around
the country, maybe to music festivals*

or something. Hey. Can you sing?

“No, but I can play the ukulele.”

That stops her cold. *Really?*

“Parker, I’ve never even seen
a ukulele except in videos.”

We both crack up.
The fantasy evaporates.

IT WAS NICE WHILE IT LASTED

But reality intrudes
when I glance at the clock.

“We’d better get dressed.
They might surprise us.”

Parker moans. *Yeah. Okay.*

*Can you imagine Colleen?
Lesbian love! She’d freak!*

I unknot myself, sit up.
“How many times have
I told you—”

*Yeah, yeah. That you don’t like
the L-word. Which is weird,
since you are one.*

I don’t really know what I am.
All I’m certain of is what I feel,
and I’m in desperate lust with Parker.

I kiss her so she won’t doubt
that, slip into my jeans.

Parker isn’t the first person
I’ve been with. And that includes
a boy or two. But she’s the first
I’ve let myself even come close
to falling in love with.

It’s a mistake. Of course it is.
And not just because

Colleen would lose
her shit if she ever caught
Parker and me together.

There's no room
in her heart or mind
to accept LGBTQ-ness.
There would be no acceptance.
No understanding.

I lost my brother
five years ago
because a caretaker
lacked empathy.

It was just a hug.
A small measure
of comfort to ease
the pain of our recent
departure from Molly and Pete's.

But our new foster
decided it was more.
Something indecent.
There has never been
that kind of love
between Storm and me.

But people like Eloise
prefer to believe the worst.
That was the last placement
Storm and I ever shared.

Parker and I have to be
very, very careful.
We've made it a game.

One we're likely to lose.

It was a huge lapse
of judgment to fall for her,
because nothing ever lasts.

The bright green of spring
becomes autumn's brown
leaves, raked into piles
and tossed or burned.

Love might sprout leaves
today, bud tomorrow,
blossom next week.

But when will it wither?

SOMEONE'S COMING DOWN THE HALL

"I think they're home."

Parker's lying naked
on the bed, eyes fixed
blankly on the ceiling.

"Parker!"

I toss her a pair of panties
and the T-shirt she left on the floor.
Still no response. It's like
she's here, but she's not.

"Hurry!"

Finally, she sits up.
Slides the shirt over
her head just as
the doorknob turns.

Parker pulls the hem
down over her crotch,
sits on the undies.

Colleen bombs through
the door, assesses the situation.
Thank God I'm dressed.

Still, she's suspicious.
Uh, what are you two up to?

I cringe. That's what Eloise
said right before she swung
a broom at Storm and me.

Parker stifles a laugh.
I shoot her a STFU glare,
answer Colleen for the both of us.

"I was writing to Storm, and
Parker decided to take a nap."

Colleen turns her focus
toward Parker. *A nap?*

Yeah. I had a migraine.

Since when do you get migraines?

*Cluster headaches, actually.
They come in waves.*

First time since you've been here?

Parker nods. *Stress causes them.
Probably because of school starting.*

Did you take something for it?

Acetaminophen. Had to. Sorry.

*You're supposed to ask, you know.
And next time, start with prayer.
"And the Lord will take away from
you all sickness." Deuteronomy 7:15.*

Next time I definitely will.

*Fine. Well, I could use some help with
the groceries. You okay now, Parker?*

Better. And I'm hungry.
Migraines give me an appetite.

Colleen looks confused,
but doesn't argue.

"We'll be right there."

As soon as Parker puts
on her shorts.

I SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND COLLEEN

"That was close, you know."

Parker scoots to the edge
of the bed, spreads her legs,
offering a quite personal view.

Exciting, huh?

"Parker, seriously, don't
take chances like that.
Please? For me?"

*Whatever, she huffs. You gotta
learn to live a little.*

She closes her legs.
Slips them into her undies.
Covers those with sensible shorts.

It strikes me how little
I know about her.

I've only been with Colleen
and Jay for six months.
Parker showed up during the summer.
Our attraction was instantaneous.
But acting on it took a while.

Trust doesn't run rampant
in foster care circles.

Even after connecting
skin to skin, sharing personal
information has taken longer.

“Hey. Do you really get
cluster headaches?”

*No. But my mom did. They took
her down worse than H, man.
In fact, they almost made me glad
she had easy access to dope.*

I have to admire how quickly
Parker invented that excuse.
Clever. But way too ballsy.

“I’m surprised Colleen
let you off so easily about
the acetaminophen.”

We’re not supposed to help
ourselves to any medicines,
not even over-the-counter types.

*Hopefully she doesn’t count them.
I had a foster do that before.
Knew exactly how many pills
were in every single container.*

*She laughs. Busted me with
a bottle of cough syrup one time.
An empty bottle, that is.*

“You drank a whole bottle?”

Yeah, baby. I was (air quotes) sick.

“Gross, Parker. That stuff
tastes like absolute crap.”

*Uh, Lake? You don't drink it
for the flavor. And, as you know,
surviving some placements requires
extraordinary measures.*

I do know.

Very well.

IT WAS UNREASONABLY HOT

The day I met Jaidyn.
That was almost a year ago,
but I remember, because it was
October and the weather guys
were freaking out about heat
waves and climate change.

I had to agree that ninety
degrees, closing in on Halloween,
could not be a good thing.

I was eating in the cafeteria,
where the air-conditioning
made things more pleasant.

I'd only recently moved
into this house with Jim,
so hadn't yet checked out
the hot lunch scene
at yet another new school.

I was trying to decide
between garlic chicken or veggie
pasta. Guess I took too long, because
someone gave me a little nudge.

I spun, expecting to get into
somebody's face. Only the face
belonged to a girl, and this
is what I saw:

Auburn hair spiked short
and tipped bright red.

Dimples creasing the blush
of her cheeks.

Freckles—few, but noticeable—
spattering her nose.

Super long lashes fringing
eyes the color of topaz.

Lips, full and soft like heart-
shaped pillows.

She flashed an incredible smile—
a straight, even row of pearls.

*Take the chicken. It's got
veggies, too. Plus, protein.*

I never sputter.
But I did right then.
“Uh . . . uh . . . protein's good.”

Jaidyn laughed. *In moderation.
You need a balanced diet.*

Why was this stunning girl
talking about diets with me?
And what was that luscious
perfume she was wearing?

Meanwhile, the kids behind
us were getting impatient.
I picked the chicken, wandered
over to a semi-deserted table.

She followed me.

Okay if I sit with you?

But she didn't wait, settling
on the bench beside me,
even as I stuttered, "I g-guess."

OKAY, I'D HOOKED UP

With a few girls before.
Hit-and-run.
Nothing serious.

But this was the first one
Who'd ever approached
so boldly. Why me?

I'm Jaidyn.

I swallowed. "Storm."

You're new here.

"Do you know everyone
at this school?"

*No. But I'd know if I'd seen you
before. First time for sure.
Are you a senior?*

"Junior."

*Me too. Maybe we'll have
a class together.*

I glanced around, trying
to figure out a reason
for her attention.

"Am I a dare or something?"

She chimed a laugh. No.
What makes you say that?

“It’s just . . . Never mind.
I’m probably not reading
this correctly.”

Well, what if you are?