

# O. Y. L.

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## Chapter 1

*“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.” No, too formal. “I want to say something to you.” No, too forceful. “Can I please talk to you about something important?” No, too desperate.*

Why was this so hard?

Jenna had been practicing this speech for days, but frustration was beginning to set in. She found herself taking more breaks like this from class lately just to get her head straight. Cool water gathered in Jenna’s cupped hands as it streamed from the white porcelain faucet. She splashed her face. Droplets clung to her cheeks as she gripped both sides of the bathroom sink, nearly knocking the glimmering red apple that teetered on the edge of the

basin to the floor. She stared somberly at her reflection in the mirror.

It had to be her complexion. He probably thought he was looking at a connect-the-dots puzzle. Day by day, her skin became oilier and her face became blotchier. She prodded the protuberance resting just below her bottom lip and then blotted it with a paper towel.

She sauntered over each puke green tile to the full-length mirror and squared off against her reflection. What she saw fully sank in. Whose bright idea was it to make her the teenage guinea pig? To make her legs twice the size of her upper body and iron out her chest? The once relatively cute Jenna now looked as if someone had stopped her on the assembly line in mid-production and simply left for a coffee break.

She tilted her head to the ceiling in exasperation.

*Does someone up there hate me?*

Moments later, two giggling eleventh-grade girls walked in. “Evan was checking me out during algebra class today. He tried to play it off, but I saw him looking up from his notebook.” The blonde tossed back her hair and strutted past Jenna. “He likes me.”

“I heard from Catey Arnold, who heard it from Stacey Martin, who lives next door to Evan; her sister said she thinks Evan thinks you’re cute,” said her brunette friend.

“I might just have to *accidentally* run into him at his locker today,” said the blonde. Left hand on her hip, she squinted her eyes slightly, puckered her lips, and began twirling her bangs with her first finger, jutting out her developed chest the entire time. “I’ve been watching my sister Nicole. Evan won’t be able to resist,” she said.

The girls stepped in front of Jenna at the full-length mirror. She was a window. Eleventh-graders never acknowledge ninth-graders. They both applied lip-gloss and secured their hair with butterfly clips.

“C’mon. We should get back to class. Ms. Ronzan will throw a fit if we’re gone too long.” They faced one another for final inspection. “Hair?”

“Perfect. Mine?”

“Hot. Let’s go.”

The draft from Colleen and Amanda’s departure was enough to rouse Jenna from her stupor.

It was no surprise to her that a boy like Evan Tillman would get googly-eyed over a girl like Colleen McNamara. Colleen was a beautiful, shapely twenty-one-year-old girl trapped in a sixteen-year-old’s body. Her family owned the obnoxiously large home at the top of Bleaker Street. Her sister, Nicole, was a sophomore at USC, and that West Coast popularity had a way of rubbing off on Colleen.

Evan Tillman was no popularity slouch either. He had the handsome, ‘bad boy’ image girls swooned over. When he was caught smoking in the bathroom during school hours last month, it nearly took a crowbar to pry admirers off of him. In short, people like Colleen McNamara and Evan Tillman were made for one another.

Jenna had no desire to compare herself to Colleen McNamara. Furthermore, she was not asking for someone like Evan Tillman to look at her. That was Colleen’s ‘him.’ Let them have each other.

The only guy ogling Jenna was Alan Fenstemacher. Not the worst, but certainly not the one she wanted. What would it take for *him* to look at her like Evan looks at Colleen?

*What will it take? What will it take?*

She rhythmically rapped her head onto the graffiti-filled glass. Despite having spent night after night practicing how she would tell him her feelings when given the chance, her confidence and self-esteem were wavering.

A brief beep billowed from the loudspeaker, followed by the nasally voice of the school secretary. “Attention Grayson High School students and faculty. An I.I.B. meeting will be held at this time in the Community Room. Thank you.”

Jenna thought the timing of this announcement peculiar. It was the middle of the school day. Why would they announce a meeting during fourth period to the entire school?

