

FACELESS

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Scholastic Press/New York



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sheinmel, Alyssa B., author.

Faceless / Alyssa Sheinmel.

pages cm

Summary: Maisie is a normal sixteen-year-old, until an electrical fire caused by a lightning strike leaves her with severe burns, her face partially destroyed—she is lucky enough to get a full face transplant but she soon discovers how much her looks shaped her own identity and her relationship with those around her, including her boyfriend.

ISBN 978-0-545-67601-4

1. Face—Transplantation—Patients—Juvenile fiction. 2. Transplantation of organs, tissues, etc. in children—Juvenile fiction. 3. Burns and scalds—Patients—Juvenile fiction. 4. Identity (Psychology)—Juvenile fiction. 5. Parent and teenager—Juvenile fiction. 6. Families—Juvenile fiction. 7. Friendship—Juvenile fiction. [1. Face—Transplantation—Fiction. 2. Transplantation of organs, tissues, etc.—Fiction. 3. Burns and scalds—Fiction. 4. Identity—Fiction. 5. Family life—Fiction. 6. Friendship—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S54123Fac 2015

[Fic]—dc23

2014043153

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 15 16 17 18 19

Printed in U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2015

Book design by Abby Denning

PART I

# SUMMER

# ONE

*S*tep, breath. Step, breath.

My best friend, Serena, doesn't understand why I run. She said once that of all the different forms of working out, she thought running seemed like the absolute worst. The most punishing. Of course, Serena does yoga.

*Step, breath. Step, breath.*

As far as I'm concerned, nothing feels better than a run, especially on a morning like this. It's early; the fog is still hanging heavy over the bay. I have the town almost to myself—just me and the dog walkers and the deliverymen, all of us making our way through the thick morning air. It's almost May, but at this hour, it's barely in the fifties. Perfect running weather. I alternate each step with an exhalation. My breath clouds the air in front of me and I race right through it.

*Step, breath. Step, breath.*

The funny thing about running is that everything hurts. Not just the obvious parts: calves and quads, ankles and glutes. No, my stomach hurts, every muscle straining to help me make the next step, especially when I'm going uphill, like I am now. My shoulders hurt,

aching in the joints from which I swing my arms to propel myself forward. I always do whatever I can to keep from focusing on the pain. When I was studying for my SATs, I used this time to test myself on vocabulary words. Before that, I listened to music as loud as I could, like I thought I could drown the pain out. Right now, I'm going over—moment for moment, word for word—the events of last night. When Chirag finally asked me to junior prom.

If I'm honest, maybe that's why I'm out here this morning instead of sleeping in like the rest of the world. Why should I sleep when it's so much more fun to be awake, thinking about what happened last night?

*Step, breath. Step, breath.*

It's not like I didn't think he was going to ask me. We've been going out since January; of *course* he was going to ask me. But I didn't know *how* he was going to ask me, and I certainly didn't think he was going to show up on my doorstep at nine o'clock on a Tuesday night with a dozen red roses and a sign that read: *Maisie Winters, I love you. Will you go to prom with me?*

We'd never said *I love you* before.

I didn't let him inside. I stepped out onto the porch, shut the door tight behind me, and opened my mouth to say *I love you, too*. But the sound of my parents fighting, audible even through the closed door, stopped me.

We heard my father's shouts, loud and clear. Something about the dishes he'd left in the sink for days.

"Why didn't you just put them in the dishwasher if they bothered you so much?"

"Because it's not my *job* to clean up after you. And I wanted to see just how long you'd let them sit there before you'd realize you'd left a mess for me to clean up."

“So the dishes were some kind of test I didn’t know I was taking?”

“Yes, a test you failed—”

I don’t think they even care what they’re fighting about anymore. I think they just fight because they’ve forgotten that there’s any other way to communicate. But anyway, the sound of their shouts kind of put a damper on the whole love thing. So I didn’t say *I love you* back. Instead, I pushed Chirag down the front steps and toward his car in our driveway. I’d done this at least a dozen times before—dragged him away from our house during one of my parents’ many epic battles. Undoubtedly, Chirag knew why he was being pushed backward so rapidly that we nearly fell down the front-porch stairs, but he was sensitive enough not to mention it. Instead he grinned, because with every step I repeated the word *Yes*. *Yes, yes, yes*, I’ll go to prom with you.

