

ERIN STEWART

AUTHOR OF *THE WORDS WE KEEP*

EVERY BORROWED BEAT

A SECOND CHANCE
AT LIFE,
A FIRST CHANCE
AT LOVE



ALSO BY ERIN STEWART

Scars Like Wings

The Words We Keep



ERIN STEWART

EVERY
BORROWED
BEAT

DELACORTE PRESS

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to ellie
i carry you in my heart



CHAPTER ONE

"I SHOULD HAVE DIED.

I was supposed to die.

Except I didn't—someone else did.

And now I'm living on borrowed time with a borrowed heart just thump-thump-thumping away.

The problem with all this borrowing?

You begin to forget what part of you is actually, well, you."



The video freezes on a particularly unattractive expression where I look like I'm about to sneeze or fart or, horror of horrors, simultaneously do both. If I were going to post this, I'd definitely need to pick a less humiliating final frame.

But I'm *not* going to post this video. I knew that before I even hit record.

An incoming call lights up my phone. Before I answer, I save the video to my drafts folder with all my other unposted clips, sixteen weeks' worth of me rambling about my new so-called life.

When I hit accept, Chloe's face fills the screen.

“You do it, yet?” She jumps right in like we were already mid-conversation. Chloe’s never beaten around a bush in her life. I guess that’s one of the first things to go when you’re slapped with an expiration date. No time for formalities.

I shake my head. Chloe groans, her voice filling my room even though she’s six hundred miles away on the California coast, sucking up that salty sea-level air, trying to eke out a little more life.

“Sydney Wells, don’t make me crawl through this phone and post that video for you.” The oxygen cannula stuck up her nose tells me it’s been a bad night. I know Chloe better than to ask about it. “We’re supposed to be running this account *together*. I need you.”

That’s a stretch. Chloe’s the force behind *TheWaitingList*, our YouTube channel, where she posts videos of what it’s like to live on a transplant list with a crappy heart. She’s honest about it—raw—and also hilarious, which is why we have almost twenty thousand subscribers. She’s pretty much a celebrity in the transplant world.

I used to post, too. But now it feels, I don’t know, weird. But then again, what doesn’t these days?

“It’s called *TheWaitingList*, Chlo. And maybe you didn’t hear but”—I tug my shirt collar down below my clavicle, barely enough to reveal the top of my scar. It’s *healing beautifully*, Dr. Russell says, but it’s still purply red enough to have some serious shock factor—“I’m not waiting anymore.”

I feel Chloe’s eye roll all the way from Cali.

“Hello? That’s kind of the whole point,” she says. “You’re the success story people need to hear.”

Chloe leans in close to the camera. Her lips are blue tinged and her eyes have a purple cast beneath them, little semicircles of sleep she didn’t get. She definitely pulled an all-nighter.

The guilt sets in quick. Here I am complaining about post-transplant life, and she’s sucking oxygen through the equivalent of a crimped straw. This is why I can’t post *any* of my videos: I’m the one who lived.

I have no right to grief.

“Our fans are starting to wonder,” she whispers.

“Wonder what?”

“If you died.”

“Well, as you can see, I didn’t.”

She leans even closer so she’s one big old eyeball.

“Debatable.”

In the bottom of the screen, a face I don’t recognize looks back at me. Our viewers probably wouldn’t recognize me, either. Before the transplant, my face was thin, no, *gaunt*. My lips had the same perma-blue hue Chloe’s do now. Near the end, I couldn’t go more than ten minutes without my oxygen. Now I’m *pleasantly plump*, as Mom would say. Dr. Russell calls it moonface, a way-too-cutesy term for how the prednisone makes my face an overstuffed balloon.

“What am I even supposed to post about?” I say. “I’m hardly inspirational. I’m seventeen and have zero idea what I’m doing with my life, and zero friends unless you include my parents. And you barely count.”

“Rude,” Chloe says.

“You know what I mean. It’s not like we can just get together and hang out at the...wherever normal people hang out.”

“*Normal* people?” she echoes, but her grin tells me she’s messing with me.

“I’m just saying, I have no life worth posting about. At the moment, I have exactly two hobbies.” I hold my fingers up to count dramatically in the screen. “One: very slow, old-lady walks around the cul-de-sac with my aforementioned best friends slash parents—”

“Which sounds pretty great,” she mutters, and a stab of guilt goes through me.

“And two,” I continue, “reading local obituaries.”

Chloe frowns. “You’re still doing that?”

“Maybe.”

“I thought you found her? The girl from that small town?”

I nod. “I’m like ninety-nine percent sure. But it doesn’t hurt to keep checking.”

