



They shared a ride. Can they share their hearts?

# *The* PICK-UP



MIRANDA  
KENNEALLY



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**PICK-UP**



**MIRANDA  
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*For a fan (and friend!)  
who's been there from the beginning:  
Andrea Soule*

## **Content Warning**

This book contains depictions of abusive parenting.

**Friday**

# Mari

A black sedan pulls up in front of the curb.

The car has a dented rear end, and the passenger-side mirror is barely hanging on. It looks like it's taken a thousand road trips.

"Is this guy going to murder us?" I ask my stepsister, Sierra.

She chews her gum. "Does the license plate match what's on the app?"

I check the license plate against the one displayed on my phone. "Yeah. But listen. If we die, just remember it was your idea to do Ryde pool."

I open the back door and we slide inside. My seat cushion is held together with duct tape. How is this even legal?

The driver turns the music down. "Are you Mari?"

I nod at him in the rearview mirror, then check his name on my Ryde app. "And you're Charles?"

"That's right."

Once we've confirmed identities, the car edges out into busy Friday-night traffic toward downtown. My dad's place is on Chicago's Gold Coast. Ever since he divorced Mom and moved away two years ago, I've only visited him a couple times. I'd never admit this to my mother, but I love this city. I can't get enough of it.

While Sierra scrolls on her phone, I take the opportunity to gaze out the window at Lake Michigan, so vast and blue it's practically the ocean. Boats full of sunbathers dot the surface. It's only six o'clock in late July, so the summer sun is still blazing.

It's a perfect night for a music festival—that's why I'm in town for the weekend. My absolute favorite artist, Millie Jade, is playing at Lollapalooza on Sunday. Listening to her music has gotten me through the best of times and worst of times, and I can't wait to see her perform live.

Sierra bought me a ticket as a gift for my birthday. As much as I worried about leaving Mom behind at home alone this weekend, Sierra's always been kind to me, and I couldn't turn down the opportunity to spend an entire weekend dancing at a concert.

The car begins to slow and turns down a side street. The driver turns the radio down. "Picking up passengers," Charles says.

Sierra insisted on the pool option so we could save three whole dollars, so other riders will be joining us. I'm praying they're not sketchy old men. How can I have the best weekend of my life if I'm dead?

The car rolls up in front of two guys.

Two very cute guys.

I glance at Sierra. She raises her eyebrows at them.

She scoots over to the door, forcing me to take the middle of the back seat.

"No, don't," I snap.

"You can thank me later," she replies with a smug smile on her face.

One of the guys climbs in beside me, and the other takes shotgun. The guy in front is definitely in college, or older, but the one next to me seems about my age. They must be at least six feet tall, and they're both buff like they play sports. To make a long story short—these boys do not fit in this tiny car.

By no choice of our own, the younger guy and I are sandwiched together in the back seat. Our thighs touch. Our arms touch. It's a game of Twister.

"It's kind of cramped in here," Mr. Buff says, adjusting his shoulders to get comfortable. "I might have to sit on your lap."

I lift an eyebrow. "Isn't the guy supposed to offer up his lap to the girl?"

He dramatically clutches his chest. "That's rather forward of you."

Sierra elbows me in the side and makes eyes at me.

A text from her appears on my phone screen: ***Dammmmmmmn he's hot.***

He takes a sharp breath.

I flick my screen off.

Crap. Did he see what Sierra wrote?

I mean, she's not wrong. He has longish, messy, dark blond hair and his skin's tanned like a California surfer's. A smattering of dark freckles dots his nose, increasing his cuteness by a factor of gazillion. A leather cord with a silver charm hangs around his neck. A smartwatch and a collection of leather and cloth bracelets ring his wrists. His body definitely knows how to fill out that black T-shirt. Those muscular forearms look superhuman.

Even though it's hotter than the sun outside and we're nowhere near a forest, he's wearing a pair of hiking boots. What's that about?

"So this is Mari," my stepsister says. "And I'm Sierra."

I slap her thigh and shoot her a look. *What gives?*

I hear Mr. Buff take another sharp breath. He glances at me sideways, and nods with a small smile. His eyes are the same sparkling blue as the lake.

I don't think this guy is going to murder us.

We look at each other longer than strangers should. With eyes like those, it's hard not to.

"Since my very impolite brother isn't going to introduce us, I'm Tyler," the older guy in the front seat says.

"And who are you?" I ask the boy next to me.

"I'm T.J."

*Well, hell-o, T.J.*



# T.J.

When it comes to girls, I have shit luck.

For most of high school, plenty of girls looked my way—to laugh at my jokes. To gossip with me. To ask for advice. To reach something on the top shelf.

A few even gave me sweet, shy smiles. Maybe they were interested in me?

But none of them ever full-on stared at me the way Mari is right now.

Her full lips part as she looks into my eyes. She has long, curly dark hair the color of a chestnut and wears rectangular glasses that look specifically hers, like how Wonder Woman's leather getup is made for her body. My eyes travel from her silver Converse high-tops up her long legs to a red leather skirt and white T-shirt.

