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Also by Ali Novak

THE HEARTBREAK CHRONICLES

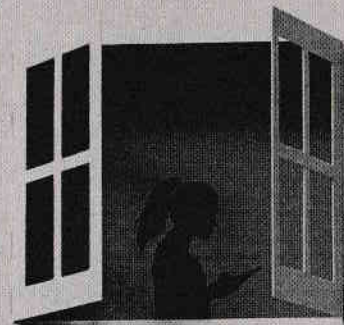
The Heartbreakers

Paper Hearts

MY LIFE
WITH THE
WALTER BOYS

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My
Life

with the

Walter
Boys

ALI NOVAK

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fire

prologue

I NEVER FELT BAD FOR Romeo and Juliet.

Don't get me wrong. The play's a classic, and Shakespeare was by all means a literary genius, but I just don't understand how two people who barely knew each other could give up their lives so willingly.

It was for love, people argue—true, everlasting love. But in my opinion, that's a load of garbage. Love takes more than a couple days and a secret shotgun marriage to develop into something worth dying for.

I'll admit Romeo and Juliet were *passionate*. But their passion was so intense, so destructive, it got them killed. I mean, the entire play is driven by their impulsive decisions. Don't believe me? Take Juliet, for example. What girl's first thought would be to marry the son of her father's mortal enemy after she catches him spying outside her bedroom window? Not mine, that's for sure. So that's really why they lost my sympathy vote. There was no preparation—or even thinking,

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for that matter. They just *did*, regardless of the consequences. When you don't plan ahead, things get messy.

And after what happened three months ago, after my life was completely thrown off course, a messy love life was the last thing I needed.

one

I DIDN'T OWN A SINGLE pair of jeans. Strange, I know, because what sixteen-year-old girl doesn't have at least one pair, maybe with a rip in the knee or a heart doodled across the thigh in Sharpie?

It wasn't that I disliked the way they looked, and it had nothing to do with the fact that my mother had been a fashion designer, especially considering she used jeans in her collections all the time. But I was a firm believer in the phrase "dress to impress," and today I was going to need to make an impression.

"Jackie?" I heard Katherine call from somewhere inside the apartment. "The taxi is here."

"Just a minute!" I scooped a piece of paper off my desk. "Laptop, charger, mouse," I muttered, reading off the rest of the checklist. Opening my satchel, I searched for my possessions to make sure they were safely tucked inside. "Check, check, check," I whispered when

my fingers brushed against all three items. With a bright-red pen, I marked an X next to each of them on my list.

There was a knock on my bedroom door. “You ready, honey?” Katherine asked, poking her head inside. She was a tall woman in her late forties, with golden hair that was cut into a mom bob and starting to gray.

“I think so,” I told her, but my voice cracked, revealing otherwise. My gaze snapped down to my feet because I didn’t want to see the look in her eyes—the sympathetic one I’d seen on everyone’s faces since the funeral.

“I’ll give you a moment,” I heard her say.

When the door clicked shut, I smoothed down my skirt as I glanced in the mirror. My long dark curls were straightened and tied back with a blue ribbon like always, not a single strand out of place. The collar on my blouse was crooked, and I fidgeted with it until my reflection was seamless. I pursed my lips in annoyance at the purple circles under my eyes, but there was nothing I could do to fix the lack of sleep that was causing them.

Sighing, I took one last look around my room. Even though my entire checklist was crossed off, I didn’t know when I would be returning, and I didn’t want to forget anything important. The space was strangely empty, since most of my possessions were on a moving truck bound for Colorado. It had taken me a week to pack it all, but Katherine helped me with the huge task.

Clothing had filled most of the boxes, but there were also my collection of Shakespeare plays and the teacups my sister, Lucy, and

I had collected from every country we’d ever visited. As I glanced around, I knew I was stalling; with my organizational skills, there was no way I’d forget anything. The real issue was that I didn’t want to leave New York—not one bit.

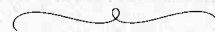
But I didn’t have a say in the matter, so with reluctance I grabbed my carry-on. Katherine was waiting for me out in the hall, one small suitcase sitting at her feet.

“Have everything?” she asked, and I nodded my head. “All right, let’s get going then.”

She led the way through the living room and toward the front door, and I trailed slowly behind her, running my hands over the furniture in an attempt to memorize every last detail of my home. It was hard, which was strange considering I’d lived here my entire life. The white sheets thrown over the furniture to prevent dust from frosting the fabric were like solid walls, holding my recollections at bay.

We stepped out of the apartment in silence, and Katherine paused to lock the door. “Would you like to look after the key?” she asked.

I had my own set tucked in my suitcase, but I reached out and took the small silver piece of metal from her hands. Unfastening my mother’s locket, I let the key slip down the delicate chain so it could rest against my chest, right next to my heart.



