



DATING

AFTER

THE END

OF THE

WORLD

JENEVA ROSE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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This one's for the man who attended my book event back in 2022 and held up a sign he wrote on the back of a Cheerios box that said "Jeneva Rose, please write a zombie suspense murder thriller killer."

I don't think this is exactly what you had in mind—specifically, the enemies-to-lovers storyline—but I've taken it upon myself to redact portions of your copy.

So, request granted.

Here's your zombie book, Dad.

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Chapter 1

2009

My dad says the world's going to end, and we'll be the only ones ready for it. That's why he's got me out here on a Saturday afternoon digging holes for a perimeter fence and a barricade, whatever that means. The kids at school get to have fun on the weekends, but not me, because my dad's a prepper. And apparently, that makes me one too. At least until I turn eighteen and can get the hell out of here. Only five more years, but who's counting?

It's nearly the end of September and fall should be approaching, but that wet Wisconsin-summer heat still lingers in the air. It's sweltering, having overstayed its welcome. Most people don't think of heat when it comes to the Dairy State, but our summers are hot and sticky, or maybe they just feel that way because of how brutally cold and long our winters are.

The sun's rays beat down on my skin, making every pore on my body ooze sweat. My arms ache and the palms of my hands sting, thanks to a spatter of blisters. Some are freshly formed bubbles, ready to pop. Others are torn open, exposing the raw, tender skin beneath. I'd wear the pair of work gloves tucked in the back pocket of my overalls, but they're too big and they slow me down, which is the last thing I need. I just want to be done for the day, and I know that's not possible until the work is finished—as my dad always says, *Pearsons don't quit until the job is done*.

I pause, let out a heavy sigh, and glance over at Dad. He sports a damp white T-shirt and an old pair of ripped jeans, complete with a focused gaze and a firm-set mouth. That's how he always appears: determined. I'd find it admirable if it weren't so annoying. Gripping both handles of the post digger, he plunges it into a hole I previously started, stamping it into the soil a few times before clamping it closed and excavating a hefty scoop of dirt. I lean

against my shovel and wipe my arm across my sweaty forehead while my dad continues to work. Obviously, I don't have the stamina or strength he has. I'm a hundred pounds soaking wet, whereas Dad is at least 6'3" and built like a brick shithouse. His words, not mine. To me, he looks more like a lumberjack, thanks to his thick beard and burly frame.

"Are we almost done?" I place a hand over my eyes, shielding them from the sun so I can see his facial expression.

Dad drops the post digger into the hole and uses the bottom of his shirt to soak up the sweat that's amassed on his face and neck.

He looks over at me, his mouth still set in a hard line. "It's not even noon yet, Casey."

That doesn't answer my question.

I tighten my ponytail and push back several baby hairs clinging to my forehead. "But we started at seven."

"Yeah, an hour later than I wanted to," he says, raising a brow.

I roll my eyes and groan, throwing my head back dramatically. "Why are we even doing this?"

"To keep us safe."

I mouth the words at the exact same time he utters them and then snap my head forward, glowering. "That's all you ever say, Father."

"Because it's all I ever mean, daughter." The corner of his lip perks up in amusement.

"Can't we ever do anything fun? Most dads take their kids to the park or to the movies or out to ice cream. You just make me work."

"It's not work. It's prep for the end—"

"Of the world," I cut him off, mockingly reciting what he's repeated to me every day for the past three years. When he first told me we had to prep for the end of the world, I thought it was exciting, like we were embarking on our own supersecret, fun adventure. But after a couple of years, that excitement wore off, and now I'm just tired, longing for a normal life . . . not whatever this is.

I toss my shovel in the grass and put my hands on my hips. “What if it never ends, Dad? Then what? We just wasted all this time prepping for nothing.”

He scratches at his beard. “Well, I really hope it doesn’t . . . but it’s going to because everything eventually ends, and that includes the world.”

I know you’re supposed to believe your parents, trust what they’re saying, and I have. I’ve believed every word my dad has uttered since I learned what words meant, but now I’m not so sure anymore. I stopped believing in Santa when I was nine years old, and I feel like I’m gonna stop believing in my dad one day too. Maybe I already have.

“If it does, why would I wanna stick around? I’d rather die along with it.” I raise my chin defiantly.

“No, you wouldn’t, Casey.”

“Yes, I would. I hate it here.”

Dad lets out a heavy sigh. “Let’s just get the rest of these holes dug, and then I’ll make us some sandwiches, and we can enjoy them under the apple tree.” He seals his offer with a smile and goes back to work, plunging the post digger into the ground.

