

# STRAYS



A NOVEL

BY



JENNIFER CALOYERAS

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## prologue

I brought the hammer down as hard as I could and watched the stucco of my closet wall crumble. That was for being dumped by Andy Dunn. I raised the wooden handle over my head and brought it down again with even more force—a human guillotine. That was for Mrs. Schneider’s condescending remark in English class. Another bash for my dad for being too busy to deal with me. A slam for my so-called best friend, Ashley, for not calling me back the night before. And a smash for my mom—for dying—that sent bits of drywall flying.

I waited until my chest stopped its rhythmic heaving up and down, like the waves of the Pacific that I could see from my bedroom window. After rearranging my clothing on the hangers so that they hid all evidence of my outburst, I stepped out of the closet and closed the doors. As usual, the hammering had been therapeutic. I had let it all out.

Or so I thought.

## one

I couldn't ignore them any longer. It was one thing to walk around the school cafeteria hiding behind my sunglasses, pretending I didn't see them waving at me, but they knew I hadn't gone deaf, so when my two "friends" started shouting my name, I had to walk over.

"Iris!" yelled Ashley again, both hands in the air like she was on a roller coaster. She had been my closest friend, if you could call it that, since I had moved to Santa Cruz, California, to start my sophomore year less than two years ago.

Sierra followed with a bellowing, "Eye!"

*Eye* was their nickname for me, but I never had the heart to tell them they should stick to Iris because calling me by the first letter of my name kind of creeped me out. I just always pictured this big, ominous eye hovering over my head.

I don't know why they'd plucked me out of all the girls at Santa Cruz High. It wasn't like I had been giving out signals that I wanted to hang out. In fact, I spent most of that first year in tenth grade with my head down, hiding behind my long brown hair. Maybe they were intrigued by the new girl with the tragic past.

Begrudgingly, I brought my sack lunch over.

"For a second there, I thought you were avoiding us," said Sierra,

who was clearly breaking the dress code by sporting a tube top.

“I wouldn’t do that,” I lied. Truth was, I had been craving more and more time alone with my thoughts lately. But it was hard to explain this to my friends because I couldn’t even really understand it myself. After finally settling in to a new home and my new life without Mom, I found myself wanting to retreat, as though the comfort scared me. I was shying away, like a hamster or a jaguar, from being a social creature.

It finally felt like the beginning of summer—the kind of day that made people visiting Santa Cruz announce to their families that they were moving to California immediately. Outside, a cerulean sky with rising heat made me envy all of the kids downing cool sodas. Dad had forgotten to give me my allowance this morning, so I was stuck with a boring peanut butter and jelly sandwich from home. And drinking fountain water—lukewarm.

“You look tired,” Ashley said as I sat down.

“I woke up late, and Dad drank all the coffee this morning,” I said.

“Coffee stunts your growth,” said Sierra. She was going to end up at least six feet tall, like her brothers, and no amount of caffeine could stop her.

“Well, it also staves off type-two diabetes,” I added.

“Here she goes,” said Sierra.

That shut me up. I didn’t have to subject them to my Science Channel addiction.

I could feel the crunchy peanut bits sticking to my teeth. “How’d you do on bio?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“There’s no way anyone got the extra credit on the bio final this morning. No way,” said Sierra, opening her plastic container filled with noodles. She was a senior who sometimes hung out with us.

Since I was in accelerated science, we were in the same class.

The sides of my mouth turned upward, ever so subtly.

“What was the question?” asked Ashley.

Sierra used her teeth to rip open the package of soy sauce. “It was something like: ‘What’s special about the way moray eels eat?’”

“And ‘What is this mechanism called?’” I added.

“I’m glad I’m not in any of those AP classes,” said Ashley.

“Why would Mr. Sommers even include extra credit questions if they’re impossible to answer? It’s cruel,” said Sierra.

My smile widened, and Ashley glanced over at me. It was one of the few pleasures I had experienced in months. I wanted to revel in it.

Ashley was onto me. “You got it, didn’t you?” she said.

“She’s smart, but she’s not *that* smart,” said Sierra, studying my eyes as my pupils widened. “Oh my God. You did get it. What in the world was the answer?”

I gave them the full explanation. “Moray eels have a second set of jaws at the back of their mouths. They’re called *pharyngeal jaws*, and when the eel clamps down on its prey, the second set protrudes forward to help bring the food back into the esophagus.”

Ashley put down her burrito. “I think I’m gonna puke.”

“Where in the world did you learn that? Mr. Sommers never even covered that in class,” said Sierra.

“He didn’t talk about it in class. It was on one of those nature programs I watch.”

