

Author of *Give Me a Sign*

ANNA SORTINO

# On the Bright Side

When life takes  
a turn, follow  
your heart.



ALSO BY ANNA SORTINO

*Give Me a Sign*

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ANNA SORTINO

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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*For Gabe*



## NOTE

THE ITALICIZED TEXT is an English translation of American Sign Language used by the characters.

## CHAPTER ONE

---

### Ellie

THE STATE SHUT down my school. Some crap about budget cuts. On my last day as a junior, I'm clearing out my dorm to leave. Except this time, I won't get to come back next fall.

I stomp my foot to get Kayla's attention. She's on the other side of our dorm, packing up her things. She looks my way. "*Do you have scissors?*" I sign, then gesture toward the door. "*You know, something that could...*" Clasping my fingers together, I make a prying motion, indicating removing our nameplates that are on the other side.

Kayla plays with the end of her long ponytail as she thinks. "*Maybe a fork!*" She cheerfully points toward the silverware we'd hoarded from the cafeteria that's still on the vanity in front of the mirror.

"*Right,*" I sign, tapping my hands together, index fingers extended. I try to match her enthusiasm, but that's always been difficult. My default range of emotions doesn't stretch that far.

Stepping outside the room, I forcefully remove the silver rectangle that says ELLIE EGAN beneath the Brandview School for the Deaf logo. No one's going to use this, so I'm taking it. I toss Kayla's to her as I shove mine into my overpacked suitcase, beneath my Sonic Boom alarm clock.

Our usually messy living quarters are now devoid of the decorations that made it a cozy home. With the absence of our belongings, the issues are more noticeable. The peeling gray paint. The stained carpeting. The crack across the ceiling that I'd watched slowly grow. All these amenities went unfixed

because the government had no interest in renovations when they'd been long conspiring to kick us all out.

With each passing year, there were fewer teachers, textbooks, and resources. The state stripped away the essentials until we were left with nothing. Now we're being sent back to our home districts, left to fend for ourselves. But we shouldn't worry! Who needs a fully immersive Deaf school when I can have a random adult interpreter trailing me around Amber High? In case it isn't clear, I'm not looking forward to this.

The lights flicker twice, alerting us to someone at the door. Cody stands there, leaning against the open frame and casually waving for my attention.

Kayla takes this as her cue to leave. "*See you around,*" she signs, giving me a quick hug and my boyfriend the slightest of nods as she rolls out her suitcase. Their indifference to each other is likely why Kayla and I didn't hang out much outside of our dorm despite rooming together every year at Brandview. She never liked Cody, and he always had a monopoly on my time anyway.

Cody glances around the empty dorm. He's still in the same sweatpants and BSD football T-shirt he was wearing last night, possibly because everything else is packed away. He steps forward, slinging an arm around me, much like he did my very first day here, letting me know that this was where I was meant to be.

"*Want to hang out down by the tree for a bit?*" he asks.

"*Y-e-s.*" I sign the word Y to the S for added emphasis that a simple nod of my hand wouldn't have conveyed.

He plants a sweet kiss on my cheek. His bloodshot eyes suggest he hasn't gotten much rest. I can tell he stayed out with the guys much later after I went to sleep. All of us at Brandview want to stretch the time we have left here. Yet, by three o'clock today, Cody and I will be headed to opposite ends of Ohio.

"*Oh, I have this for you.*" I reach into my tote and retrieve the navy sweater I'd spent the last few weeks knitting for him.

"*Thank you, Grandma,*" he signs with a smirk.

I nudge him encouragingly. "*Feel how soft it is!*"

*“It’s nice.”* But he places it back with my things. *“I don’t have room. Bring it for me when you visit.”*

*“Sure.”* I should have planned to do that from the beginning. Of course he doesn’t have space to take this right now with everything else he has to bring home. I just would feel better about the distance if we’d left with parting gifts of some kind.

I brush back his scruffy blond hair as he smiles, taking my hand. We walk through the maze of hallways to the heavy back door of the dormitory. Turning onto the worn trail toward a small shaded grove, he places his arm around my waist, squeezing me tight. This is our spot, where we’d sneak out to if our roommates were occupying the dorms.

Cody sits down on the grass. I sit beside him and reach for the spare bobby pins clasped on my bra so that I can pin back my auburn hair. This could be any other afternoon. Except it’s the last one.

I turn to sign, *“It’s all weird. It’s still not real to me yet.”*

*“I’ll miss it.”* He glances around, taking everything in.

