

TESS SHARPE



(AND ONE TIME WE DID)



For everyone who's stayed up too late reading
slow-burn fanfic, waiting for the kiss.

And for the fic writers who fuel us.



THE TIME IN THE HAY SHED

TATE

TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO

THE FIRST TIME we almost kiss, I'm on the edge of drunk. I know this is not a ringing endorsement—of me, how I spent the first half of freshman year, or of this story of the first (but definitely not the last) time I almost ended up kissing Penelope Conner. But stay with me.

I have never existed in a world without Penny. She's two months older, so she got here first. I can't tell you how many times she reminded me of that when we were little. And since Lottie and Mom are Lottie-and-Mom, I've been stuck in Penny's orbit my whole life.

She has a way of doing that. Drawing people in. She's like a magnet. She's like this damn town—even when you think you're free of it, it has a way of bringing you back. But I've never been able to get free of this town . . . or Penny.

I decided she was annoying when I was seven. Wanted to hate her by nine, but it never really worked. Got into what would've been a fistfight if Marion hadn't gotten between us at eleven. By twelve, we'd

decided enough was enough when it came to our mothers trying to make us friends. And by thirteen, we were moving toward high school and our separate lives: I was up at five a.m. every day to swim, and she was off color-coding things and terrorizing the school administration via the student council.

Which brings us to the start of high school and that party and the moment that changed everything for me but definitely not for her. (She's not the only one who likes to keep a record of things. Mine's just more in my brain than on the wall in calendar form.)

It's one of the team senior's party. Her parents are out of town and she knows a guy, so there's a ton of beer, and someone's strung lights along the barn rafters. The scent of hay is stronger than the smell of pot, motor oil, and sweat.

Going from a club team to a school team is an uneven balance, because I still swim for the club on weekends, and everyone knows Coach tolerates it only because I'm already faster than all the freshman girls. And the sophomore girls. And the juniors.

I'm not Olympics good or anything. But I might be scholarship good, and it's the only way I'm going to get out of this town, so that's where I put my focus. I already know better than to reach for some things. Some girls don't get some things. And I definitely fall into the *some girl* category.

So I'm at the party. And I'm tipsy off, like, two beers, because I didn't eat, and it's that time before anybody understands that getting shit-faced is kinda boring and makes the morning swim hell . . . and I want so, so badly to fit in with the rest of the team. But I don't know then that fitting in will always be out of reach.

The girls are noisy and so is the music on the speakers someone's

hooked up. I don't notice Penny at first, especially because my friend Remington keeps bringing me beer and then making me chase it with bottles of water and hissing warnings about hydrating, because that's the way Remi is. He worries almost as much as Penny.

The whole party, I see Penny and Jayden out of the corner of my eye, and I try not to pay attention, swear to God, but when a guy yells *I'm gonna stare at whoever's chest I want* drunkenly at the top of his lungs, it's hard not to notice.

Jayden Thomas is an asshole. One who *always* blatantly stares at everyone's breasts.

Penny's a crying streak of brown hair and pastel chiffon as she dashes away from him, and I hear Remi say my name, but I don't listen.

I have a problem with not listening.

Which is why I follow Penny. Right out of the barn and toward the hay shed where she goes to hide. It's badly lit and smells like every garden I've ever helped Marion plant.

By the time I get there, not only has she arranged the bales of hay into a chair for herself, she's made a little footstool.

"Gonna make a full-on fort next?" I ask.

There's a little trill in my heart when she says, "Leave me alone, Tate," without even turning around to see if it's me.

"I came to check on you."

"I'm fine." She sniffs. "You can go now."

She kicks her feet up on that hay bale and crosses her arms, and I could leave, I should leave. . . . Another, less drunkish version of me would have left. But drunkish me thinks she looks humiliated and sad, so I have no choice but to nudge her feet to the side and sit down on the hay-bale footstool, facing her.

Her mascara isn't smudged, and I'm relieved that she didn't cry hard enough—maybe didn't care enough—to let him smear her. He doesn't deserve her heartbreak.

"Jayden's a jerk."

"I love him," she says, and I cannot help it, I start scoffing before she's even done with the sentence.

"Penny, you do *not*. That is impossible."

She glares at me. "I'm *supposed* to love him."

"Who says?" I ask incredulously. "Did he say that?"

"No," she says, and sniffs again. "It's part of my plan."

"Your *plan*?" I have that feeling of dread I sometimes get with her, because she tends to take things too far. Like the time we were in grade school and she decided she needed to live off the land for a week to *truly* understand some book we were reading in class. I don't remember the book, but I do remember the week that nine-year-old Penny spent wandering around the woods with an ax, living off blackberries and the fish she caught with a net she wove out of vines.