We sat on the plane in silence. I was trying hard to forget that I was currently moving farther and farther away from my home, and I refused to let myself cry. For the first month after the accident, I never

left my bed. Then came the day where I miraculously pulled myself out from underneath my comforter and got dressed. Since then, I'd promised myself I would be strong and composed. I didn't want to go back to the weak, hollow person I'd become, and that wasn't going to change now. Instead, I focused my attention on Katherine as she clenched and unclenched the armrest, her knuckles going white each time she did.

I only knew a few things about the woman sitting next to me. First was that she was my mother's childhood friend. They grew up in New York and attended Hawks Boarding School together, the same school my sister and I had been enrolled in. Back then, she was known as Katherine Green, which brought me to the second thing I knew about her. During college she met George Walter. The two married and moved to Colorado to start a horse ranch, George's lifelong dream. Finally, the third and most noteworthy piece of information I knew about Katherine—she was my new guardian. Apparently I'd met her when I was little, but it was so long ago I couldn't remember. Katherine Walter was a complete stranger to me.

"Afraid of flying?" I asked, as she let out a deep breath. Honestly, the woman looked like she was going to be sick.

"No, but to be completely truthful, I am a bit nervous about—well, taking you home," she said. I felt my shoulders tense up. Was she afraid I was going to go off the deep end? I could assure her that wasn't going to happen, not if I wanted to get into Princeton. Uncle Richard must have said something to her, something about me not being okay, even though I was perfectly fine. Katherine caught my

look and quickly added, "Oh no, not because of you, honey. I know you're a good kid."

"Then why?"

Katherine's smile was sympathetic. "Jackie, honey, did I ever tell you I have twelve kids?"

No, I thought as my mouth dropped open, *that definitely wasn't mentioned*. When he decided I was moving to Colorado, Uncle Richard did say something about Katherine having kids, but twelve? He'd conveniently left that little detail out. A dozen kids. Katherine's household must be stuck permanently in a state of chaos. Why would anyone even *want* to have twelve children? I could feel the tiny wings of panic fluttering inside my chest.

Stop overreacting, I told myself. After taking a few deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth, I pulled out a notebook and pen. I needed to find out as much as I could about the family I was going to live with, so I could be prepared. Sitting up in my seat, I asked Katherine to tell me about her kids and she agreed enthusiastically.

"My oldest is Will," she began, and I started writing.

The Walter Boys:

Will is twenty-one. He's in his final semester at the local community college and is engaged to his high-school sweetheart.

Cole is seventeen. He's a senior in high school and a talented auto mechanic.

Danny is seventeen. He's also a senior in high

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school and the president of the drama club. He's Cole's fraternal twin.

Isaac is sixteen. He's a junior in high school and is obsessed with girls. He's Katherine's nephew.

Alex is sixteen. He's a sophomore in high school and plays way too many video games.

Lee is fifteen. He's a sophomore in high school and a skater. He's also Katherine's nephew.

Nathan is fourteen. He's a freshman in high school and a musician.

Jack and Jordan are twelve. They're in seventh grade and twins. They believe they will be the next Steven Spielberg and always have a video camera with them.

Parker is nine. He's in fourth grade. He looks innocent but loves tackle football.

Zack and Benny are five and are in kindergarten. They're twins and little monsters with potty mouths.

I looked over what I wrote, and my stomach dropped. This was a joke, right? Katherine didn't just have twelve kids, but twelve boys! I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, about the male species. I went to a private school for girls. How was I ever going to survive living in a house full of boys? Didn't they speak their own language or something?

As soon as the plane landed, Uncle Richard was going to hear an earful from me. Knowing him, he was probably wrapped up in an important board meeting and wouldn't be able to take my call, but I couldn't believe him! Not only was he pawing me off on some woman I didn't know, but he also was dumping me with a pack of boys. He said he was doing what was best for me, especially since he was never home, but over the past three months, I'd gotten the feeling he didn't feel comfortable being a parent.



Richard wasn't my real uncle, but I'd known him since I was a little girl. He was my dad's college roommate, and after graduating, they became business partners. Every year on my birthday, he would bring me a bag of my favorite jelly beans and a card with fifty dollars in it.

In January, Richard became my guardian, and to make the situation more bearable for me, he moved into the penthouse on the Upper East Side where my family lived. At first it was weird with him in the house, but he kept to himself in the spare bedroom and soon we fell into a comfortable routine. Normally, I only saw him at breakfast since he always worked late into the night, but last week that all changed. When I came home from school, the dinner table was set with what must have been his best attempt at a home-cooked meal. Then he told me I was moving to Colorado.

"I don't get why you're making me leave," I told him after ten minutes of arguing.

"I explained this already, Jackie," he said, his face pained as if this

decision was ripping *him* away from the only home he'd ever known and not me. "Your school therapist is worried about you. She called today because she doesn't think you're coping well."