I could get so caught up in those shows that hours would pass and I wouldn’t even notice. And since I’d been feeling so antisocial lately, my propensity for marathon sessions of TV watching had increased significantly.

“You kind of have a photographic memory,” said Ashley.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “Only when it comes to things...” I paused, thinking about what I was trying to say. What was the information I was more likely to remember?

“Related to animals?” Ashley offered.

“I guess. I remember some flora stuff, too, but mostly the fauna,” I said.

“You should try going to the Monterey Bay Aquarium with her. It’s like having your own personal tour guide,” said Ashley.

I guess I had been a bit much when we took a road trip forty-five minutes south to Monterey soon after we met. It had been a kind gesture for Ashley to invite me along with her family, and Dad had been happy to spend the weekend holed up in his office. Ashley had made fun of me for spouting off facts and strange trivia about the various sea animals—they were my specialty. With all the time I had spent in the ocean, I felt a bit like a sea animal myself. At least I used to feel that way. The ocean now reminded me too much of my mom, so I avoided it. But whenever I heard or read anything about an animal—it didn’t matter what kind—the fact would get filed away in my head, and I could recall it at any given moment.

“Wonder why it doesn’t work with everything?” asked Sierra.

I had been wondering the same thing. I had four more finals to take over the next week, and only the easiest one—biology—was behind me. I was pretty sure I had nailed it. But the rest of the week would bring precalculus, Spanish 3, AP U.S. history, and the most dreaded one: English 3. It was my only class that wasn’t advanced, which was ironic because my mom had been a librarian who was basically in love with books. I’d been doing okay in English until I was placed in Mrs. Schneider’s class last year, in the tenth grade. And then, as luck would have it, I got her again the following year.

Schneider was like a virus I could not shake.

She approached English like an army lieutenant—all rules and no fun. Above her desk was a quote by Molière: GRAMMAR, WHICH KNOWS HOW TO CONTROL EVEN KINGS. But Schneider ran her classroom like King Henry the Eighth—hacking off our proverbial heads every time anyone misspoke.

I knew I should have been studying more, working harder to make sure I kept up my 3.8 grade point average, but the more I studied “the rules,” the more mottled they became.

Looking around the cafeteria, you could see severe cases of “senioritis” everywhere. Students were constantly talking about what colleges they were going to, pushing the limits of the already pretty lax dress code in the form of too-short skirts, and exuding a joy that I did not share.

High school was so compartmentalized. You could see it in the yearbook: who the sporty kids were, the skaters, the nerds, the theater geeks, the popular kids. But my friends seemed to transcend that kind of labeling. We were part of different things at school. Sierra wrote for the school newspaper, *The Weekly Slug*; Ashley played volleyball; and I sang in the choir and was part of the school science team that met over an occasional lunch period to discuss the latest breaking news. We were an eclectic trio.

“One week until we’re seniors!” I said with fake enthusiasm, trying to take the focus off me and the inner workings of my weird brain.

“I know—I can’t believe it! Next year is going to be so awesome!” said Ashley.

Mom had always talked about the importance of getting into a good college, which felt kind of weird because Dad had never gone. He’d worked his way from construction worker to contractor to

businessman, all without a degree. But Mom was always so nostalgic about her college days at Brown University, it was only natural that I would follow in her footsteps.

Dad would always debate with her. “We have some fine state schools in California.”

But she’d fire back, “It’s not the same as being hunkered down in the dead of winter in a library that’s been in operation for over two hundred years.”

And that was the image I conjured most often when I pictured myself at college: sitting bundled in a cold library with a long knit sweater, surrounded by books on molecular biology. I realized not every junior romanticized college in quite the same way.

After Mom died, Dad and I didn’t really talk about college plans anymore. He had thrown himself into his new job, and I was busy figuring out if and how I was going to make new friends. But when I came home one day last year with a Brown brochure that the college counselor had given me, Dad sat me down and expressed his concerns.

“We can’t afford it.”

I knew there was one less income coming in, which was why our new duplex in Santa Cruz was way smaller than our house in Topanga Canyon, just north of Los Angeles.

“I’m a good student. I can get a scholarship.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said. “We’re not poor enough for a scholarship.”

So there I was, not rich enough to afford a private university, but not poor enough for assistance—stuck between a rock and a hard place. Stuck with Dad in California. The good news was my grades had been strong—at least until this semester—and I’d been slowly adding to my nest egg with the funds I’d received from Mom’s small

trust. The money was accumulating a modest amount of interest at First Pacific Bank. What better way to spend it than on my education? I knew she'd approve of my plan. With that money there, my college counselor explained, I could qualify for a loan.