Chloe sighs out long and low.

“You need to come back to Broken Hearts Club,” she finally says, matter-of-factly. “Oh my gosh, last week, Josh, you know, the liver kid? He was going on and on about how he’s going to die without having sex, and I swear I almost banged the kid just to shut—”

A coughing attack hits Chloe before she can finish. She gives me a thumbs-up but then moves the screen away from her face. I can hear her hacking off camera. Her heart may be failing, but it’s her lungs that feel it. And her fits are getting worse. They’ve *been* getting worse since I met her two years ago in the online transplant support group.

Our moms both enrolled us after they got worried we were becoming miserable teenage hermits. It’s all very *Fault in Our Stars*, except there are no hot boys with an affinity for metaphor. Oh, and also, those cancer kids weren’t sitting around waiting for the phone to ring because huzzah! Someone has died! You get to live!

We talk about waiting (which is every bit as tedious as it sounds), and we talk numbers: oxygen saturations and liver stats and how many people have to die before we get to the top of the list. And will they die in the appropriate mile radius in the right way with the right blood type and perfectly sized organ? Will someone else’s tragedy be my salvation?

It’s a bit morbid, if you ask me (which my mom did *not* before signing me up). But I did meet Chloe, so there’s that. She nicknamed the whole thing Broken Hearts (and Spare Parts) Club and made it almost bearable each week: Watching people get better, watching them get worse. Watching everyone move up and down the waiting list like a macabre game of musical chairs.

Because that’s what it is, isn’t it? A sick game of chance where winning means someone else loses. Big-time.

I haven’t been back to group since my surgery. I highly doubt anyone wants me there, lording my brand-spanking-new heart over their failing

organs.

Chloe's face reappears, flushed and sweaty. She takes a swig from the water bottle next to her. It's the behemoth kind with a ribbed straw they give you in the hospital. I guess that's another essential of life on the list: an impressive collection of hospital souvenirs.

"All I'm saying is, you did it, Syd. You're here. That's a *good* thing. Celebrate it." A wide smile spreads across her face. "Speaking of which, I got an email from your mother. Something about a *big day*."

She says *big day* with ample sarcasm. It's my mom's term, and the definition has grown egregiously generous in the last few years. First poop post-surgery? Big day! First walk around the cul-de-sac? Get some balloons! First clean heart biopsy? Let's make a Chatbook!

And today?

Today, I'm leaving the house. Dr. Russell cleared me to drive a full month ago, but I've waited until I actually have somewhere to go. Somewhere important.

"So, whaddya gonna do?" Chloe asks.

I give Chloe a look, because she knows good and well what I'm going to do. I told her all about my *big driving day* plans last week. She shakes her head.

"No."

"Yes."

"Sydney. That's a *bad* idea." Her face is suddenly somber, a look she reserves for only her most serious disapproval.

And she's right. I know she's right. But for the past two years, I've lived with one thought: if someone doesn't die soon, then I will. That messes with a person. Makes you think about what your life is worth—and who should die instead.

And then, someone does.

"Why can't you just stalk her on social like, as you would say, a *normal* person does," Chloe adds.

“I’ve looked. Nothing,” I say. “Hey, aren’t *you* the one who just said I need to get a life?”

“Yeah. Your *own* life.”

“Well, consider this my first step.” I return Chloe’s intense stare. “Who knows, maybe I’ll be so inspired that I’ll film an extensive and utterly compelling video telling all our followers about my *big day* out.”

Chloe’s lips form a tight line.

“I won’t hold my breath.” A little smirk plays at the corner of her mouth. “Even if I could.”

I laugh, and so does she. This is why we have so many followers—Chloe literally laughs in the face of death.

Before she hangs up, Chloe leans in one more time, until all I can see is her enormous eye.

“For real, though, Syd. The obits thing is weird enough, but this”—she pauses, to let the oxygen catch up to her or because she’s trying to find the right words—“just don’t get too close.”

“Cross my recycled heart and hope to die,” I say right before I hang up.

The screen goes blank. My room goes quiet.

Well, except for the thumping in my chest, in my ears, in every piece of me, my new heart just pumping away, steady and even and perfect like it always does.

One hundred thousand beats per day. In sixteen weeks, that’s 11.2 million beats.

Beats that should have been hers.

At least, I’m 99 percent sure it’s a *her*. And for the past four months, all I’ve had are questions. What kind of life did she have? What plans did she have for all the years I stole?

The questions rattle around in my brain pretty much constantly. First thing in the morning, last thing at night. With every borrowed beat.

Which is why Mom’s right, today *is* a big day. Not because I’m leaving the house for something other than a doctor’s appointment or a geriatric walkabout.

