

*Even If I Fall* by Abigail Johnson

Chapter One

The car jolts back and forth, rocking Maggie and me along with it before stalling. Again. My nostrils flare and I dig my baby blue-painted nails into the steering wheel. Calm as you please, I pull the keys from the ignition, roll down the window and hurl them into the field of wild grass growing along the side of Boyer Road, less than a stone's throw from the base of my long dirt driveway.

"Feel better?" Maggie's mirrored sunglasses show me that the question is rhetorical. My left eye is twitching and the dimple in my chin has never been more prominent. I try to relax my jaw as I tuck the dark brown strands of my not-quite-shoulder-length hair behind my ears, but my reflection doesn't change much. With the window open and the A/C off, there is no ignoring the sauna-like June heat rolling in as the sun reaches the height of the day. It's the kind of hot and muggy that wrings every drop of moisture—and optimism—from my body, leaving me limp and heavy in the steamy afternoon air.

"This is an evil car and it hates me."

"No, not Daphne." My friend and self-appointed driving instructor gives the dash a little pat.

"Why did I give her such a cute name?" I eye Daphne, aka the navy Camaro from hell. I've owned my first car for three days and have barely driven her as many miles. "I should start calling her Jezebel."

"Call her whatever you like but you still have to learn to drive stick."

"I'm trying." I lean forward to yell directly into the air vent. "I will be so good to you if you just stop stalling every two seconds!"

"You're lifting your foot off the clutch too soon."

"I know." I collapse back against my seat.

"So stop it."

I can hear the grin in Maggie's voice before I turn my head to look at her. Yeah, she's enjoying this. "You said learning to drive stick would be fun, that I'd have it down in an hour. We've been at this all morning and I'm pretty sure I'm getting worse."

"You're not going to get any better without the keys, Brooke."

With a sigh, I push open my door and cross the single lane dirt road. The thigh-high grass skims the hem of my faded blue sundress as I search the open field. Fortunately, the keys have a ridiculously large fuzzy keychain in the shape of an ice skate on them—my new-car present from Maggie—so they aren't hard to find.

"Who has a stupid keychain now?"

Turning back, I see she's crawled over the console and is resting her forearms on the driver's side open window. "I never said stupid, I said interesting."

Maggie bursts out laughing. "You're always so polite. Is that a West Texas thing or a Covington thing?"

"Worried it's catching?" I ask with a faux scowl.

Maggie pulls the collar of her sleeveless watermelon-print shirt up to her chin and hunches her shoulders. "It better not be. If I start calling anybody ma'am, I'm moving back to LA."

"It's not my home or my family. I just don't see the sense in being rude for no reason." I let my gaze travel back to Daphne. "But that's with people, not cars." A smile alights on my face. "Hey, you think there's something wrong with her and not me?"

Maggie raises an eyebrow—well, I think she raises an eyebrow. Her aviators cover half her rather small face, so it's hard to tell. She plucks the keys from my hand while fully moving into the driver's seat. A second later I'm left choking on a dust cloud as she speeds a few hundred yards down the dirt road, executes an action-movie-worthy U-turn, and drives back. She's grinning as she slows next to me.

"Guess it's not the car."

"Not fair. Didn't you tell me your dad is a professional stunt driver?"

"Professional stunt driver, professional cheater and liar." She lifts one hand then the other as though she's weighing the two options. "He is a man of many talents."

"Sorry," I say. I feel like I've known Maggie my whole life instead of just a couple weeks, so I keep forgetting that there's still a lot she hasn't shared with me.

Maggie dismisses my apology with a wave of her hand then lifts her sunglasses into her pink-tinted hair, which exactly matches the double-winged liner on her eyes. She's definitely raising her eyebrows now. "If we're talking about fair, ask me how I feel watching you do quintuple silk-cow jumps around me when I can barely skate backward."

"*Salchow* jumps, and they were only doubles. Plus, you're getting so much better."

"Says the girl my mom literally offered to pay to be my friend."

"She offered to pay me for ice skating lessons." While I needed the money—we live on the outskirts of town and gas to and from anywhere isn't cheap—it turned out what I really needed was someone whose eyes wouldn't shade with pity or scorn whenever they looked at me. "Besides, I think we can both agree you're the one paying now." I eye the hand rubbing her neck. I've been jerking us around for hours trying to tame Daphne.

Maggie tries not to smile. "You know my mom would have paid you twice what she offered. She's convinced I'm turning into some kind of recluse who only talks to the camera when I'm filming YouTube tutorials. She only really likes the Korean beauty videos I make, but I'm half American too. Anyway, I'm just glad the first person I met turned out to be as amazing off the ice as she is on it. One less thing she can nag me about, right?"

"Yeah," I say, ignoring the queasy flip in my stomach as she opens the door for me and slides back into the passenger seat.

"All right, enough stalling." She mimes a rim shot to go along with her pun. "Everybody does it when learning to drive stick. Suck it up and get back in the car."