"So, what does it feel like to have one more week until graduation?" Ashley asked Sierra. More than anything, I wanted to switch places with Sierra and officially be a high school graduate.

"I can't wait to get out of this place," said Sierra. "I mean, Santa Cruz is pretty and all, but doesn't it make you feel like the world is so much bigger? There are colleges with student populations as big as this entire city!"

"Seriously? Like where?" Ashley asked.

"Ohio State, for one." Sierra had had her heart set on that school since the beginning of last year. It was all we ever heard about. We were glad when her acceptance letter finally arrived in the mail. "Can you imagine all the single guys there will be to choose from? And I'm not talking surfer types."

It was true. Our city boasted an inordinately high ratio of surfer guys: tanned skin; long, sun-bleached hair; and this laid-back attitude that made you feel that even if you took one by surprise and slapped him across the face, he'd just keep the conversation rolling.

"Um, speaking of which," said Sierra. "Looks like Andy found himself a freshman."

We turned our heads in unison to see what Sierra was talking about, making it totally obvious that we were spying on Andy Dunn—my ex. Not surprisingly, he was one of those surfer types, but with a brain. He had broken up with me two weeks earlier. He said that I just seemed closed off, that I wasn't letting him in. He claimed he meant emotionally, but I had an entirely different interpretation; I

hadn't been ready to do much more than kiss him. We'd dated for three months, and seeing him with another girl made my stomach ache in its lowest depths.

"Whatever," I said, turning back around, pretending to shrug the whole thing off. But *the waters were rising*—or at least that's how I felt as the anger gained momentum in my body. I tried to ignore the feeling by anticipating the damage I would inflict on my closet wall once I got home.

"You mean, that doesn't bug you?" Sierra pointed straight at them.

"You don't have to point," Ashley said, lowering Sierra's arm.

"He can do what he wants. Fine by me," I lied.

It wasn't fine. The last thing I wanted was a front-row seat to their face-sucking festival. How insensitive could one person be? And to think I'd actually loved this guy. Or, at least I thought I had.

I changed the subject. "So what are the official summer plans?"

"Summer school if I didn't pass my biology final," said Sierra.

"You'll pass," I said. So much of my time was spent telling these two that they were pretty or skinny or that they'd pass or whatever else they wanted to hear. It was exhausting.

"Okay, supposing I pass AP bio," said Sierra, "I guess summer will be spent being a junior counselor at Summer Brooke Day Camp in Los Gatos, packing up for college, and then hanging with you fine people each afternoon, right?"

"You guys are so lucky," said Ashley. "I have to work."

"Yeah, at the best coffee house in Santa Cruz!" I couldn't hide my excitement that Ashley would be behind the counter at Pergolesi, a Victorian-house-turned-coffee-shop where college students went to study. She had already assured me that as long as her manager wasn't around, I could have all the free coffee I wanted.

“You’re working, too, right, Eye?” asked Sierra.

“Babysitting. Same boys I sit during the week sometimes.”

I would be babysitting the Harrison boys from nine to three every day. Their mom worked some part-time computer-type job over the hill in San Jose and made enough to pay me \$15 an hour, a 25 percent raise from last summer. It was a pretty easy job, and even fun at times: walking the boys to the park and the library. Every paycheck would transform into college credits.

“Do you have to change diapers?” asked Sierra.

“I did last year. But Conor’s three now. He’s potty trained. I just have to give him a jelly bean every time it lands in the potty.”

“Eew! You have to watch him pee!” said Sierra.

“I’m just there to make sure everything goes where it’s supposed to go,” I said.

“I am only having girls,” said Ashley, putting her uneaten lunch away.

Sierra laughed. “You don’t get to choose!”

“I thought there were *ways* of making it go one way or the other. Like positions or some tea you could drink.” Ashley could be so naïve.

“Yeah, Make-a-Girl tea,” I said. “Saw that one on sale at the market last week.”

We all laughed.

“Okay, Ms. Biology Expert, so you tell us then. How is a baby’s sex determined?” asked Sierra.

I hadn’t really thought of it before. Just knew there was a fifty-fifty chance.

“Sorry, guys, I only do animals,” I said.

“People don’t count as animals?” asked Ashley.

“Well, I guess humans are the one animal I don’t understand,” I

said, staring at Andy, who was still slobbering all over that freshman girl. *The waters began rising again.* It felt as though I were drowning a slow death and there was nothing I could do to save myself.

Sierra's phone pinged, and she looked down to read the text. "I can't believe this!"

"What?" I asked.