“And then what?” I practically yell.

He glances at me while excavating a scoop of dirt. “Then we’ll install the posts, the fencing, and the barbwire. You know that, Casey.”

My bottom lip trembles and tears well up in the corners of my eyes. I turn away to hide my frustration and kick the handle of the shovel before plopping down in the grass. Pulling my knees into my chest, I try to make myself as small as possible. The post digger thuds against the hard soil, followed by Dad’s work boots crunching over dried grass. He kneels in front of me, lifting my chin with his thumb and index finger, forcing me to meet his gaze. I’m not one to cry, and he knows that. But it’s all too much.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t wanna do this anymore,” I say, jerking away.

“Why not?”

“Because I wanna be normal.”

“Who says we’re not normal?” Dad cracks a small smile.

I pull a piece of skin from an open blister on my dirty, inflamed hand and flick it into the grass.

“The kids at school.” I briefly look up at him. “They say you’re a freak and a kook who wears a tinfoil hat.”

“Well, I don’t care what people say about me, Case, so I wouldn’t let it bother you.” He ruffles my hair.

I smack his hand away. “They say I’m a weirdo too! They call me Crazy Pearson.” A tear breaks past my lower lashes, spilling out. “And they filled my locker with canned goods yesterday.”

Dad’s brows shove together with concern. “What? When did this all start?”

“Two weeks ago. We had to write a short paper on what we did over the summer and present it to the class. I wrote about all the work we did, the trench we dug for fresh water, the bunker excavation, the gardening, combat training, installing solar panels, everything. And now . . . all they do is make fun of me, except Tessa. She’s my only friend.”

Dad’s arms engulf me as he pulls me in for a tight hug, my face smushing against his brawny chest. I want to shove him away, but I need the embrace more than I need to be obstinate in this moment.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I didn’t realize you were having such a hard time at school.”

“I wasn’t. Everything was fine until stupid Blake came along . . .” The words come out muffled, and the strength I was trying to display fades away. I sob, unable to speak.

“Who’s Blake?” he asks, rubbing my back to comfort me.

“A new boy at my school.” I pull away and meet his gaze. “He’s the one that got everyone to make fun of me.”

Dad arches a brow. “That’s probably because he likes you. Boys always pick on the girls they like.”

I scrunch up my face. “Well, I don’t like him at all. He’s an asshole.”

“Casey!” Dad warns, but he’s unable to hide the small, amused smile on his face.

“Sorry . . . but he is, though.”

“I don’t doubt that. Do you want me to talk to his parents?”

“No, Dad. Then I’ll be a freak and a tattletale. It’ll be way worse.”

“Okay, do you want me to scare him, maybe rough him up a little?” He pretends to box with closed fists.

“Dad, no!” I say, slapping his hands.

He puts his punching paws away and chuckles. “Then what would you like me to do, Case?”

“Nothing,” I huff. “I’ll just . . . I’ll just ignore him.”

Dad pats me on the shoulder. “I think that’s a good idea, sweetheart.”

“But I’m gonna picture Blake’s stupid face every time I spike that shovel into the dirt,” I say with a firm nod as I wipe away the tears with the back of my hand.

“And every time you hit the boxing bag too.”

“And every time I wield my throwing stars.”

Dad grins. “And when the world ends, we won’t let Blake in here.”

“That’s right. He’ll be crying down at the road begging me to save him, and I’ll be like, ‘You should have been nice to me, Blake, because now you’re going to die.’” I put on a huge smile.

A look of concern flashes across Dad’s face.

“What?” I shrug. “He’s a rotten, terrible, stupid boy.”

“I know, but just because he’s terrible doesn’t mean you need to be.”

I let out a heavy sigh and nod. Dad gets to his feet and reaches his hand out for mine. In one fell swoop, he yanks me up into a standing position.

“Let’s finish up here. I’ve got ice cream Drumsticks in the freezer with our names on them.” He smiles.

“Deal,” I say. The sun set high in the sky illuminates his head, making it look as though he’s wearing a crown. We shake on it and get back to work.

I grip the handle with two hands and raise the shovel, glowering at the partially dug hole while picturing Blake’s stupid face in the dirt. If I squint, I

can even see his bright-green irises. The other girls at school think he's hot because his eyes are the color of summertime grass, but I think they look more like vomit. I plunge the blade down, spiking it as hard as I can into the soil, and then I smile.

