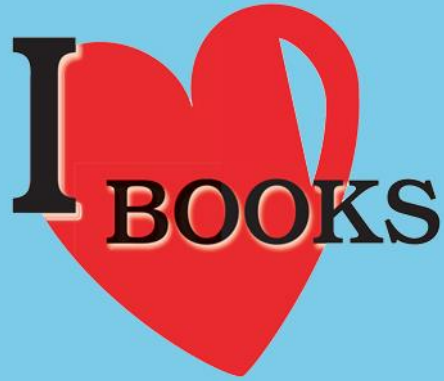




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Jay Asher

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CHAPTER ONE

“I hate this time of year,” Rachel says. “I’m sorry, Sierra. I’m sure I say that a lot, but it’s true.”

Morning mist blurs the entrance of our school at the far end of the lawn. We stay on the cement pathway to avoid damp spots in the grass, but Rachel’s not complaining about the weather.

“Please don’t do this,” I say. “You’ll make me cry again. I just want to get through this week without—”

“But it’s not a week!” she says. “It’s two days. Two days until Thanksgiving break, and then you leave for a whole month again. More than a month!”

I hug Rachel’s arm as we continue walking. Even though I’m the one leaving for another holiday season far from home, Rachel pretends like it’s *her* world that gets turned

upside-down each year. Her pouty face and slumped shoulders are entirely for my benefit, to let me know I'll be missed, and every year I'm grateful for her melodrama. Even though I love where I'm going, it's still hard to say goodbye. Knowing my best friends are counting the days until I return does make it easier.

I point to the tear in the corner of my eye. "Do you see what you did? They're starting."

This morning, when Mom drove us away from our Christmas tree farm, the sky was mostly clear. The workers were in the fields, their distant chainsaws buzzing like mosquitoes, cutting down this year's crop of trees.

The fog came in as we drove lower. It stretched across the small farms, over the interstate, and into town, carrying within it the traditional scent of the season. This time of year our entire little Oregon town smells like fresh-cut Christmas trees. At other times, it might smell like sweet corn or sugar beets.

Rachel holds open one of the glass double doors and then follows me to my locker. There, she jiggles her glittery red watch in front of me. "We've got fifteen minutes," she says. "I'm cranky and I'm cold. Let's grab some coffee before the first bell."

The school's theater director, Miss Livingston, not-so-subtly encourages her students to drink as much caffeine as needed to get their shows together on time. Backstage, a pot of coffee is always on. As the lead set designer, Rachel gets unrestricted access to the auditorium.

Over the weekend, the theater department finished their performances of *Little Shop of Horrors*. The set won't be broken down until after Thanksgiving break, so it's still up when Rachel and I turn on the lights at the back of the theater. Sitting on the stage, between the flower shop counter and the big, green, man-eating plant, is Elizabeth. She sits up straight and waves when she sees us.

Rachel walks ahead of me down the aisle. "This year, we wanted to give you something to take with you to California."

I follow her past the empty rows of red cushioned seats. They obviously don't care if I'm a blubbering mess during my last few days of school. I climb the steps to the stage. Elizabeth pushes herself up, runs over, and hugs me.

"I was right," she tells Rachel over my shoulder. "I told you she'd cry."

"I hate you both," I tell them.

Elizabeth hands me two presents wrapped in shiny silver Christmas paper, but I already kind of know what they're giving me. Last week, we were all in a gift shop downtown and I saw them looking at picture frames the same size as these boxes. I sit down to open them and lean against the counter under the old-fashioned metal cash register.

Rachel sits cross-legged in front of me, our knees almost touching.

"You're breaking the rules," I say. I slide a finger beneath a fold in the wrapping of the first gift. "We're not supposed to do this until after I get back."

"We wanted you to have something that will make you

think of us every day,” Elizabeth says.

“We’re kind of embarrassed we didn’t do this when you first started leaving,” Rachel adds.

“What, back when we were babies?”

During my very first Christmas, Mom stayed home with me on the farm while Dad operated our family Christmas tree lot down in California. The next year, Mom thought we should stay home one more season, but Dad didn’t want to be without us again. He would rather skip the lot for a year, he said, and rely solely on shipping the trees to vendors across the country. Mom felt bad, though, for the families who made a holiday tradition out of coming to us to buy their trees. And while it was a business, Dad being the second generation to run it, it was also a cherished tradition for both of them. They met, in fact, because Mom and her parents were annual customers. So every year now, that’s where I spend my days from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Rachel reclines, setting her hands on the stage to prop herself up. “Are your parents still deciding about this being the last Christmas in California?”