The large century-old brick manor where we had our classes. The eighties-era bunker-style building that housed our vastly outdated dorm rooms. The playground across the quad where the two of us had first kissed by the swings when we were twelve. Is he remembering all the same moments, too? So many of my memories at this place are intertwined with Cody.

I fell for him while discovering my love of sign language and Deaf culture. How do I maintain this part of me without him?

*“I don’t want to leave.”* Taking a deep breath, I fight to hold back tears.

Cody is stoic. *“I guess we were almost done here anyway.”*

*“Exactly. Why’d they have to take it all away from us now? We had one more year.”* I repeat, *“One.”*

*“There’s no perfect timing.”* He stares up at the sky.

It’s different for him. His entire family is Deaf.

But for me, Brandview was home. Not back with my hearing family who don’t sign. I’m only myself here. How am I supposed to go from total ASL immersion to being probably the only Deaf kid at Amber High?

*“Do you know anyone at your new school?”* I was initially surprised when I found out that Cody would be mainstreamed next year, too. I figured his family might be able to send him away to another Deaf school somewhere, but not all of them are large enough to have their own competitive athletics programs the way Brandview did, so Cody ultimately chose to go to the public school back home in Powell Heights.

*“Yeah, I toured and met the football team.”* He checks something on his phone and chuckles but doesn’t tell me what it was. *“Because I’ve got training with the guys before playing in the fall.”*

*“That’s nice.”* Cody hadn’t told me he’d visited and gotten to know the team already. Did that happen when he went home over spring break? I hate the distance between us already. I’m jealous of his instant new friends and presumably busy summer schedule, since my spare time is occupied by solitary activities such as reading or knitting. *“Bet playing there won’t be as fun.”*

He shrugs. *“It’ll be fine.”*

We’ve been inseparable at Brandview. Wherever I go, he’s there. Anywhere he goes, I’m there. Ever since I turned the corner my first week here, when—lost, overwhelmed, and a touch homesick—I ran into Cody. He sized me up with an amused grin and signed for me to stop crying. I hadn’t been and was ready to protest, but as I fumbled to remember the basic ASL I’d learned during orientation, he stepped close and offered his hand. I took it without hesitation, forgetting my anger. Under his wing, I found my place at Brandview, even though I didn’t come from a Deaf family or arrive fluent in sign.

But last night, I noticed the first crack, a tear at the seams between us that now threatens to unravel further. It made sense that Cody wanted time alone to say goodbye to the guys so that they wouldn’t intrude on our final hour. However, he isn’t giving me much to work with. I guess he’s processing this last day differently than I am. I want to reminisce and cry over how much we’ll miss each other. Meanwhile, he seems content to sit still and let it all wash over us.

*“We’ll still move back here, right?”* I ask. *“After graduation?”*

I may be imagining it, but he pauses for a beat, then slowly signs, “*Yeah, we have our plan.*”

Once we’re done with high school, Cody and I are going to get a cheap place in the town of Brandview, deliver food for apps, and save money to open our Deaf-owned auto shop. That’s not entirely where I always envisioned myself, but it’s been our goal practically since we started dating. Always good with cars, he’ll do repairs while I run the office. We’ll be our own boss with no one else to answer to. It beats being stuck in some hearing-centric office somewhere, wasting away.

Sure, this area is a little small-town suffocating and religiously overbearing. But because of the institute, lots of graduates stick around. It’s a Deaf enclave...Will it still be once BSD is shut down? Where else are Cody and I supposed to craft our future? Maybe we could try a new city with a large Deaf population, like DC, Rochester, or LA?

For the next year, Cody will be with his family up by Cleveland, while I’ll be with mine outside Cincinnati near the Indiana border. Two hundred and sixty-two miles. A four-hour-and-thirteen-minute drive. Doable for summertime visits, but more difficult for weekends. Not to mention expensive.

I keep telling myself we’ll make it through. I know it.

What I’m not sure about is how I’ll survive an entire year back in the hearing world. And I’ve lived so much of my life without parental supervision that it’s going to be difficult to be trapped under the same roof as my family year-round.

At least it’s only temporary.

“*When do you think you’ll be able to visit?*” I ask, needing to get the logistics straight and to know it won’t be long before I see him again. “*Or do you want me to drive up to you first?*”

“*Look.*” Cody’s distracted and points to a truck that’s pulled up alongside the manor.