When he left, I worried that maybe I’d done the wrong thing. Maybe I should have said *I love you, too* before he drove away. But then, he didn’t actually *say* he loved me, so maybe I wasn’t *supposed* to say it back. Maybe it doesn’t technically, officially *count* until it’s said out loud. Maybe there’s some strict etiquette about *I love yous* that I don’t know because it’s never happened to me before. Late last night, I actually considered putting it in a note of my own, just so that we’d be perfectly even.

Now I blink, brushing some sweat from my eyelids, and picture his liquid brown eyes staring at me, crinkling at the edges as his lips widen into a smile. We’re polar opposites, physically at least. I have red hair and blue eyes and pale skin dotted with too many freckles. He has caramel skin without a single blemish. To Chirag, my freckles are exotic. He once told me he thought they were sexy, like hundreds of tiny tattoos.

We're going out tonight. Maybe I'll say it then. If he says it first, then I'll definitely say it. I practice the words now, saying them aloud softly in between heaving breaths: *I love you, too. I love you, too. I love you, too.* I break into a sprint, panting. Each word is an effort. This is the last hill before I'll turn back and start running home. I just have to make it around one more curve. Sweat trickles down my neck, beneath my ponytail, getting caught somewhere in my sweatshirt.

I found the dress I want to wear to prom in a magazine over a month ago. It's green and silky and practically backless. It even has a matching headpiece, the same shade of green, for me to pin my long hair around. It's expensive, but I think I can convince my mom. It's the least she can do after last night. Typical of my parents to ruin one of the most important moments of my life with their fighting. But I'll have to work up the nerve to wear the headpiece to the dance anyway. With my red hair, a green sort-of hat could look like I'm dressed up as a Christmas elf or a leprechaun or something. I showed Serena a picture of the dress the other night and she thought that I could totally pull it off, but I'm not convinced yet.

I turn around and start the trek home. This is the easiest part of my run; mostly downhill and with the promise of a hot shower and breakfast once I make it back. I don't notice the first few raindrops; they mix in with my sweat. But as the rain increases, it becomes impossible to ignore. Serena would say that I should've looked at the forecast before I decided to run this morning. Serena wouldn't understand that I rolled out of bed hours before my alarm went off, got dressed in the dark, and jogged out the front door without even looking at myself in the mirror, let alone at a weather report.

I'm keeping this run short, just in case Chirag wants to run together after school later. When we run together, it always turns

into a competition, a dozen tiny races along the way. Who can get to the end of this street faster? Who can make it up the hill first? Who can jump highest over the tree stump on my corner? I won't mind a second workout today. I never miss an excuse to spend more time with him—or anything at all that keeps me out of the house, and away from my parents' fighting, just a little bit longer.

Only a few blocks left; I can see the tree stump from here. It was an enormous oak once, but it was struck by lightning years ago. Its branches crashed through the windows of the nearest house; the trunk fell flat across the street and caused some kind of massive car accident. No one ever bothered getting rid of the stump, though. Apparently, its roots were so deep that digging it up would have been really expensive. They'd have had to cut off the plumbing to half the neighborhood. At least that's what my father told me. Maybe he was just trying to scare me from going outside in a thunderstorm, like I am right now.

The rain turns icy cold, snaking its way under my sweatshirt and into my sneakers. I shiver. The first crack of thunder makes me jump. I break into a sprint; I can almost see our house from here. Anyway, I shouldn't be such a baby, scared of a little thunder and lightning. When I was younger, I'd crawl into my parents' bed during thunderstorms, settle myself right in between them. I couldn't do that now if I wanted to. My father started sleeping in the den months ago.

Lightning streaks across the sky, breaking up the fog, drenching my neighborhood in light. For a split second, everything is completely clear, as bright as if it were the middle of the day and not six in the morning. It takes me a second to realize that I've stopped running, that I'm standing still.