"I was supposed to drive to a concert in Berkeley this weekend to review a band for the newspaper, but now my mom's saying she needs the car because she just got invited to some spa getaway with *her* friends. I seriously hate her. I wish she were dead."

Even though I was looking down at my sandwich, I could feel their eyes on me, waiting for my reaction.

"Sorry, Eye," said Sierra.

There that monacle was, floating above me. Looking down on me. Singling me out.

*Girl with the dead mother.*

"It's okay!" I assured her. After all, it should have been okay, an offhand remark said in front of someone whose mom happened to be dead. Sierra hadn't meant to offend, I understood that—but, truth be told, whenever people mentioned their moms I ached a little inside. It seemed like a waste of time to want something I couldn't have. Dad was still single, always too busy with work for girlfriends, but even if he remarried and I gained a stepmother, whether good or evil, she'd never replace my real mom.

I did my best to smile and empathize with Sierra.

"My mom wants to take us on a girls' shopping trip to San Francisco next weekend," Ashley said. "You ladies in?"

Sierra squealed. "Yes!"

"Eye?" asked Ashley. I knew she was being generous with her offer,

but I was desperate for some time alone.

“Maybe,” I answered, unenthusiastically.

“Aw, come on. We need your dad’s juice for the ride up!”

Dad was a manager at a juicing facility just north of Santa Cruz, and his one and only perk seemed to be a limitless supply of fresh-squeezed fruit and vegetable juices that filled our otherwise scant refrigerator to the brim.

“I’m totally going on a juice diet,” said Sierra. “Tell your dad we need a case for the car. You have to come.”

Did they only want me to go on the trip for my free drinks? I wondered if I put in a request like that whether Dad would bother following through—or even return my text, for that matter. He was always busy with work. When I was younger, he’d taken time off to go on vacations with me and my mom. We’d go camping in Yosemite or cross-country skiing in the Sierras. But after she died, Dad’s workload seemed to increase, and I couldn’t figure out whether he had actually been given more work or whether he had chosen to take it all on in order to avoid dealing with Mom’s death—or dealing with me.

A wadded-up paper lunch bag hit Ashley in the face.

“Seriously?” she said. She picked it up and threw it back toward three boys at another lunch table, laughing. We didn’t know their names but referred to them as Mutton Chop (the guy was always growing his sideburns), Streak (he had a streak of blond bleached at the front of his hair), and Hoodie Boy (who always wore the same hooded sweatshirt pulled tight so you could hardly see his face). All of them were troublemakers. They had been kicked out of class more times than I could count, and once in a while I’d see one of them sitting outside the principal’s office, waiting, no doubt, for another stern warning. They were from a whole other world of kids who

didn't listen, kids who had no college ambition, kids who would end up in the same place doing the same thing twenty years from now. Or worse: in jail.

"Here comes Principal C."

Principal Cagle was on the prowl again. Close to the end of the school year, he had a mission to bust anyone he could get his hands on, like he had some quota to fill. With the paper-bag delinquents only a table away, I didn't even question his steady pace toward us. Also, he and Ashley's dad were friends, and once in a while, just to make everyone feel awkward, he'd have a seat with us and start making small talk.

Sierra said, "Ashley, hide under the table, so he doesn't see you..."

Ashley was getting ready to squeeze under the laminate when Cagle leaned down toward me and said, not quite in a whisper, "Iris Moody, please meet me in my office in ten minutes."

My cheeks flushed as Cagle turned and walked away.

"He's so creepy," Sierra said, once he was out of earshot.

"What in the world was that about?" asked Ashley.

I shrugged.

"He probably just wants to tell you you've won some super-genius science award and they're etching your name on a plaque that will sit on the gym wall for all eternity," said Sierra.

The paper-bag boys were staring at me and laughing, still probably shocked that they weren't the ones Cagle was after.

"Want to walk around Pacific after school?" Sierra asked us.

Ashley nodded. "You'll come, too—right, Eye?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, less than enthusiastically. I really just wanted an afternoon to myself.

"Is everything okay?" Ashley asked.

“Peachy,” I said in my perfected sarcastic tone.

Ashley rolled her eyes.

“You don’t have to be rude about it,” said Sierra.

“You guys have a good lunch,” I said and grabbed my things. I just felt like being alone, wallowing in my funk. I told myself that once summer break officially started, I would emerge from hiding, ready to face the world.

As I walked toward Mr. Cagle’s office, a nagging feeling took over my body that this meeting was going to be anything but congratulatory.

*Strays* is forthcoming  
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If you are a member of the media and would like a review copy, please  
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