"My high school plan," she says.

Of course she has a plan. It probably entails numerous color-coded parts and a blueprint of the school she dug up at town hall. And apparently, it includes Jayden Thomas. That thought makes something prick inside me, sharp and angry red. It gets the better of me. Which is why I forge ahead without thinking it through.

"Your high school plan involves a guy who doesn't respect you or any other person enough to stop ogling their breasts? Penny, come on. Breasts are great, I like them a lot, too, but I know not to stare at people's!"

"God, he's such an ass," she moans into her hands. "And a terrible kisser. I don't know what I was thinking."

I'm so relieved that she's not heartbroken that I don't realize what I've revealed until her head jerks up and she's staring at me.

"Wait a second. What did you say about breasts?"

"What?" My heart slams in my rib cage.

"You said . . ." She's staring at me way too hard, and I suddenly understand the value of running.

Because I just tipsily outed myself to Penelope Conner by talking about breasts.

"Are you . . ." She stops, trying to give me an escape hatch about accidentally coming out. It's sweet enough—generous enough—for me to shrug and finish the sentence.

"Yeah. I'm bi."

Her head tilts. Curiosity sparks in her eyes. "Okay, that explains some questions I had about Mandy Adams and you in seventh grade."

I kick hay at her. "Shut up. Mandy and I never—"

She smirks, her tears completely dry now.

"We *didn't*," I insist.

"You should've before she moved. She was cute. But maybe she was more my type than yours."

And just like that, I'm the one staring.

Just like that, she's flipped everything, because until five seconds ago, I would've said I knew everything there was worth knowing about Penny. I have—had?—a handle on her, personality-wise.

But this . . . well, *this* is unexpected.

"Penny, how much have you had to drink?"

"How much have *you* had to drink?" she shoots back. That smirk, it deepens, and the barn rafters stretch shadows across her face for a second, making her look wild.

Because that's the thing about Penny: She's prim and class presidential on the surface, but when you dig deeper, she didn't just spend a week in the woods with an ax—she loved every second of it.

"You're not the only person with secrets," she singsongs at me.

"Well, you've already spilled about your big plan."

"Jayden was just part of it." She waves off his memory like it's a fly.

"How many parts are there?"

"Fifteen."

"You made a fifteen-part plan for high school?"

"It's part of my thirty-five-step plan for life."

She's definitely had too much to drink—she's talking this freely with me. And I've definitely had too much to drink, too, that I'm sitting here, hanging on her words like she's a cliff I've slipped from. But I keep hold instead of letting go.

"That's a lot of steps."

"How many steps would you have in *your* plan?"

"My life plan has one step: Get out of this town."

She laughs. I shouldn't be looking at the way the light falls on her lips, but I am.

So many bad ideas are happening in my head in this hay shed. So many new ideas. Or maybe not new, but ones that were foggy before. Now my gaze is a steamy mirror wiped clean, and there she is, clear for the first time: Penny at her sharpest. More curving thorn than girl, ready to snag you and not let go.

Neither of us knows how to.

"You've always wanted to get out of here." She stretches out on her throne of hay, and I'm grateful for the bad lighting, because my face is red even before her shirt rides up. It's just a sliver of skin, barely visible, a little paler than the rest of her, and I don't know why it's so different all of a sudden. I don't know why it matters more than the skin on her arm or her neck, that strip above her jeans that looks so soft.

But she's not soft. I need to remind myself of that. She looks soft, but she is the girl in the woods with the ax. The girl who spends her weekdays doing all her homework so she's free to spend her weekends on the river with her dad.

The girl who eats rapids for breakfast that'd make experienced rafters shit themselves.

If I'm good *in* the water, Penny is a genius *on* it.

She's terrifying—fearless in an adrenaline-junkie way that her dad eggs on. The last time I went out with the two of them, I was sure I was gonna die.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" I ask, too honest and too curious to stop myself.

"It's not a cage for me," she says. Her head tilts up, toward the open sides of the hay shed, where the horizon—all pine and volcanic rock—looms, and I don't even know this feeling in my stomach well enough to name it. "These mountains . . . that river . . . I could spend my life learning them, and there'd still be more to know."

"Leaving has to be one of the thirty-five steps in that plan of yours," I point out.

"Oh? Does it?" She arches her eyebrow at me, and I've done it again—offended her without meaning to, because we've always ground against each other like parts fused together by a bad mechanic.

"You're just going to stay here forever?"

"I don't hate it like you do."

"I don't—"

"You do."