Another crack of lightning, closer now, and I spin around in the direction of the sound. Behind me, a tree has been hit, just a few yards away from the tree stump. Who ever said that lightning didn't strike twice in the same place? A blackened branch hangs on to the tree's trunk by just a few fibers of wood, draped down over the electrical wires, or phone wires, or whatever they are, dancing in the wind, setting off sparks that look almost like fireworks.

I should get moving, go on home, take off these soaked clothes and sit on top of the radiator until I'm warm. But for some reason, I find myself rooted in this spot, staring at the embers flying down. It's strange to see sparks even as the rain grows stronger, stranger still when they ignite into flames. There is an audible *whoosh* as the fire travels up the branch of the tree, a crisp sort of crackling as the leaves begin to burn, filling the air with tiny pieces of white ash. I taste smoke in the back of my throat, so thick and heavy that I think I might retch.

I press my hands to my face when the branch finally snaps from the tree, dragging the wires to the ground with an enormous crash every bit as loud as the thunder.

Another flash of lightning illuminates the sky, but my neighborhood is already saturated with light from the fire and the sparks coming off the wires. When they hit the wet ground, they sizzle.

I close my eyes and listen: the sizzles sound almost like whispers.

*Hiss, hiss, hisssssssssss.*

## TWO

It feels like swimming. No, I wasn't swimming. I was running.

*Step, breath. Step, breath.*

"She's moving!" someone shouts. My father's voice. But what's he doing here, on my run? We haven't run together in years. He can't keep up with me anymore.

*Step, breath. Step, breath.*

Slowly, I become aware that I'm not standing. That my feet aren't pounding the pavement but flailing around, trapped under tightly tucked covers. The sensation of swimming had nothing at all to do with water, but swimming up into consciousness after a long, deep sleep.

"Hurry, please!" My mother's voice this time. "She's moving!"

Why are they shouting like it's some kind of miracle that I'm moving? I move every minute of every day. I even move in my sleep—I toss and turn, one of those people who can't stay in the same position all night.

A deep voice that I don't recognize says my name once, twice. He shines a bright light in my eyes. "Dilated," he murmurs. Louder: "She's going to drift in and out of consciousness for the next hour or so. Don't be surprised if she's a little fuzzy for a while."

It takes me a second to realize that the man with the deep voice isn't talking *to* me, but *about* me. I open my mouth to speak, but sleep sneaks up on me again, swallowing my questions before they have a chance to escape.

This happens at least three more times that I can remember—I move, my parents shout, the man with the deep voice shines a light in my eyes and I fall back to sleep—but the fourth time, my eyes finally stay open.

The skin surrounding my eyes is wrapped up in something thick and bulky so that I have tunnel vision: I can see only what's directly in front of me, and since I'm lying on my back, all I can see is the ceiling, painted a sticky sort of light blue that someone probably thought looked like the sky.

I try to speak, but my voice is nothing more than the thinnest of croaks, as though I haven't had anything to drink for weeks. My throat feels like it's made of sandpaper and my lips feel like there are dozens of tiny needles pricking them over and over.

"Mom?" I whisper. I try to clear my throat, lick my lips, swallow, but everything is dry. My lips are cracked and when I stick my tongue out to lick them, I feel something foreign on my face.

I think it's bandages. I think I'm in the hospital.

"Mom?" I croak. I try to roll over but my left side feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. I *can't* roll over.

"I'm here, honey." My mother's voice sounds soft and soothing, nothing like it sounded when she shouted for help earlier. I try to lift my head to see her face, but I can't actually turn my neck. My head feels like it's encased in plaster. Maybe it is. I begin to sweat, a string of panic twisting its way through my rib cage. *What happened to me?*

My mother must position herself so that her face is directly above mine, because finally I can see her hovering above me. The string of panic tightens when I see the expression on her face. I've never seen her look so frightened. She looks about ten years older than she did the last time I saw her.

My god, this must be bad. My heart starts beating hard, so fast that a nearby machine begins to wail.

"Sweetheart," she says, trying to reach for me, but I shake my head. Or I try to shake my head. I can't move my neck. Oh god, I'm paralyzed. Oh god, I broke my spine and I'll never run again. I'm going to be one of those people who sit in a wheelchair and move it forward by blowing into a tube.