I try, I really do, but before my butt even hits the seat, I'm grabbing the gearshift like it's a bull ready to buck me off. Not that I've ever ridden a bull—we may live in cattle country but the empty acres around my family's farmhouse are purely ornamental—but the idea is starting to look a lot less daunting in comparison.

"Do you remember the most important rule of driving stick?"

I nod, buckling my seat belt. "Don't confuse the clutch for the brake pedal."

"No—cars can sense fear."

I slide my gaze toward my friend and watch her grin at me.

"Are you thinking about punching me in the boob?"

She knows I would never admit to something like that out loud, but the reluctant smile inching onto my face gives me away.

"Joke's on you." Grinning wider, Maggie twists to face me and pushes her chest out. "Flat as a board, baby. Who's laughing now, besides every boy ever?"

Both of us, apparently. It takes way too long for my composure to return enough to start the car again. I don't even mind that it stalls the first time. Or the second. I manage not to stall on my third try, but Daphne is jerking us around so much that it's a hollow victory.

You can drive from one end of town to the other in ten minutes, but I'm not ready to face even those few stoplights and intersections, so we stick to the back roads on the outskirts of town near my house, where traffic is practically nonexistent. The only other vehicle we've encountered is a truck pulled onto the side of Pecan Road, its driver nowhere to be seen. Not that I'm paying much attention to anything but the gearshift growing sweaty in my palm and the stop sign looming ahead. I could roll through it, except I know I won't. So I downshift and come to a full and legal stop. Beside me, Maggie says nothing. I know what to do; it's the execution that keeps tripping me up. I still don't understand how I can be so good with my feet in one area and so awful in another.

Slowly...slowly... I lift my left foot off the clutch as I press down on the gas with my right. I'm not even breathing at this point. Daphne starts to rock a little, but I give her more gas until... Air escapes me in a laugh. "I did it!" More of the happy sound bubbles up inside me as we roll smoothly forward. I didn't know it was possible to be this happy off the ice.

Maggie is hooting beside me, which only makes me laugh harder as I slow to make a turn toward town, knowing I won't stall.

And then I see him walking along the side of the road. He turns toward the car as we get close and our eyes lock. My laughter dies a second before Daphne. An invisible fist slams into my stomach, and the last of my laughter chokes out. Guilt slithers up my legs and torso, tethering me to my seat so that I can't look away from him.

"No worries," Maggie says, still bouncing her shoulders in celebration. "Start her up again and..." She leans forward just as Heath Gaines's eyes narrow at me before he turns away. "More of that famous Southern charm I've seen so much of since moving here. And my mom wonders why I'm happier online. Seriously, who even is that?"

Considering Maggie and her mom just moved to Telford, she might be the only person in our entire town who'd have to ask that question, which is one of the many reasons I don't tell her the truth. If I did, I'd have to tell her about Jason. She knows I have an older brother, but to hear my mom talk about him, you'd think he was away at college instead of where he really is. I hate lying to Maggie, even indirectly, but I'd hate even more for the truth to drive her away.

"No one I know." That isn't technically a lie, but it's so far from the truth that I can't look at Maggie when I say it. I add something about not wanting to push my newfound understanding with Daphne too far in one day, and since I still need to go by the rink to pick up my paycheck, we end up at her house just as thick gray clouds start rolling across the sky.

"Yuck," Maggie says, looking at the approaching storm. "That's gonna hit before you can get home. Why don't I come and drive you home afterward, in case it gets ugly?" She brightens. "Then I can drive the Zamboni while you grab your check."

I nod, looking at the clouds with my own frown and absently saying, "Sure, if you want me to lose my job."

Maggie makes a show of wrestling with indecision before sighing in defeat. Normally, I'd laugh at her, but I'm still looking at the sky and the last thing I want to do is laugh. "I'll be fine. Besides, your mom would have to pick you up after."

Maggie's scowl is fierce but fleeting as she gets out. "Promise me you won't total Daphne by backing into another car. Trust me when I tell you how demoralizing it is to rely on your mom for rides when you're seventeen."

"I'll be fine," I repeat. My hand tightening on the steering wheel hides a tremor that has nothing to do with driving, but Maggie doesn't know that.

"Hey." Maggie's put-upon tone is gone.

I bring my gaze to hers.

“You drove Daphne, stop and start, all of it, the whole way here without stalling once. This is my impressed face.”

My smile probably doesn't touch my eyes. “I learned from the best.”

She grins. “Shut up, baby, I know it. And besides, that's my line.” With one last pat of Daphne's hood, she heads inside.

I'm halfway to the rink when the first lightning bolt forks in the distance, constricting the band of guilt in my chest. I look in my rearview mirror. In my mind, I see the familiar brick red truck on the side of the road—a truck I can't believe I drove past without cold recognition icing over me—and the guy in a sweat-drenched white T-shirt having to walk miles back to town during a thunderstorm.

And I was laughing when he saw me.

Daphne doesn't stall once as I turn around.

Excerpt

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