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including
Conrad's letters
to Belly!

a summer novel

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven

A Couple of Years Later

'Burn for Burn' Teaser
About Jenny Han

For my two Emilys:
Emily van Beek, you are my ambassador of quan
Emily Thomas Meehan, let's stay together forever
love, your girl



Acknowledgments

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On Wednesday nights when I was little, my mom and I would watch old musicals. It was our thing. Sometimes my dad or Steven would wander in and watch for a bit, but it was pretty much always my mother and me on the couch with a blanket and a bowl of sweet and salty popcorn, every Wednesday. We watched *The Music Man*, *West Side Story*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, all of which I liked, *Singin' in the Rain*, which I really liked. But I loved none of them the way I loved *Bye Bye Birdie*. Of all the musicals, *Bye Bye Birdie* was my number one favorite. I watched it again and again, as many times as my mother could stand. Just like Kim MacAfee before me, I wanted to wear mascara and lipstick and heels and have that “happy grown-up female feeling,” I wanted to hear boys whistle and know it was for me. I wanted to grow up and be just like Kim, because she got to have all of those things.

And after, when it was bedtime, I would sing, “We love you, Conrad, oh yes we do. We love you, Conrad, and we’ll be true” into the bathroom mirror with a mouthful of toothpaste. I would sing my eight-nine-ten-year-old heart out. But I wasn’t singing to Conrad Birdie. I was singing to *my* Conrad. Conrad Beck Fisher, the boy of my preteen dreams.

I’ve only ever loved two boys—both of them with the last name Fisher. Conrad was first, and I loved him in a way that you can really only do the first time around. It’s the kind of love that doesn’t know better and doesn’t want to—it’s dizzy and foolish and fierce. That kind of love is really a one-time-only thing.

And then there was Jeremiah. When I looked at Jeremiah, I saw past, present, and future. He didn’t just know the girl I used to be. He knew the

right-now me, and he loved me anyway.

My two great loves. I think I always knew I would be Belly Fisher one day. I just didn't know it was going to happen like this.



chapter one

When it's finals week and you've been studying for five hours straight, you need three things to get you through the night. The biggest Slurpee you can find, half cherry, half Coke. Pajama pants, the kind that have been washed so many times, they are tissue-paper thin. And finally, dance breaks. Lots of dance breaks. When your eyes start to close and all you want is your bed, dance breaks will get you through.

It was four in the morning, and I was studying for the last final of my freshman year at Finch University. I was camped out in my dorm library with my new best friend, Anika Johnson, and my old best friend, Taylor Jewel. Summer vacation was so close, I could almost taste it. Just five more days. I'd been counting down since April.

"Quiz me," Taylor commanded, her voice scratchy.

I opened my notebook to a random page. "Define *anima* versus *animus*."

Taylor chewed on her lower lip. "Give me a hint."

"Umm . . . think Latin," I said.

"I didn't take Latin! Is there going to be Latin on this exam?"

"No, I was just trying to give you a hint. Because in Latin boys' names end in *-us* and girls' names end in *-a*, and *anima* is feminine archetype and *animus* is masculine archetype. Get it?"

She let out a big sigh. "No. I'm probably going to fail."

Looking up from her notebook, Anika said, "Maybe if you stopped texting and started studying, you wouldn't."

Taylor glared at her. "I'm helping my big sister plan our end-of-year breakfast, so I have to be on call tonight."

"On call?" Anika looked amused. "Like a doctor?"

"Yes, just like a doctor," Taylor snapped.

"So, will it be pancakes or waffles?"

"French toast, thank you very much."

The three of us were all taking the same freshman psych class, and Taylor's and my exam was tomorrow, Anika's was the day after. Anika was my closest friend at school besides Taylor. Seeing as how Taylor was competitive by nature, it was a friendship that she was more than a little jealous of, not that she'd ever in a million years admit it.

My friendship with Anika was different from my friendship with Taylor. Anika was laid-back and easy to be with. She wasn't quick to judge. More than all that, though, she gave *me* the space to be different. She hadn't known me my whole life, so she had no expectations or preconceptions. There was freedom in that. And she wasn't like any of my friends back home. She was from New York, and her father was a jazz musician and her mother was a writer.

A couple of hours later, the sun was rising and casting the room in a bluish light, and Taylor's head was down, while Anika was staring off into space like a zombie.

I rolled up two paper balls in my lap and threw them at my two friends. "Dance break," I sang out as I pressed play on my computer. I did a little shimmy in my chair.

Anika glared at me. "Why are you so chipper?"

"Because," I said, clapping my hands together, "in just a few hours, it will all be over." My exam wasn't until one in the afternoon, so my plan was to go back to my room and sleep for a couple of hours, then wake up with time to spare and study some more.



I overslept, but I still managed to get another hour of studying in. I didn't have time to go to the dining hall for breakfast, so I just drank a Cherry Coke from the vending machine.