*I.I.B. I.I.B.*

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Someone once said that no one is perfect—until you fall in love that is. It was the first week of school. Third period literature class. Jenna’s senses were on overdrive. He was so handsome—so perfect that day. A musky smell wafted in the air from his delicate, white skin. Always sharply dressed, he sported crisp khakis and a baby blue polo shirt. Whenever he strolled past her desk, she tingled with excitement if he so much as grazed her arm or leg. She was mesmerized by the adorable way he furrowed his brow and stuck out his tongue, just slightly, from the right side of his mouth when he was deep in thought at his desk.

She could get lost in those eyes. She heard Mr. Sansom say, “...and this is most important. I need everyone’s attention. Kyle? You too.” It was enough to rouse Jenna from her daydream. “If you hear about an I.I.B. meeting over the loudspeaker and you’re in the bathroom or the hallway, that’s a code that you must report to the nearest classroom immediately. When we’re sure everyone is accounted for, we’ll lock the door, turn off the lights, and gather silently by the side wall, out of sight of the window in the doorway.”

*At least I’ll be with him.*

“We’ll remain in that position until notified otherwise over the loudspeaker. Throughout the year we’ll be practicing this drill, so please be ready.”

Jenna remembered Andrew Coffman asking, “What does I.I.B. stand for?”

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Veronica Kingston burst from one of the stalls, pulling up her pants, “Jenna! Is anyone else in here? Come on. Didn’t you hear the code? We’ve gotta go.”

Jenna tried to follow Veronica out the door, but her legs felt weighted to the ground with concrete cinder blocks. Although she was only fourteen, this was not her first police emergency.

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Thirteen candles. Pink frosting.

The telephone rings.

SLAM!

CRASH!

“No, please ... Jenna, lock yourself in the bathroom!”

The pounding on the door; fumbling to dial 911.

“Jenna, come out of there this instant! Don’t you dare dial that number!”

“Get out, Jenna. Use the fire escape!”

Police lights.

Sirens.

Handcuffs.

Tears.

## Chapter 2

Even the best laid plans don't always pan out the way they should. Grayson High School students were taught to walk, not run, quietly to the nearest classroom if they were in the hallways during an announcement concerning an I.I.B. meeting. They were told not to panic. Teachers would relay messages via walkie-talkie to the office about which students were in each classroom to ensure everyone was safe. On paper, it was a foolproof plan.

Grayson practiced this drill countless times in the past, but no one ever knew whether it was real or not until it was over. She willed her lifeless legs to move—drill or no drill, she needed to get back to her classroom. Flight instinct took over as she sprang for the bathroom doorway, grabbing the apple but leaving her books

behind. The slamming and locking of doors around her sounded like rifles shooting and reloading.

She made a mad dash past the statue of Grayson Middle School's founder, Alexander Grayson. Running in sandals made footing difficult. Looking up, she could see her classroom door clearly. Almost there.

Her arms pumped. Her legs drove forward. "Hold the door Ms. Valdez!" she shouted. "Hold the door Ms. Val—"

Before the next syllable could leave her lips, her arms were pinned to her sides by two strong hands behind her. In the next instant, she was dragged backwards into blackness. Jenna screamed. The door slammed.

Suddenly, Jenna's feet no longer felt like they were on the ground. She was floating among the clouds. A clammy sweat pushed from her pores. She sighed. She wobbled. She fainted.

### Chapter 3

In a courtyard within Jenna's apartment complex, a courtyard where blades of grass were at a premium and little natural life existed, there somehow grew a tall, majestic apple tree. A deep, hearty root system buckled the sidewalk above, creating speed bumps for pedestrians. The grooves of its thick bark held strong after years of harsh weather and human wear and tear. In the fall, luscious red apples dangled from branches just out of reach of passers by.

It was a tree providing ambiance to the rapidly expanding concrete jungle. A symbol that possibilities abound when everything else works against you. Honestly, Jenna never paid much attention to the tree growing up. Sure, it was fun to climb and a fallen apple was a tasty treat now and again. But since the

day they shared their first kiss, that tree, especially its fruits, had become much more meaningful.