We watch as a small crew methodically removes and loads all the classroom furniture to take away. Are they going to sell it, or is it headed straight to a landfill? I’ve checked several times, but there hasn’t been any

announcement about what they're going to do with the property yet. It'd be a shame if this beautiful building sat empty. Still, I'd rather that than it be torn down.

Whatever it turns into, maybe they'll have some sort of plaque in the entryway commemorating how long this building served as a school and some of its historical attributes. Maybe they'll leave the wall of class portraits of each graduating class, even though my own legacy here will never be framed.

Years from now, people looking at these artifacts won't see the whole story.

They won't understand how generations of Deaf students once made Brandview our own. And how easily those in charge were able to take it away from us.

I squeeze Cody's hand. At least by holding on to him, I'll be keeping part of this place with me when I leave.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

# Jackson

THE SCORE IS one to one. I kick the ball across the bright green field. With the goalposts ahead of me, I have a clear path to score, and then the championship is in the bag. I can already taste sweet victory. It's all but a guarantee now that Amber High varsity soccer will win state.

Walnut West is struggling. Their defense is exhausted, and their goalie has been on his heels all game. Double overtime will do that, and so will penalty kicks, but those won't be necessary when I make this shot. I dribble just inside the box, aligning and planting my left leg, ignoring the tingling sensation shooting up my calf. In a few short seconds, the ball will be in their goal, and the game will be ours. I swing my right foot back to make the kick.

Then I collapse.

"Shit!" someone shouts behind me, skidding to a stop to not topple over my crumpled body.

It's like the ground gave way beneath me. There are loud gasps from the bleachers. I blink as my head spins, trying to piece together what happened. But it's like there's a gap in my memory. One moment I'm about to score, and the next I'm sprawled out on the grass.

My teammates are left scrambling as our opponents take advantage of the situation. Falling isn't new to me—we knock into each other on the field all the time—but this time, no one else was around. It was just me and gravity, and for some reason, I'm down. When I'm finally able to catch my breath, I see Walnut West's forward on a breakaway to our goal. They must have



played a long ball down the field while I've been on the ground. And now my cousin, guarding our net, fails to save my mistake.

"Noooooooo!" I shout faintly as Walnut West scores a deciding point.

Sweat drips down my temple and onto my jersey. *Is it hotter than usual?* I mean to stand up, but I'm hit with exhaustion, so I stay planted in the grass. Coach calls for a time-out.

"What was that, Jackson?!" Liam shouts, running my way. He towers over me, his light skin reddening with anger as he spits on the grass. It didn't seem to be aimed at me, but I can't say for sure.

Tucking his gloves beneath his arm, my cousin runs over from the end goal to help me up. While the rest of the team keeps their distance and joins the huddle, undoubtedly processing their feelings about the turn this game has taken, Darius is the only one who seems concerned about me. "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"I—" I'm usually quick to bring the optimism, but the words are hard to find.

It's difficult to explain, because I do have a sinking suspicion about what happened. Shaking out my legs, I try to feel out if there's more numbness than usual. *When will this go away?*

They fell asleep a week ago, and I never imagined this many days later I'd still be waiting for them to wake up. What started as a strange vibration at the bottom of my feet quickly spread to my toes and up my calves until my entire legs were engulfed in some indescribable tingly feeling. I thought I could wait it out. *Fight through the pain*, as my dad always says. *Pain is just weakness leaving the body. Stop making excuses and try harder.* There was no reason I couldn't live with this numbness and play the rest of the season in spite of it, like it was some strange fluke.

I notice as my parents leave their seats and rush to the field. They're the holistic type, avoidant of making doctor appointments unless absolutely necessary. Which is why I hadn't told them about my legs. I could still wiggle my toes and walk normally. I didn't need a doctor. Now I'm not so sure.

Liam is still looming nearby, muttering some choice words, but he clears the area as adults hurry over.

“Messina!” Both my cousin and I look up as our last name is called out. Coach approaches, leaning beneath my arm to hold me up, gesturing for his assistant to grab my other side.

“I can walk it off,” I insist, but Coach immediately puts a stop to that.

“This will *look* better,” Coach whispers to me. “Let’s get you to the trainer.”

*Right, because otherwise I look like the clumsy asshole who blew the game for no good reason.*

Coach and Darius return to the team while I wrap an arm around the assistant coach’s shoulder and hobble off the pitch. My parents trail closely behind us.