But because today, I finally get my answers.

CHAPTER TWO

MOM'S USING THE GOOD DISHES. The bone china with the platinum band around the edge.

It's part of her cherish-the-little-things plan. Celebrate every day. Use the fancy towels. Light the special candles. Pile the wedding china high with pancakes on a Tuesday.

"What am I saving these for?" Mom said the first time she brought the dishes down from the attic. It was a year ago, after Dr. Russell told me I was in a particularly craptacular spot on the waiting list—not sick enough to be a transplant priority, not healthy enough to make it past my teens.

"*Today* is the occasion," Mom had announced that afternoon. "I'm tired of waiting."

Life on the list can do that to a person.

I stand at the kitchen doorway for a second before entering. Dad's reading a book of poetry while eating breakfast because of course he is. He lives and breathes all those dead poets, and he expects his students at the community college to do the same.

If today weren't a *big day*, I'd be sitting next to him with one of my heart books. That's what Dad calls the stack by my bed, a strange mix of medical texts about the human heart and rom-coms about teenagers, aka stories about all the stuff I've missed. I can't get enough of all the tropes—fake dating and enemies to lovers and *oh my gosh, there's two of us and only one*

bed! I love it all. Chloe says my kissy-kissy books are boring. She likes dragons and sword fights and far-off made-up lands. I want real life—crushes and kisses and parties and, well, being a normal seventeen-year-old. That's *my* fantasy.

I have my latest read, *Love at First Bite*—which promises ample will-they-won't-they tension in some sort of bakery—tucked under my arm, trying to look as unsuspecting as possible. And I *always* have a book in case there's a long wait at the doctor or Mom has to run into a store that's too peopley for me.

I clutch *First Bite* while Mom lays out my morning pill parade next to my fancy plate. It's quite the cocktail of antirejection drugs, steroids, antibiotics and vitamins, all designed to help my body play nice with my new heart.

I'm not out of the woods yet (as Mom and Dr. Russell *love* to remind me).

Dad reads some poem out loud to Mom while she counts pills, and seeing them there, a halo of morning sunlight encircling them, I seriously reconsider going out today. This house, my parents, they've been my whole world since eighth grade. That's three years of just the three of us. And yes, I'm one part pathetic, two parts loser that my idea of a fun Friday night is a fiction read-a-thon or one of Mom's black-and-white movies, but it's nice. Safe. Familiar.

Dad glances up and sees me, teetering in the doorway. He raises his wineglass of orange juice in my direction.

"Big day," he says with a wink.

"There she is!" Mom claps. "Hold it right there."

She scurries into the kitchen and returns with the car keys and her phone. I pose for the shot with the key ring dangling off my finger, my book under my arm and my hobo bag slung over my shoulder. It contains the most important ingredient for today's outing: my notebook.

It's all a bit silly, really. You'd think it was my first time behind the wheel ever, not just since the transplant. Mom's looking down at her photos.

Already reliving this *big day*.

Satisfied, Mom motions for me to sit and stacks my plate with pancakes, if that's what you can legally call these fiber-fortified whole-grain heart-healthy abominations. While I eat, my parents do that thing where they're talking to me, but actually over me and each other.

Mom: So, what are your plans for today?

Dad: Car's all gassed up.

Mom: You know who I ran into yesterday? Bree Bennet's mom. Remember Bree? You used to be such good friends. Maybe you could go see her?

Dad: Checked the tires, too.

Mom: She was a nice girl. Maybe it's time to reach out to your old friends, now that you...that things are looking up?

Dad: You got your license? And money, do you need more money?

Mom: Oh, I put hand sanitizer and Clorox wipes on the front seat. In case you go in somewhere. Do you think you'll go in somewhere?

Dad: No crowds.

Mom: Or salads. Or sushi. Maybe don't eat until you get home.

Dad: Andrea, the girl can eat.

Mom: (laughing a bit too high-pitched) Of course she can. It's just Dr. Russell said that thing about foodborne infection.

Dad: Oh, please. She didn't come this far to get taken down by a California roll. Right, Syd?

They're both staring at me now. I swallow a bite of imitation pancake.

"I'm just gonna cruise around a bit. You know, take my new ticker for a spin." I hold up my book. "Maybe stop and read somewhere quiet."

It's a lie. A small one. The perfectly harmless, white variety that's a *must* for life on the list.

We've all gotten pretty good at them over the last three years. *What's meant to happen will happen. The doctors know what they're doing. It's all going to be okay.* We slip the little half lies in without even thinking, anything to avoid looking directly at the truth.