I scratch at a piece of tape that holds down another fold. “Did the store wrap this?”

Rachel whispers to Elizabeth loud enough for me to hear, “She’s changing the subject.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I just hate thinking about this being our last year. As much as I love you, I would miss going down there. Besides, all I know is what I’ve overheard—they still haven’t mentioned it to me—but they seem pretty stressed

about finances. Until they make up their minds, I don't want to get my heart set either way."

If we hang on to the lot for three more seasons, our family will have run that spot for thirty years. When my grandparents first bought the lot, the little town was in a growth spurt. Cities much closer to our farm in Oregon already had established lots, if not an abundance of them. Now everything from supermarkets to hardware stores sells trees, or people sell them for fund-raisers. Tree lots like ours aren't as common anymore. If we let it go, we'd be doing all of our business selling to those supermarkets and fund-raisers, or supplying other lots with our trees.

Elizabeth puts a hand on my knee. "Part of me wants you to go back next year because I know you love it, but if you do stay we'd all get to spend Christmas together for the first time."

I can't help smiling at the thought. I love these girls, but Heather is also one of my best friends, and I only see her one month out of the year when I'm in California. "We've been going down there forever," I say. "I can't imagine what it would be like to suddenly . . . not."

"I can tell you what it would be like," Rachel says. "It'll be senior year. Skiing. Hot tubbing. In the snow!"

But I love our snowless California town, right on the coast, just three hours south of San Francisco. I also love selling trees, seeing the same families come to us year after year. It wouldn't feel right to spend so long growing the trees only to ship them all off for other people to sell.

"Sounds fun, right?" Rachel asks. She leans close to me

and wiggles her eyebrows. “Now, imagine it with boys.”

I snort-laugh and then cover my mouth.

“Or not,” Elizabeth says, pulling back Rachel’s shoulder. “It could be nice to have it just us, a time without any boys.”

“That’s pretty much me every Christmas,” I say. “Remember, last year I got dumped the night before we drove to California.”

“That was horrible,” Elizabeth says, though she does laugh a little. “Then he brings that homeschool girl with the big boobs to winter formal and—”

Rachel presses a finger to Elizabeth’s lips. “I think she remembers.”

I look down at my first present, still mostly wrapped. “Not that I blame him. Who wants to be in a long-distance relationship over the holidays? I wouldn’t.”

“Although,” Rachel says, “you did say there are some good-looking guys who work on the tree lot.”

“Right.” I shake my head. “Like Dad will let that happen.”

“Okay, no more talking about this,” Elizabeth says. “Open your gifts.”

I pull up a piece of tape, but my mind is now on California. Heather and I have been friends literally since we can remember. My grandparents on Mom’s side used to live next door to her family. When my grandparents passed away, her family took me in for a couple of hours each day to give my parents a break. In exchange, their house got a beautiful Christmas tree, a few wreaths, and two or three workers to hang lights on their roof.

Elizabeth sighs. "Your presents. Please?"

I tear open one side of the wrapping.

They're right, of course. I would love to spend at least one winter here before we all graduate and move off to wherever. I've had dreams of being with them for the ice-sculpting contest and all the other things they tell me about that go on around here.

But my holidays in California are the only time I get to see my *other* best friend. I stopped referring to Heather simply as my winter friend years ago. She's one of my best friends, period. I used to also see her a few weeks every summer when visiting my grandparents, but those visits stopped when they passed away. I worry I may not be able to enjoy this season with her, knowing it might be my last.

Rachel stands up and walks away across the stage. "I need to get some coffee."

Elizabeth yells after her, "She's opening our presents!"

"She's opening *your* present," Rachel says. "Mine has the red ribbon."

The first frame I open, with the green ribbon, contains a selfie of Elizabeth. Her tongue sticks out sideways while her eyes look in the opposite direction. It's like almost every other photo she takes of herself, which is why I love it.

I press the frame against my chest. "Thank you."

Elizabeth blushes. "You're welcome."

"I'm opening yours now!" I shout across the stage.

