

Flipped

The first day I met Bryce Loski, I flipped. Honestly, one look at him and I became a lunatic. It's his eyes. Something in his eyes. They're blue, and framed in the blackness of his lashes, they're dazzling. Absolutely breathtaking.

It's been over six years now, and I learned long ago to hide my feelings, but oh, those first days. Those first years! I thought I would die for wanting to be with him.

Two days before the second grade is when it started, although the anticipation began weeks before—ever since my mother had told me that there was a family with a boy my age moving into the new house right across the street.

Soccer camp had ended, and I'd been so bored because there was nobody, absolutely nobody, in the neighborhood to play with. Oh, there were kids, but every one of them was older. That was dandy for my brothers, but what it left me was home alone.

My mother was there, but she had better things to do than kick a soccer ball around. So she said, anyway. At the time I didn't think there was anything better than kicking a soccer ball around, especially not the likes of laundry or dishes or

vacuuming, but my mother didn't agree. And the danger of being home alone with her was that she'd recruit me to help her wash or dust or vacuum, and she wouldn't tolerate the dribbling of a soccer ball around the house as I moved from chore to chore.

To play it safe, I waited outside for weeks, just in case the new neighbors moved in early. Literally, it was *weeks*. I entertained myself by playing soccer with our dog, Champ. Mostly he'd just block because a dog can't exactly kick and score, but once in a while he'd dribble with his nose. The scent of a ball must overwhelm a dog, though, because Champ would eventually try to chomp it, then lose the ball to me.

When the Loskis' moving van finally arrived, everyone in my family was happy. "Little Julianna" was finally going to have a playmate.

My mother, being the truly sensible adult that she is, made me wait more than an *hour* before going over to meet him. "Give them a chance to stretch their legs, Julianna," she said. "They'll want some time to adjust." She wouldn't even let me watch from the yard. "I know you, sweetheart. Somehow that ball will wind up in their yard and you'll just *have* to go retrieve it."

So I watched from the window, and every few minutes I'd ask, "Now?" and she'd say, "Give them a little while longer, would you?"

Then the phone rang. And the minute I was sure she was good and preoccupied, I tugged on her sleeve and asked, "Now?"

She nodded and whispered, "Okay, but take it easy! I'll be over there in a minute."

I was too excited not to charge across the street, but I did try very hard to be civilized once I got to the moving van. I

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stood outside looking in for a record-breaking length of time, which was hard because there he was! About halfway back! My new sure-to-be best friend, Bryce Loski.

Bryce wasn't really doing much of anything. He was more hanging back, watching his father move boxes onto the lift-gate. I remember feeling sorry for Mr. Loski because he looked worn out, moving boxes all by himself. I also remember that he and Bryce were wearing matching turquoise polo shirts, which I thought was really cute. Really *nice*.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I called, "Hi!" into the van, which made Bryce jump, and then quick as a cricket, he started pushing a box like he'd been working all along.

I could tell from the way Bryce was acting so guilty that he was supposed to be moving boxes, but he was sick of it. He'd probably been moving things for days! It was easy to see that he needed a rest. He needed some juice! Something.

It was also easy to see that Mr. Loski wasn't about to let him quit. He was going to keep on moving boxes around until he collapsed, and by then Bryce might be dead. Dead before he'd had the chance to move in!

The tragedy of it catapulted me into the moving van. I had to help! I had to save him!

When I got to his side to help him shove a box forward, the poor boy was so exhausted that he just moved aside and let me take over. Mr. Loski didn't want me to help, but at least I saved Bryce. I'd been in the moving van all of three minutes when his dad sent him off to help his mother unpack things inside the house.

I chased Bryce up the walkway, and that's when everything changed. You see, I caught up to him and grabbed his

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arm, trying to stop him so maybe we could play a little before he got trapped inside, and the next thing I know he's holding my hand, looking right into my eyes.

My heart stopped. It just stopped beating. And for the first time in my life, I had that feeling. You know, like the world is moving all around you, all beneath you, all *inside* you, and you're floating. Floating in midair. And the only thing keeping you from drifting away is the other person's eyes. They're connected to yours by some invisible physical force, and they hold you fast while the rest of the world swirls and twirls and falls completely away.

I almost got my first kiss that day. I'm sure of it. But then his mother came out the front door and he was so embarrassed that his cheeks turned completely red, and the next thing you

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know he's hiding in the bathroom.

I was waiting for him to come out when his sister, Lynetta, saw me in the hallway. She seemed big and mature to me, and since she wanted to know what was going on, I told her a little bit about it. I shouldn't have, though, because she wiggled the bathroom doorknob and started teasing Bryce something fierce. "Hey, baby brother!" she called through the door. "There's a hot chick out here waiting for you! Whatsa matter? Afraid she's got cooties?"

It was so embarrassing! I yanked on her arm and told her to stop it, but she wouldn't, so finally I just left.

I found my mother outside talking to Mrs. Loski. Mom had given her the beautiful lemon Bundt cake that was supposed to be our dessert that night. The powdered sugar looked soft and white, and the cake was still warm, sending sweet lemon smells into the air.