No. *Get a grip, Maisie.* I was able to move my legs before. They *saw* me moving my legs. I kick them now, just to make sure I can. I exhale deeply, my throat still parched, but my heart begins to slow. The machine resumes its steady beep. Listening carefully, I guess that it must be right next to the bed, just above me on the right.

"Water," I croak. It's hard to make words from beneath whatever it is that's wrapped around my face. The word comes out sounding like *wa-wa*, but my mother must understand because she nods, then disappears. She doesn't go far; she's just moving to get a cup of water from my bedside table, but that's outside of my field of vision.

"Is it okay?" my mother asks. Another female voice answers, "Just a little."

"Who's that?" I ask. I wish I could see. I wish I could sit up. I wish I could *move*.

"One of your nurses," Mom says. "Anna."

Then Mom reappears. She holds a cup to my mouth and I use a straw to drink, even though it hurts my lips. I hold it with my teeth

instead. Water has never tasted so good. I could drink ten, twenty, thirty glasses of water. I swish the water around in my mouth, wetting all the places that feel so dry.

“Not too much, sweetie,” my mother says, pulling the cup away, her face back to its place above mine. What’s wrong with me that *water* is dangerous?

Footsteps; someone coming into the room.

“Give her a chance, Sue,” says another voice. My father’s this time. “She hasn’t had anything to drink for nearly a month.”

It’s hard to drink lying so flat and water goes down the wrong tube. I cough—or anyway, I try to cough, but it’s hard when you’re as immobilized as I am. What does he mean, I haven’t had anything to drink for nearly a month? I must have misheard him. Every sound is muffled through whatever it is that’s wrapped around my head.

“What happened to me?” Even after the water, my voice sounds strange. I can barely move my mouth: *Wha happa ta ma?*

“You’re in the hospital,” Dad says, not answering my question. I can’t see his face but it sounds like he’s standing at the foot of my bed. There’s room for only one person in my limited field of vision and it’s still my mother.

He adds, “The burn unit of the hospital. Do you remember your accident?”

I keep forgetting that I can’t shake my head. The burn unit. The panic string in my chest tightens. A burn unit is not a good place to be.

“You were running,” Dad prompts. It’s strange to hear his voice, feel his presence in the room, without seeing his face. “There was a storm.”

“Lightning,” I say, remembering. The words come out muffled, as if my mouth were stuffed with gauze. “I was struck by lightning?”

My question is met with silence at first. Another time, another place, that question would be a joke. No one is actually struck by lightning, right? I mean, I know somewhere, someday, people are. But it's really really rare, right? Nervous sweat drips down my neck, seeping into my bandages. Finally, my mother says, "She can't see you shaking your head, Graham."

"There was a fire," Dad answers finally. There's something weird in his voice, like he can barely stand saying the word *fire* out loud. Mom leaves my side for a moment; I hear her shoes clicking on the floor as she crosses the room. Is she going to hug my father? I can't remember the last time I saw them so much as shake hands.

Whatever's wrong with me, it must be really bad if she's comforting him.

My heart starts to pound again. I beg it not to go so fast that the machine starts screeching again, concentrating the same way I do when I run and I'm trying to save up my energy for the final sprint. But my will isn't strong enough to overcome my body, at least not this time, because the machine starts to wail. I hear footsteps and the sound stops—the nurse, Anna, must have turned off the machine.

"Dad, please. What's wrong with me?" My question sounds absurd: *Wha wron wit ma?* I repeat the question, struggling to make the words sound clear. They'll never tell me if I sound like a toddler.

It *can't* be that bad. I'm not the kind of person really bad things happen to. Not particularly good things, either. I'm just a normal girl. I'm not the most popular, but I'm not the biggest nerd either. I have a boyfriend, but it's not like he's the captain of the football team and I'm homecoming queen. I've had the same best friend since first

grade. My parents fight, but everyone's parents fight. I'm just *normal*.

And it can't be that bad because I'm not in any pain. Nothing hurts. I try lifting my right arm; it feels fine. But when I try to lift my left arm, I discover that something is holding it in place.

Finally, Mom says, "The doctor will be here in just a second. Your father went to ask for him the minute you woke up."

"Why can't I move my left arm?"

"It's all wrapped up in bandages, baby. You suffered second-degree burns on your left arm and torso."