Her clothes remind me of what girls wear to school dances. My worst memory flashes to mind, the time in middle school when I was slow dancing with Lacey Sutton, and it felt so warm and good that I leaned in to kiss her. As soon as our lips met, she ducked away. Wouldn't look at me. Never talked to me again. I guess she'd only agreed to dance with me as a charity case.

Even though girls had smiled at me in high school, I couldn't figure out how to talk to them, to take things up a level. What if the girl yanked away from me again? If that happened a second time, I'd apply to be an exchange student to Mars rather than face the shame.

My brother never had any problems getting a girlfriend.

To be honest, Tyler never had trouble doing much of anything.

4.0 GPA. Pick of colleges. Near-perfect math score on the SAT. Star of the high school tennis team. He secured a job at a hedge fund an entire year before he graduated from the University of Chicago.

When Tyler was home for Christmas break last year, I confided in him about my total lack of girl experience. While we were playing Xbox, when our eyes were firmly planted on the TV screen—so Tyler wouldn't see how embarrassed I was—I asked for help.

“How can I meet a girl? One who, like, wants me?”

“If you like a girl, just talk to her.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, like that's ever worked. If I'm alone with a girl, nothing happens. We end up talking or goofing off. They aren't into me.”

“If you're not making a move, they probably think you aren't into them.”

Huh. I'd never considered that, but it made sense. In the fall, I'd gone with my parents to Dad's company picnic and ended up wandering around with Samantha Henley. She and I had such a good time together. Afterward we ditched our parents and went out for fro-yo. Honestly, it never occurred to me to kiss her. I'd always been so worried about rejection, I kept things casual.

After telling my brother about Samantha, he looked at me like I was from an alien planet. “Dude, if she spent all day with you, of course she was interested. You should've made a move! Next time you have to kiss the girl, okay?”

Easy for Tyler to say.

Besides, Sam couldn't have been that interested. A few weeks later she had a boyfriend. But what if I had found the courage to make a move?

“So what do I do?”

“You need to have more confidence,” Tyler said, tapping his video game controller. “Then you'll be able to get whoever you want.”

“Yeah right.”

He held his arms out wide, the controller dangling from his hand. “I don't have any problem getting girls.”

“Yeah, but you're you and I'm me.”

“You look just like me, Teej.”

I studied my older brother. We're both tall, and our faces are so similar we could be twins, but while my body looked like a strand of spaghetti, his arms were corded with muscles. He could bench-press me. He could probably bench-press a T. rex.

"I don't have your body, though," I said.

He set the controller on the carpet and stood. "Change your clothes. We're going to the gym."

Normally I'm careful about asking my brother for advice because he has definite views on what I should and shouldn't do. Sometimes I like his ideas, but others are way out of my comfort zone. But in this case, I loved it.

Thanks to strength training and drinking tons of protein, I've put on fifteen pounds of muscle this year. And this summer, when I wasn't at the gym, I've been working for a landscaping company. Hauling mulch makes you ripped. On top of that, being out in the sun has tanned my skin. For the first time ever, I'm proud of my body and love how strong it is. I pushed hard for it.

I look like my brother now.

But there are other complications. Like... I don't know how to make a move. I'm the world's last eighteen-year-old virgin. The absolute lastest of the last. If I were the only guy on Earth, humanity would go extinct because I'd never gather the courage to approach someone about repopulating the species.

When I asked Tyler how to ask a girl out, and maybe even about fooling around, he just shrugged. "Find somebody who sets your blood on fire. Then you'll know what to do."

And now I meet Mari, this gorgeous girl—maybe the most gorgeous girl I've ever seen. She has a deep Southern accent. When she says "Hi," it sounds like "Hai," and I'm a goner.

She smells like springtime.

My blood is on fire.

But I'm never going to see her again. This is what, a ten-minute car ride downtown?

See what I mean? I have shit luck.

# Mari

Sierra elbows me again.

I elbow her back.

Yes, this guy is cute. Sexy, even. But he's way out of my league.

T.J. grasps the roof handle above the door, showing off his impressive biceps. With his other hand, he taps his knee with the tips of his fingers. He seems comfortable and at ease. What's that like?

He's a stranger, but I'm not worried. After Dad left, Mom signed us up for self-defense classes. They helped make me strong, and to be honest, kind of a badass. Mom was more excited to have a reason to let off some steam and punch things, especially the class dummy we all called Asshole Bob.

T.J. doesn't seem creepy, but even if he was, I could take him down like the time I totally incapacitated Asshole Bob with a few jabs to the sensitive shoulder area and a hard knee to the crotch.

"What does T.J. stand for?" I ask.

"Terrific and jazzy," T.J. says, making jazz hands.

"It stands for Thomas Jefferson," Tyler says with a snort. "Our dad's a history buff."

"And he clearly hates me," T.J. adds.

"T.J.'s not a bad name," I say.

"The name Thomas Jefferson is pretty geeky, though, and not the best guy to be named after." T.J. gives me a sneaky smirk. "Dad ruined my life. That's why I'm hanging out with my brother on a Friday night."

Over his shoulder, Tyler playfully flips T.J. off.