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My mouth was watering just looking at it! But it was in Mrs. Loski's hands, and I knew there was no getting it back. All I could do was try to eat up the smells while I listened to the two of them discuss grocery stores and the weather forecast.

After that Mom and I went home. It was very strange. I hadn't gotten to play with Bryce at all. All I knew was that his eyes were a dizzying blue, that he had a sister who was not to be trusted, and that he'd almost kissed me.

I fell asleep that night thinking about the kiss that might have been. What did a kiss feel like, anyway? Somehow I knew it wouldn't be like the one I got from Mom or Dad at bedtime. The same species, maybe, but a radically different beast, to be sure. Like a wolf and a whippet—only science would put them on the same tree.

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Looking back on the second grade, I like to think it was at least partly scientific curiosity that made me chase after that kiss, but to be honest, it was probably more those blue eyes. All through the second and third grades I couldn't seem to stop myself from following him, from sitting by him, from just wanting to be near him.

By the fourth grade I'd learned to control myself. The sight of him—the thought of him—still sent my heart humming, but my legs didn't actually chase after him anymore. I just watched and thought and dreamed.

Then in the fifth grade Shelly Stalls came into the picture. Shelly Stalls is a ninny. A whiny, gossipy, backstabbing ninny who says one thing to one person and the opposite to another. Now that we're in junior high, she's the undisputed diva of drama, but even back in elementary school she knew how to

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put on a performance. Especially when it came to P.E. I never once saw her run laps or do calisthenics. Instead, she would go into her “delicate” act, claiming her body would absolutely collapse from the strain if she ran or jumped or stretched.

It worked. Every year. She’d bring in some note and be sure to swoon a little for the teacher the first few days of the year, after which she’d be excused from anything that required muscles. She never even put up her own chair at the end of the day. The only muscles she exercised regularly were the ones around her mouth, and those she worked out nonstop. If there was an Olympic contest for talking, Shelly Stalls would sweep the event. Well, she’d at least win the gold and silver—one medal for each side of her mouth.

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My solution to Shelly Stalls was to ignore her, which worked just dandy until about halfway through the fifth grade when I saw her holding hands with Bryce.

My Bryce. The one who was still embarrassed over holding my hand two days before the second grade. The one who was still too shy to say much more than hello to me.

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The one who was still walking around with my first kiss.

How could Shelly have wormed her hand into his? That pushy little princess had no business hanging on to him like that!

Bryce looked over his shoulder from time to time as they walked along, and he was looking at me. My first thought was that he was telling me he was sorry. Then it dawned on me—he needed my help. Absolutely, that’s what it had to be! Shelly Stalls was too delicate to shake off, too swirly to be pushed away. She’d unravel and start sniffing and oh, how embarrassing that would be for him! No, this wasn’t a job a boy could do gracefully. This was a job for a girl.

I didn’t even bother checking around for other candidates—I had her off of him in two seconds flat. Bryce ran away the minute he was free, but not Shelly. Oh, no-no-no! She came at me, scratching and pulling and twisting anything she could get her hands on, telling me that Bryce was *hers* and there was no way she was letting him go.

How delicate.

I was hoping for herds of teachers to appear so they could see the real Shelly Stalls in action, but it was too late by the time anyone arrived on the scene. I had Fluffy in a headlock and her arm twisted back in a hammerlock, and no amount of her squawking or scratching was going to get me to *unlock* her until a teacher arrived.

In the end, Shelly went home early with a bad case of mussed-up hair, while I told my side of things to the principal. Mrs. Shultz is a sturdy lady who probably secretly appreciates the value of a swift kick well placed, and although she told me that it would be better if I let other people work out their own

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dilemmas, she definitely understood about Shelly Stalls and her hair and told me she was glad I'd had the self-control to do nothing more than restrain her.

Shelly was back the next day with a head full of braids. And of course she got everybody whispering about me, but I just ignored them. The facts spoke for themselves. Bryce didn't go anywhere near her for the rest of the year.

That's not to say that Bryce held my hand after that, but he did start being a little friendlier to me. Especially in the sixth grade, after Mr. Mertins sat us right next to each other in the third row back.

Sitting next to Bryce was nice. *He* was nice. He'd say Hi, Juli to me every morning, and once in a while I'd catch him looking my way. He'd always blush and go back to his own work, and I couldn't help but smile. He was so shy. And so cute!

We talked to each other more, too. Especially after Mr. Mertins moved me behind him. Mr. Mertins had a detention policy about spelling, where if you missed more than seven out of twenty-five words, you had to spend lunch inside with him, writing your words over and over and over again.

The pressure of detention made Bryce panic. And even though it bothered my conscience, I'd lean in and whisper answers to him, hoping that maybe I could spend lunch with him instead. His hair smelled like watermelon, and his earlobes had fuzz. Soft, blond fuzz. And I wondered about that. How does a boy with such black hair wind up with blond ear fuzz? What's it doing there, anyway? I checked my own earlobes in the mirror but couldn't find much of anything on them, and I didn't spot any on other people's either.

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I thought about asking Mr. Mertins about earlobe fuzz when we were discussing evolution in science, but I didn't. Instead, I spent the year whispering spelling words, sniffing watermelon, and wondering if I was ever going to get my kiss.

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