"First of all, I never wanted to see that therapist," I argued, slamming my fork on the table. "Secondly, how can she even suggest I'm not coping well? My grades are excellent, if not better than first semester."

"You've done a fine job in school, Jackie," he said. I could hear the *but* coming. "However, she thinks you're throwing yourself into your work as a way to avoid facing your problems."

"My only problem is that she has no clue who I am! Come on, Uncle Richard. You know me. I've always been studious and hardworking. That's what it means to be a Howard."

"Jackie, you've joined three new clubs since the start of the semester. Don't you think you're spreading yourself a bit thin?"

"Did you know Sarah Yolden received a scholarship to go study an endangered species of plants in Brazil over the summer?" I asked instead.

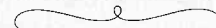
"No, but—"

"She got to publish her findings in a science magazine. She's also first chair for violin and got to perform in Carnegie Hall. How am I supposed to compete with that? I can't just have good grades if I want to get into Princeton," I told him coolly. "My application needs to be impressive. I'm building it up."

"And I understand that, but I also think a change of scenery might be beneficial for you. The Walters are wonderful people and are happy to take you in."

"A change of scenery is relaxing on the beach for a week!" I exclaimed, rocketing out of my seat. Leaning over the table, I glared at Uncle Richard. "This is cruel. You're sending me across the country."

He sighed. "I know you don't understand right now, Jackie, but I promise this is a good thing. You'll see."



So far, I still didn't understand. The closer we got to Colorado, the more nervous I became, and no matter how many times I told myself that things would be fine, I didn't believe it. I chewed my lip until it was raw, worrying over how difficult it would be for me to fit into the Walters' lives.

When the plane landed, Katherine and I made our way through the airport to find her husband.

"Now, I told the kids last week that you're moving in, so they know you're coming," she chattered as we pushed through the crowds. "I have a room for you as well, but I haven't been able to clean it out yet, so—oh, George! George, over here!"

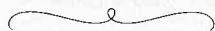
Katherine jumped up and down, waving to a tall man in his early fifties. I could tell Mr. Walter was a few years older than his wife because most of his hair and scruff were completely gray, and age lines were starting to streak across his forehead. He was wearing a red-and-black flannel shirt with jeans, heavy work boots, and a cowboy hat.

When we reached him, he pulled Katherine into a hug and stroked her hair. It reminded me of my parents, and I cringed and turned away. "I missed you," he told her.

She pecked him on the cheek. “I missed you too.” Pulling away, she turned to me. “George dear,” she said, taking his hand. “This is Jackie Howard. Jackie, this is my husband.”

George looked uncomfortable as he sized me up. After all, how exactly do you greet someone who just lost her entire family? Nice to meet you? We’re happy to have you? Instead, George held out his free hand for me to grasp and muttered a quick hello.

Then he turned back to Katherine. “Let’s get the luggage and go home.”



Once all of my suitcases were packed into the bed of the truck, I climbed in the back seat and dug my phone out of my jacket. George and Katherine were chatting quietly about the flight, so I pulled on my headphones, not wanting to hear any more of their conversation. As we drove farther away from the city and deeper into the country, I became more upset. We were surrounded by plains that stretched for miles, and without the tall, proud buildings of New York City, I felt exposed. Colorado was beautiful, but how was I ever going to live here?

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the truck pulled onto a gravel road. In the distance, I could see a house at the top of a hill, but just barely. Was all of this land really theirs? When we got to the top, I realized it wasn’t a single house; it looked more like three homes put together. I guess you need a lot of space for twelve boys.

The grass desperately needed to be mowed, and the wooden front

porch could have used a paint job. The lawn was covered in toys, probably the younger boys’ handiwork. George hit one of those small clicker-thingies that was clipped onto the visor, and the garage door started to open. A bike fell over, followed by a few more toys, which blocked the truck’s way into the parking spot.

“How many times do we need to tell them to clean up after themselves?” George grumbled to himself.

“Don’t worry, dear. I’m on it,” Katherine said as she unbuckled her seat belt and slid out of the car. I watched as she moved the mess so her husband could pull in. When the car was finally parked, George let the engine die, and we sat in the dim silence. Then, he turned around in the front seat to face me.

“You ready, Jackie?” he asked. He looked me over and frowned. “You’re looking kind of pale.”

Of course I looked pale! I had just flown halfway across the country with a woman I didn’t know because my family was gone. On top of that, I was going to have to live with twelve kids, all of whom were boys! This wasn’t exactly a top-ten day for me.

“I’m fine,” I said, muttering my automatic response. “Just a little nervous, I guess.”

“Well, the best piece of advice I can give you ’bout my boys”—he began while unbuckling his seat belt—“is their barks are worse than their bites. Don’t let ’em scare you.”

How was that supposed to be reassuring? George was watching me, so I nodded my head. “Um, thanks.”

He gave me a small nod and then got out of the car, leaving me