It happened three weeks before the I.I.B. announcement. Mr. Sansom sat at his place in the discussion circle and said, “For the next few weeks we’re going to be concentrating our literature studies on a person who is, arguably, the most influential writer in history. Would anyone like to take a guess who I’m talking about?”

Steve Cooper raised his hand. “J.K. Rowling?”

The class laughed. “I’m a Harry Potter fan, too, but not who I’m thinking of. Think older,” Mr. Sansom said. He circled his arms like a combine as if trying to harvest thoughts from the class by pulling it out of them.

Crystal Walsh tentatively raised her hand. “Shakespeare?”

“Exactly.” He tossed a Hershey Kiss her way. “Mr. William Shakespeare. An incredible writer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There’s the handsome fella right over there.” He pointed to one of the many posters of literary greats hung from his cabinets.

“For the next month we will be reading and discussing portions of some of his most famous plays and poetry. Today we’ll be starting with one of his most recognizable plays, *Romeo and Juliet*.” A few students turned to each other and playfully

stuck their finger down their throat in a gagging gesture. Jenna couldn't have been happier.

"Romeo and Juliet. I saw that movie! The girl playing Juliet was a fox!" Rodney blurted out from his place in the circle. His classmates broke into laughter.

Mr. Sansom responded without missing a beat. "Before it was a movie, it was a beautifully written play. We'll need a male to play the role of Romeo. Any volunteers?"

Every male in the room squirmed as if his seat had suddenly become infested with ants. A game of "Don't Make Eye Contact With Mr. Sansom" had begun. Rodney lost.

"Rodney, you were very interested in Romeo and Juliet a few seconds ago. Care to share the stage with one of these lovely young ladies?" He swept his hand dramatically across the female students in the circle. The girls, and Rodney, were as red as the fire alarm hanging above the doorway.

Rodney responded quickly, "Sorry, Mr. Sansom, but I just found out last week I'm allergic to Shakespeare. Gives me gas." The audience looked to Mr. Sansom for an indication to laugh, but his face was far from amused.

"I, like everyone else, appreciate your humor now and then. There *is* such a thing as going overboard, Rodney. You've hit that point. Let's give this material the respect it deserves."

Just like that, the situation was settled, and the class was back on track. Similar to his talent for joking with students without hurting their feelings, Mr. Sansom had a talent for being serious with someone who was acting inappropriately without being mean or condescending.

“If no one else wants to read, then I guess I’ll have to show you boys how it’s done,” said Mr. Sansom. “I’ll be reading the part of Romeo. Now I need a female who is willing to read the part of Jul—”

Jenna’s hand shot into the air before he could finish his sentence.

“Ms. Durstine. Think you’re up to the challenge?” Mr. Sansom asked.

“Definitely,” Jenna said.

“Thanks for volunteering, Jenna. I can always count on you.” Mr. Sansom pointed his finger at her like a toy gun and winked at her as he shot. “So...Romeo and Juliet were two people in love.” He drew a red heart in marker on the white board extending across the front of the room. “Can anyone take a guess as to what could cause a relationship like Romeo and Juliet’s to be so dangerous?”

“They were from two families who hated each other,” Jenna said without raising her hand. “No one believed they should be together.”

“Correct. Romeo was a Montague, Juliet was a Capulet.” Mr. Sansom split the heart in two and wrote the information in each half. He sat down, propped his elbows on his thighs, and folded his hands.

“You see, Romeo was down in the dumps because he was having second thoughts about a girl he was dating named Rosaline. Meanwhile, a man named Paris was slowly trying to convince Juliet to marry him. I say slowly because she was still two years too young to marry according to her family.”

“How old was she?” asked Bruce.

“Only a couple of years older than all of you. Juliet wasn’t thrilled about the idea of marrying Paris. Does anyone want to take a guess how Romeo and Juliet fell in love?”

Jenna burst out. “It was love at first sight. They saw each other at a party and fell in love.”