Silence. Because she's a little right about the hating part and a lot right about the cage part, just like she's all right about how she could spend her life here, in these woods, with that damn ax of hers, and never stop discovering new things. I can see it clearly, like I can suddenly see her clearly.

I don't know why it bothers me so much, the idea of her just staying here.

(Or maybe it's the idea of leaving her behind. Because as annoying as Penny is, I could never bring myself to hate her. As much as we clash, I know where she's coming from. And the more we tried to separate the threads of our lives that our mothers' bond braided together, the more I realized how hard it would be.)

She snorts. "At least you're not telling me I'm too smart to stay."

"Well, you're being nice," I say, and she shoots me a puzzled look. "You're not insisting there's no way I'm getting out."

Penny frowns. She has strong brows—dark slashes against tanned and freckled skin—and when she frowns at you, it's a whole experience. "I wouldn't ever say that," she says. "It'll be hard, but that's kind of your area, isn't it?"

She leans forward, elbows on her thighs, and now her feet are close to touching mine. The polish on her toenails is green. Or maybe blue. I can't quite see for sure. But I'm consumed with the need to know, to memorize every detail about this moment.

She is close. (Too close? Not close enough? I can't decide.) Her

knees brush against my leg, as she looks me straight in the eye like all the air hasn't been sucked out of the room, and says, "If anyone's getting out, it's you."

"Penny." I don't know anything but her name right now. I can't see anything but her.

I should have never walked into this hay shed.

"I believe it, even if you don't," she declares, and maybe if she'd said it grandly or with a flourish, I could've shrugged it off and blamed the alcohol.

But it doesn't come out grand. And there are no flourishes.

There are her hands, grabbing my wrists and squeezing as she says it. And there is her focus, entirely on me, her eyes so sure, and when she doesn't let go, my entire body jump-starts—a shuddering leap of parts that had been unused now grinding alive.

I pull back my wrists, thinking she'll let go.

She doesn't. She lets me pull her forward.

(I don't know what to do / I know what I want to do.)

(I don't know how to get it / if I should try.)

(Is freezing here better?)

But before I can decide, she does it for me, because that's Penny for you.

"Your eyelashes are so long," she says—and I don't know how to even process the way my heart pounds as she continues, "I never noticed before."

"They're just eyelashes." Is that my voice? I don't even know. My heart's beating too fast. My skin's too hot. It's touching hers.

(She's not close enough. I've decided.)

"Mmm. Pretty." And then like she wants to prove her point, she

finally lets go of me. But before I can recover, a finger traces down my face, beneath the curve of my brow, to the corner of my eye, a touch that has me forgetting how to blink or move or really do anything at all.

“You’re really pretty.”

It’s like a cold shock to my system. I don’t try to tug away from her, but I know I need to, now.

“You’ve had too much to drink.”

Her smirk is back, God help me. Her fingers are on my cheek now; if they dip a little lower, they’ll be cupping it.

“I had half a beer two hours ago. Do you really think I have to be drunk to think you’re pretty?”

“I—”

“Because you’ve always been pretty.”

She’s cupping my face now. I can’t even swallow around how much I want to sink into the feeling.

(She is so close. Her hands are not soft, they’re calloused from rowing and ropes, and the catch of rough skin against my cheek is . . . it is . . .

It’s like being cherished for the first time.)

I say her name. Is it to stop her? Or to urge her on? I’m not honest enough with myself to admit which one I want it to be.

(So close.)

Then someone else is calling Penny’s name outside the shed, and we jerk away from each other so fast it makes my head spin.

“Penny? Are you in here?”

Meghan, her best friend, comes hurrying inside a second later.

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for— Oh, hey, Tate. You keeping her company?"

I paste on a smile. "Just waiting for you to find her," I say, getting up.

"Are you okay?" Meghan asks Penny, but Penny's just staring at me like I'm a tricky stretch of water she hasn't figured out how to navigate, and I want to break away, but how can I when she's looking at me like I'm the most fascinating thing in the world? "You're a mess—we need to get you cleaned up before we go home. Come on."

"I'm fine," Penny says, and she lets Meghan drag her off, but she keeps glancing back at me, brows drawn together in a dark slash like she's determined to figure it out, whatever just happened or didn't-happen-but-almost-happened.

I don't know if it was fanciful, thinking that. Or truthful.

All I know is that she never tries to figure it out. Or maybe she just doesn't have the time. Because that Penny? The one who cried over a boy humiliating her and had a thirty-five-step plan for life and who cupped my face in a hay shed?

That version of Penny dies with her father. And the girl who survives the accident is a whole new Penny. One who's all fears instead of fearless.

(Because some girls, they don't get some things, remember?)