I exhale. Second-degree burns. *That's not so bad*, I think. Can't people get second-degree burns from just staying in the sun too long? I'm going to be okay. The string of panic loosens; my heart slows. I take a deep breath.

Footsteps again. Then a face I've never seen before is hovering above mine. But when he speaks I recognize his voice. He's the one who said I'd be a little fuzzy for a while.

"Second-degree burns aren't that bad, right?" I ask immediately.

He ignores my question. Or maybe he didn't understand it. How will I get answers if I can't make myself be heard? Beneath my bandages, I feel hot. I fight the urge to yank at them like a too-tight collar.

"Maisie, my name is Dr. Cohen. I've been handling your case since you were brought in."

Something about the way he says *since you were brought in* gives away the fact that I've been here a long time. My father's words come back to me.

"What did my dad mean when he said that I hadn't had anything

to drink for nearly a month?” It takes me a while to ask such a long question. I have to hold each word in my mouth before it can get out.

Dr. Cohen blinks, hesitating. He looks away for a second, to my parents maybe. He nods. His dark brown eyes remind me of Chirag’s, though his aren’t quite so deep, not quite so liquidy. In the right light, Chirag’s eyes look like cups of black coffee.

“You’ve been getting all the fluids you need from your IV,” Dr. Cohen says. He sounds positively cheerful about it, as though getting fluids from a needle is a much more convenient way to stay hydrated than, say, drinking.

“Have I been in a coma or something?” I ask slowly.

“Something like that,” Dr. Cohen says. “Though not a coma like you’d think of it.”

*What is that supposed to mean*, I think but do not say. I’ve never actually thought of a coma one way or another before.

“We induced your coma,” he says carefully.

Suddenly, I wish it was my mother’s face and not Dr. Cohen’s that I was looking at, no matter how frightened she looks. In fact, for the first time in a long time—maybe for the first time ever—I wish I were sitting on my mother’s lap, wish she was rocking me back and forth and saying things like *It’s gonna be okay, baby* and *Nothing to worry about, just a scratch or two*.

“Why?” I ask finally.

“With your injuries—Maisie, you were burned very badly.” His face is serious, his mouth settling into a perfectly straight line in between sentences. “Your injuries were so severe that we thought it would be best to keep you in a coma until we could manage your pain. Your body needed the time to recover.”

That doesn't sound so bad. I must be almost fixed, then, if they've decided it's time for me to wake up. I must have slept through the worst of it.

"For how long?" I ask.

"A few weeks," Dr. Cohen answers.

A few weeks? A few *weeks*! I know I shouldn't be surprised—Dad said it had almost been a month—but seriously, who do these doctors think they are, the bad fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*?

I close my eyes, trying to imagine everything I must have missed. Prom, for starters. It was scheduled for three weeks before the end of the school year. Serena and I were going to get ready together. She was going to do my hair for me, since I never have the patience to do anything but pull it into a ponytail. She was going to be ready with her camera when Chirag picked me up, to catch a picture of what his face looked like when he first saw me in my dress. We weren't going to sit out a single dance all night.

Has the school year ended yet? Don't they know I can't miss my final exams? I have papers to write. Races to run. Am I going to have to repeat my junior year? How am I going to get into Berkeley with something like that on my record?

Summer school. I can go to summer school. Plenty of kids do. And the doctors will put a note on my file explaining that I wasn't a delinquent or something, I just had an accident.

"When can I go home?" I ask, though I say it too fast and it sounds like *Whe cah ah ga ho?* I say it again, slower this time.

Dr. Cohen blinks again. "Maisie, I'm afraid you're going to be with us for quite some time yet."

"But why? For a few second-degree burns?"

Even as I ask the question, I know that there's something more, something they haven't told me yet. Suddenly, I'm certain that something very bad has happened to me. I can hear it in the timbre of my mother's voice and I can see it in the rehearsed smile that's plastered on Dr. Cohen's face. The panic is setting in again. My heart is beating faster. Sweat pools at the nape of my neck.

They don't put you in a coma for a few second-degree burns.

My mother's voice rings out, clear as a bell: "Maisie. It wasn't just your left side that got burned."