Mr. Sansom was out of his seat again. “Right, Jenna.” He tossed her a Hershey Kiss as well. “They fell madly in love, but were more than a little upset to hear that they were from dueling families. Two people who shouldn’t be falling in love with each other are doing so. All the makings of a great story, right?” Most of the class nodded their heads in agreement. Mr. Sansom’s enthusiasm was infectious.

“Everyone please open your textbooks to page twenty-five. With that background, today we’re going to read a brief, famous segment from Act I, Scene V.”

“You mean the scene where they first kiss?” Jenna interjected for a third time.

“Yes,” he said. “You sure know a lot about Romeo and Juliet.”

Jenna looked innocent. “I read it once. It’s in our textbook, right?”

“We’ve got a very knowledgeable Juliet here. I think we’re all in for a treat,” Mr. Sansom said.

Only a few students flipped to the appropriate page. Most kept their eyes glued to Mr. Sansom. Rodney raised his hand. “Is it legal for a teacher to kiss a student?” Jenna awaited his answer.

“We won’t have to find out.” He turned to Jenna. “Sorry to disappoint you,” he joked. “We’ll just blow kisses at the appropriate time, okay?”

Jenna was lost in thought.

“Okay, Jenna?” Jenna refocused and nodded in agreement. “As we read, listen to Shakespeare’s exceptional language and the way it makes you feel when you hear it.” He placed his hand to his heart. “It may sound like gibberish at first, but we’ll discuss it at the end. Jenna, are you ready? Top of page 352.”

“Ready,” Jenna said. She stood tall and stepped into the middle of the circle, fully focused on the upcoming performance.

Mr. Sansom began,

“If I profane with my unwortheiest hand,  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand.”

It was as if Jenna had been born on the stage. She channeled all her energy into her character. There was no need for her to look at the book. She knew it by heart.

“Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotions shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,  
And palm-to-palm is holy palmers’ kiss.”

Jenna and Mr. Sansom held their hands in front of their bodies, palms facing front. Mr. Sansom said, “Juliet is letting Romeo know that they can show the same affection by touching hand-to-hand as they can with a kiss.”

When it was time for the two young lovers to kiss, Mr. Sansom said, “Here’s where Romeo goes in for the smooch.” He continued,

“Then move not, while my prayer’s effect I take.  
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.”

Mr. Sansom kissed the palm of his hand, laid it flat, and gently blew the kiss to Jenna. Jenna grabbed it from the air and pulled her palm to her lips.

“Then have my lips the sin that they have took.”

“Juliet has cunningly created a reason for Romeo to kiss her back,” explained Mr. Sansom.

“Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!  
Give me my sin again.”

As if possessed by an outside spirit, Jenna leaned forward for the real thing. Mr. Sansom continued acting, not noticing Jenna’s movement, and concluded the reading by kissing his palm one last time and blowing it to Jenna. Her eyes opened just in time to grab the kiss from the air once again.

The crowd burst into applause, hoots, and hollers. Jenna stood still, blood flushing her face as if pumped there by massive fire hoses. The bell rang, ending third period.

“Class, it looks like we’re out of time. Great job today! Sorry we didn’t get to discuss the meaning of that scene. We’ll start with that discussion first thing tomorrow. No homework for tonight.” The class cheered again at this final piece of good news.

The students filed out quickly. Jenna remained motionless in her spot.

“Very impressive reading, Jenna,” Mr. Sansom said as he erased the heart on the board. “Best I’ve ever heard. You never cease to amaze me. Has anyone ever told you you’re mature beyond your years?”

Jenna shook her head.

“With emotion like that in your reading, you’ll either be an incredible actress, or you’re going to make some lucky Romeo very happy some day.” Mr. Sansom took his hand to the top of Jenna’s head and tousled her hair.

“Thanks Sh-, I mean Mr. Sansom,” fumbled Jenna. “Have a night great—I mean, great night!” she managed to yell as she rushed out the door. The moment she exited, she spun, putting her back to the wall of concrete blocks. She clutched her books to her chest, looked upward, and breathed a deep, contented sigh. Slowly her fist unclenched, and she stared at her open palm. Then, with another contented sigh, she brought her palm to her lips.