Walking slowly toward us, Rachel carries three paper cups of steaming coffee. We each take one. I set mine to the

side as Rachel sits back down in front of me, and then I begin to open her present. Even though it's only one month, I am going to miss her so much.

In Rachel's photo, her beautiful face is sideways, partially blocked by her hand as if she didn't want the picture taken.

"It's supposed to look like I'm being stalked by the paparazzi," she says. "Like I'm a big-time actress coming out of a fancy restaurant. In real life, though, there would probably be a huge bodyguard behind me, but—"

"But you're not an actress," Elizabeth says. "You want to do set design."

"That's part of the plan," Rachel says. "Do you know how many actresses there are in the world? Millions. And all of them are trying so hard to get noticed, which is a total turnoff. One day, while I'm designing sets for some famous producer, he'll take one look at me and just know it's a waste to keep me behind the camera. I should be in front of it. And he'll take full credit for discovering me, but I actually *made* him discover me."

"What concerns me," I say, "is that I know you believe it's going to happen just like that."

Rachel takes a sip from her coffee. "Because it is."

The first bell rings. I gather the silver wrapping paper and crumple it into a ball. Rachel carries that and our empty coffee cups to a trash can backstage. Elizabeth puts my frames into a paper grocery bag and then rolls down the top before handing it back to me.

“I assume we can’t stop by before you leave?” Elizabeth asks.

“Probably not,” I say. I follow them down the steps, and we take our time walking up the aisle to the back of the theater. “I’ll be in bed early tonight so I can work a couple of hours before school tomorrow. And then we leave first thing Wednesday morning.”

“What time?” Rachel asks. “Maybe we—”

“Three a.m.,” I say, laughing. From our farm in Oregon to our lot in California, it’s about a seventeen-hour drive, depending on bathroom breaks and holiday traffic. “Of course, if you want to get up that early . . .”

“That’s okay,” Elizabeth says. “We’ll send you good thoughts in our dreams.”

“Do you have all your assignments?” Rachel asks.

“I believe so.” Two winters ago, there were maybe a dozen of us migrating tree-lot kids at school. This year, we’re down to three. Thankfully, with so many farms in the area, teachers are used to accommodating different harvest times. “Monsieur Cappeau is worried about my ability to *pratiquer mon français* while I’m gone, so he’s making me call in once a week for a chat.”

Rachel winks at me. “Is that the only reason he wants you to call?”

“Don’t be gross,” I say.

“Remember,” Elizabeth says, “Sierra doesn’t like older men.”

I’m laughing now. “You’re talking about Paul, right? We

only went out once, but then he got caught with an open can of beer in his friend's car."

"In his defense, he wasn't driving," Rachel points out. Before I can respond, she holds up her hand. "But I get it. You saw that as a sign of impending alcoholism. Or bad decision making. Or . . . something."

Elizabeth shakes her head. "You are way too fussy, Sierra."

Rachel and Elizabeth always give me a hard time about my standards with guys. I've just watched too many girls end up with guys who bring them down. Maybe not at first, but eventually. Why waste years or months, or even days, on someone like that?

Before we reach the double doors that lead back into the halls, Elizabeth takes a step ahead and spins toward us. "I'm going to be late for English, but let's meet up for lunch, okay?"

I smile because we always meet up for lunch.

We push our way into the halls and Elizabeth disappears into the bustle of students.

"Two more lunches," Rachel says. She pretends to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes as we walk. "That's all we get. It almost makes me want to—"

"Stop!" I say. "Don't say it."

"Oh, don't worry about me." Rachel waves her hand dismissively. "I've got plenty to keep me busy while you party it up in California. Let's see, next Monday we'll start tearing down the set. That should take a week or so. Then I'll help the dance committee finish designing the winter formal. It's not theater, but I like to use my talents where they're needed."

“Do they have a theme for this year yet?” I ask.

“Snow Globe of Love,” she says. “It sounds cheesy, I know, but I’ve got some great ideas. I want to decorate the whole gym to look like you’re dancing in the middle of a snow globe. So I’ll be plenty busy until you get back.”

“See? You’ll hardly miss me,” I say.

“That’s right,” Rachel says. She nudges me as we continue to walk. “But you’d better miss me.”

And I will. For my entire life, missing my friends has been a Christmas tradition.