Mom seems to be talking to herself now, probably trying to figure out which one of her supplements I should have been taking to prevent this. “Are you all right, Jackson?” she asks.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine,” I say with no strain in my voice.

From my dad’s scoff, I can tell he disagrees with this display of frailty. I really wish they’d let me walk off by myself. Yet, as I put one foot in front of the other, my legs drag heavily along the ground, and I stumble. I guess I’m playing into appearances even if I don’t mean to. I’m *fine*, really—it’s embarrassing to have this many eyes watching me struggle to get away.

“You can lie low for a bit,” the assistant coach tells me reassuringly.

“Accidents happen, I guess,” I say, mustering up a half-hearted grin. “They can get it back.”

So close to summer break, it’s not surprising to find the school is empty on a Saturday. We go in through the door nearest to the field, making our way through the dark hallway to the athletics office. I shrug off assistance. There’s no need to keep up the pretense now that we’re away from the curious crowds. “I can walk by myself.”

But my gait is slow and meandering, and I reach to steady myself against the wall a few more times than I’d care to admit. I can’t remember it ever

taking this long to get through these corridors before. My parents observe me closely.

“It isn’t swollen,” my dad states, scratching a finger against his freshly shaven cheek.

Mom gathers her long brown hair over one shoulder and squats to check my legs, but I don’t stop long enough to let her inspect. “No, it doesn’t seem to be. But we’d need to get the shin guard off to tell.” She tries to pull down a knee-high sock to get a glimpse.

“You’re going to trip me.” I shoo her away.

She stands back, hands resting on her hips. “Does it feel like anything’s strained?”

“We’re almost there; *relax*.” I wish they’d chill, but they have a tendency to hover. It’s the major downside of being the only child of parents who have more time and money than they know what to do with. And ever since discovering CrossFit a few years ago, they think there’s nothing heavy weights and protein smoothies can’t fix.

After what feels like forever, we reach the athletic trainer’s office. She is eating a granola bar and watching a movie on her laptop but jumps to assist immediately. There’s obvious relief when she sees no blood or terribly contorted body parts.

I climb onto the examination table, and she inspects my ankle and leg, not seeming too concerned. It’s awkward, lying here while my parents and one of my coaches stand around. I’m mortified there’s nothing wrong. Like, obviously I want there to be nothing wrong, but at this point, a *little* something wrong would make this whole situation not a waste of time. Can there just be anything to prove this hasn’t all been in my head?

“Hmm,” the trainer says, bending my left knee back and forth, then switching to the right. “Does anything feel different?”

I shift to sit upright. “Like I’ve sat too long and my legs fell asleep.”

She stands back, putting her hands on her hips. “And how long has this been going on?”

*At least a week.* But I see my parents—Dad’s jaw tightening, while Mom frets. “A few days,” I answer, wanting to convey the gravity of the situation

while also not making too much of a fuss.

The trainer grabs her clipboard and makes a note. “You know, it could be a pinched nerve.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I nod like I know what she’s talking about. “How would that work?”

“There could be too much pressure on a nerve somewhere like your lower back,” she explains. “It can go away on its own with rest or massage. But if it continues too long or gets worse, definitely go see your doctor.”

“I’ve got some potassium, Jackson,” my mom says, holding up a bottle of capsules, since for some reason, she was already carrying it around in her purse. “And I can think of a few yoga moves that might help stretch it out when we get home.”

“Okay.” I stand from the table, wincing as I place my feet on the ground. As I expected, there’s nothing to do but wait it out. No use worrying about it. But I do need to start brainstorming excuses so that I won’t have to sit in on an exercise class full of bored housewives.

The game must’ve ended pretty quickly after my fall—there’d only been a minute or so left on the clock—since Darius is now walking into the room.

“Did we—” I start to ask, but my cousin’s solemn shrug gives it away.

We lost.

We should’ve won, but we lost. The teams were too evenly matched for Amber to gain back any momentum in so little time.

“Well, I’ll meet you at the car,” I tell my parents, eager to get away from my father’s unamused gaze.

“Are you doing all right, though?” Darius removes the sweatband from his forehead, shaking out his Persian curls inherited from my aunt. “Want me to grab your stuff?”

“Nah, I got it.” I shrug, not sure how to explain what happened. “And I think I’ll be fine.” We head to the locker room while the assistant coach hangs back to chat with the trainer.

“Dang, Uncle Roberto was not having it,” Darius comments once he’s sure my parents are long out of earshot.