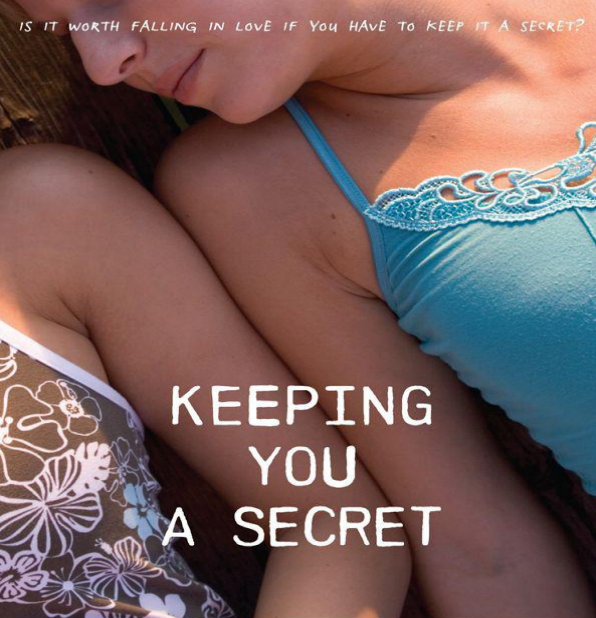


IS IT WORTH FALLING IN LOVE IF YOU HAVE TO KEEP IT A SECRET?



KEEPING
YOU
A SECRET

JULIE ANNE PETERS
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

KEEPING YOU A SECRET

A NOVEL BY
JULIE ANNE PETERS

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Girlfriend Told Me*](#)

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To Sherri for always

And to those who are living out and
proud. You are a beacon for others
to find their way home.

Chapter 1

First time I saw her was in the mirror on my locker door. I'd kicked my swim gear onto the bottom shelf and was reaching to the top for my calc book when she opened her locker across the hall. She had a streaked blond ponytail dangling out the back of her baseball cap.

Great. Now I was obligated to rag on her for violating the new dress code. Forget it, I decided. My vote

—the only dissenting one in the whole student council—still counted. With me, anyway. People could come to school buck naked for all I cared. It wasn't about clothes.

We slammed our lockers in unison and turned. Her eyes met mine. “Hi,” she said, smiling.

My stomach fluttered. “Hi,” I answered automatically. She was new. Had to be. I would've noticed her.

She sauntered away, but not before

I caught a glimpse of her T-shirt. It said: IMRU?

Am I *what*?

She glanced back over her shoulder, the way you do when you know someone's watching. That's when it registered—the rainbow triangle below the message. My eyes dropped. Kept her in sight, though, as she disappeared around the corner.

I shifted my attention to my schedule. Brit Lit, calc, U.S. History, then art and econ after

lunch. Was I out of my mind? Why was I taking a full load my last semester of high school? Weren't we supposed to revel in this time, embrace our friends, screw around until graduation? At some pivotal point, of course, we'd decide the direction our lives were going to take. A derisive laugh might've escaped my lips. Like I got to decide anything about my life.

I headed down the deserted hallway, clutching my books to my chest. This is insane, I thought. I

don't even need the credits. I'd gotten to choose the early track—

first class at seven, last class at one—but then I added econ at the last minute so I'd be finishing the day with everyone else. I drew a deep breath—and coughed. Who needed to get stoned before school when you got a free ride from the carpet-cleaning fumes?

Morning was a blur. As I stumbled to lunch, my head reeling from the volume of homework I'd already accumulated, my anxiety mounted.

I'd be up till midnight, easy.

"Babe!" Seth called across the crowded cafeteria. He loped to the double doorway to meet me. Kiss me. "We're over here." He thumbed toward the vending machines, snaking an arm around my waist and steering me along.

"Hi, Holland. Hey, Seth," a few people greeted us as we weaved between tables. I assumed my oh-so-happy face. Plaster-casted smile. What was wrong with me? I loved school. I couldn't wait to get back

after winter break.

“Holland, did you see Mrs. Lucas? She was looking for you,” Leah said as she cleared a place beside her for me to sit. “She said to tell you to drop into the career center sometime today.”

Today, tomorrow, never. Popping the top on a can of Pepsi Twist that Seth had set in front of me, I said to Kirsten across the table, “How was Christmas in Texas?”

Leah kicked my shin.

Uh-oh.

Kirsten sighed theatrically. “You had to ask.” She launched into a psychodrama about how her mother was a raving lunatic the whole two weeks and all they did was scream at each other.

Seth split his fries with me and I zoned. He said in my ear, “You want ketchup?” I must’ve nodded because he got up and left.