The test was as hard as we had expected, but I was pretty sure I would get at least a B. Taylor was pretty sure she hadn't failed, which was good. Both of us were too tired to celebrate after, so we just high-fived and went our separate ways.

I headed back to my dorm room, ready to pass out until at least dinnertime, and when I opened the door, there was Jeremiah, asleep in my bed. He looked like a little boy when he slept, even with the stubble. He was stretched out on top of my comforter, his feet hanging over the edge of the bed, my stuffed polar bear hugged to his chest.

I took off my shoes and crawled into my twin, extra-long bed next to him. He stirred, opened his eyes, and said, "Hi."

"Hi," I said.

“How’d it go?”

“Pretty good.”

“Good.” He let go of Junior Mint and hugged me to him. “I brought you the other half of my sub from lunch.”

“You’re sweet,” I said, burrowing my head in his shoulder.

He kissed my hair. “I can’t have my girl skipping meals left and right.”

“It was just breakfast,” I said. As an afterthought, I added, “And lunch.”

“Do you want my sub now? It’s in my book bag.”

Now that I thought about it, I was hungry, but I was also sleepy. “Maybe a little later,” I said, closing my eyes.

Then he fell back to sleep, and I fell asleep too. When I woke up, it was dark out, Junior Mint was on the floor, and Jeremiah’s arms were around me. He was still asleep.

We had started dating right before I began senior year of high school. “Dating” didn’t feel like the right word for it. We were just together. It all happened so easily and so quickly that it felt like it had always been that way. One minute we were friends, then we were kissing, and then the next thing I knew, I was applying to the same college as him. I told myself and everyone else (including him, including my mother especially) that it was a good school, that it was only a few hours from home and it made sense to apply there, that I was keeping my options open. All of those things were true. But truest of all was that I just wanted to be near him. I wanted him for all seasons, not just summer.

Now here we were, lying next to each other in my dorm-room bed. He was a sophomore, and I was finishing up my freshman year. It was crazy how far we had come. We’d known each other our whole lives, and in some ways, it felt like a big surprise—in other ways it felt inevitable.



chapter two

Jeremiah's fraternity was throwing an end-of-year party. In less than a week we would all go home for the summer, and we wouldn't be back at Finch until the end of August. I had always loved summertime best of all, but now that I was finally going home, somehow it felt a little bittersweet. I was used to meeting Jeremiah in the dining hall for breakfast every morning and doing my laundry with him at his frat house late at night. He was good at folding my T-shirts.

This summer, he would be interning at his dad's company again, and I was going to waitress at a family restaurant called Behrs, the same as I did last summer. Our plan was to meet at the summer house in Cousins as often as we could. Last summer we hadn't made it out there once. We'd both been so busy with our jobs. I took every shift I could to save money for school. All the while, I'd felt a little hollow inside, my first summer away from Cousins.

There were a few lightning bugs out. It was just getting dark, and it wasn't too hot of a night. I was wearing heels, which was stupid, since on a last-minute impulse I'd walked instead of taking the bus. I just figured it was the last time for a long time I'd walk across campus on a nice night like this.

I'd invited Anika and our friend Shay to come with me, but Anika had a party with her dance team, and Shay was already done with finals and had flown home to Texas. Taylor's sorority was having a mixer, so she wasn't coming either. It was just me and my sore feet.

I had texted Jeremiah to tell him I was on my way and that I was walking, so it would take me a little while. I had to keep stopping to adjust my shoes because they were cutting into the backs of my feet. Heels were dumb, I decided.

Halfway there, I saw him sitting on my favorite bench. He stood up when he saw me. "Surprise!"

"You didn't have to meet me," I said, feeling very happy he had. I sat down on the bench.

"You look hot," he said.

Even now, after being boyfriend and girlfriend for a whole two years, I still blushed a little when he said things like that. "Thanks," I said. I was

wearing a sundress that I had borrowed from Anika. It was white with little blue flowers and ruffly straps.

“That dress reminds me of *The Sound of Music*, but in a hot way.”

“Thanks,” I said again. *Did* the dress make me look like Fräulein Maria, I wondered? That didn’t sound like a good thing. I smoothed down the straps a little.

A couple of guys I didn’t recognize stopped and said hi to Jeremiah, but I stayed put on the bench so I could rest my feet.

When they were gone, he said, “Ready?”

I groaned. “My feet are killing me. Heels are dumb.”

Jeremiah stooped down low and said, “Hop on, girl.”

Giggling, I climbed on his back. I always giggled when he called me “girl.” I couldn’t help it. It was funny.

He hoisted me up and I put my arms around his neck. “Is your dad coming on Monday?” Jeremiah asked as we crossed the main lawn.

“Yeah. You’re gonna help, right?”

“Come on, now. I’m carrying you across campus. I have to help you move, too?”

I swatted him on the head and he ducked. “Okay, okay,” he said.

Then I blew a raspberry on his neck, and he yelped like a little girl. I laughed the whole way there.