Leah and Kirsten began to talk about college—again. Could we get through one whole day without bringing up the subject? Kirsten

said, "Mom wants me to commute to Metro Urban and live at home. Like *that's* going to happen." She rolled her eyes. "All I want to do is graduate and get the hell out of this rat hole."

I checked out again. At some point Seth returned with the ketchup and I swabbed a greasy fry through the watery blob. Round and round it goes; where it stops, nobody knows. Seth nudged me. "You okay?"

I glanced up to find everyone staring at me. Was I chanting out

loud? Relinquishing my hold on the mutilated fry, I crossed my eyes and said, "I got Arbuthnot for Brit Lit."

They all went, "Eeoooh." Leah added, "Don't ever be late. She'll ream you out in front of everyone."

I grimaced. I hated when teachers did that. "You know," I said, picking up my cheeseburger, "all these anti-bullying policies should apply to teachers. I mean, *corporal* punishment is illegal." I chomped into my burger and chewed. "Public humiliation," I said with my mouth

full, “is a form of *psychological* abuse.”

By their bobbing heads, I assumed they all agreed. What were we going to do about it? Nothing. Even though I was president of student council, I felt powerless to effect change of any social significance at our school.

I take that back. We now had a pop machine in the hall.



Drawing Level I was, as Seth

referred to it, a bullshit class. But I needed to fill time between lunch and econ. As I wandered down the arts wing, feeling totally out of my element, I wondered what mental aberration had possessed me when I chose an art elective. Drawing, no less, which probably required talent. More than doodling in notebooks.

The assigned studio, 212A, had four rows of tables set end-to-end with chairs arranged haphazardly. No semblance of order. I slid into a

plasti-seat in the back. My uneasiness grew as I studied the crowd clogging the doorway and milling around the display cases. Not the kind of people I usually associated with—which was okay. I didn't have a problem with diversity. It was just... I don't know. I felt weird. I decided to drop the class. Maybe add another study hall. I was going to need it.

A man's voice in the hallway herded everyone inside. As people filed across the threshold, I caught

sight of her. The baseball cap was gone; now her hair flowed around her shoulders. Her eyes darted across the studio and stopped on me. I wanted to look away, but couldn't. She held me somehow, spellbound.

The instructor bustled in and broke the connection. Oh, God. He looked like Einstein on ecstasy. "Just find a seat anywhere," he said to the stragglers. As he turned to write his name on the board, I flipped open a spiral. When I glanced over

surreptitiously, she'd slipped into a seat up front. Another girl slid in beside her. I knew that girl—Randi or Brandi. She was on swim team last year for about a week. Right about the time Seth and I hooked up. Brandi.

“I realize you can't read this,” the instructor said as he ran a palm over his cotton candy hair, “but it says ‘Jonathan McElwain.’ ” He was right. His handwriting was gorgeous, all loopy and bold, but you'd need clearer vision than mine

to decipher it. I squinted through my contacts—that was an *M*? He brushed chalk off his hands and added, “You can call me Mackel.”

I wrote down, *Mr. McElwain*. Then drew a line through it and printed, *Mackel*.

“If I want to get paid, I have to turn this in.” He flapped a computer printout at us. Hopping onto the desk, he curled cross-legged and uncapped a Flair. “Anderson, Michaela.”

“Present.” A girl at the end of my

row raised her hand, and Mackel scratched a checkmark.

A few people I did actually know. It's inevitable when you've lived in the same place your whole life. The guy with the serious orange spikes and nostril ring was in my calc class. Winslow Demming. I remembered him from computer science sophomore year, except back then Winslow was a geek. Brilliant, though. And sweet. Another reminder why people shouldn't be judged on appearance.

Mr. McElwain—Mackel—

progressed through the list. For some reason I was focusing on the back of the blond girl's head, only half listening for my name. "Cecelia Goddard," Mackel read. Her hand shot up and she said, "It's Cece."

I wrote it down. *Cecelia Goddard. CC? Cece?*

Cece, I decided and drew a box around it.

"Holland Jaeger."

A couple of heads swiveled.

"What?" I blinked up.

“Holland Jaeger?”

“Oh, here.” I raised my hand.

Added in a mutter, “Apparently not *all* here.”

She twisted around and smiled.

My stomach lurched. I shielded my face with my hand and pretended to scribble notes.

Mackel handed out a supplies list.

It was long. There were pencils, ink, charcoal, erasers, markers, pens, two sizes of drawing tablets.

God, I’d have to work a month of overtime to afford all this stuff.

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