

Hey, Nobody's Perfect

by Ann Herrick

Chapter One

Injuring a body part was so not a good thing, but I thought I could make it work for me.

"Sivia, would you please get the door!" Mom shouted from inside the pantry, where she was trying to find the oat bran cereal.

What was it with bran and people over forty, anyway?

I grunted.

Mom pulled herself out of the pantry.

I rolled my eyes for effect, scuffed over to the door and fumbled with the lock. It took a few extra seconds with the jiggling and jostling, but I got it open. "Hi, Dad."

"Hi, honey." Dad kissed my forehead. His lips felt like icicles. His soaking-wet sweatshirt clung to his chest. It was hard to tell if he was wet from rain or from sweating through the two-mile run from his new "bachelor pad," (yuck) as he called it. He used to just barge right in, before Mom changed the locks. He raged about that until she pointed out that she didn't have a key to his place, that when he first moved out he didn't even want to tell her where his apartment *was*.

Dad rubbed his hands together. "Spring rain! That means softball is just around the corner. How's your wrist, Sivia?"

"Er, the swelling has gone down a little." I gave him a lame smile to show I was trying to be brave through my vast pain.

"That's great," Dad said. "From now on, watch those sweeping gestures. Whacking the back of your hand on the corner of the kitchen table could have broken a bone."

"Kurt," Mom said, her voice heavy with exasperation—almost standard when talking to Dad these days. "The doctor said a bruised bone could take just as long to heal as a fracture." She poured herself a bowl of oat bran and sat down to eat.

Dad ignored Mom's comment. As usual. "Have you been putting ice on it, Sivia?"

"Yes. But!" I quickly added, "It still hurts. A lot! I totally can't bend my wrist or move my two middle fingers." I tried to project a wounded-puppy look.

"Keep it elevated," Dad said. "Maybe you should get a new bandage. That one looks stretched out. And you know the rule. R.I.C.E. Rest, ice, compression, and elevation."

"Yes, Dad." I thought the bandage was fine, but I didn't argue. Dad was so a control freak and way too health-conscious, but, as beyond annoying as it was, everything he said always turned out to be right. I grabbed two slices of whole wheat bread and shoved them into the toaster.

"You've got to take care of that wrist," Dad said. "After all, softball is your calling."

Mom let out a loud sigh.

"Er, yeah," I said. With my good hand I tucked my hair behind my ear. Just last year, at Dad's strong, um, "suggestion," I'd switched from track to softball. I liked to run, but my speed was only average, at best. Dad didn't like for me to spend time on being just average. Even good wasn't good enough. That's why I played up my bandaged wrist. Maybe it would give me the out I needed if Dad didn't let up about his goals for my perfection in softball.

Suddenly there was a loud thud, bump, and crunch from the direction of the hallway. That would be Russ, jumping down the stairs. He skidded into the kitchen, his thick brown hair flopping down on his forehead, his arms wide open. "Ta-da!" he half sang. At twelve, he was the master of grand entrances. "Oops. Morning, Dad."

"Rus-sell Gro-ner," Dad said in his clipped, stern tone. "How many times have I told you not to jump down the stairs like that?"

"Four thousand, seven hundred and eighty-two? If I'm right, do I get a prize?"

Dad glared at Russ.

"Sorry." Russ shrugged as he scuffed his foot back and forth. "I forgot."

"Oh," Dad said. "You forgot. How on earth could you—"

Mom let out a symphony of sighs, and scraped her chair on the floor as she stood to take her cereal bowl over to the dishwasher. She pressed her normally full lips down into a tight line.

"Now, Estelle." Dad touched Mom's elbow. "You know he shouldn't be crashing around like that."

Mom shot Dad a penetrating look. Dad flinched.

There was a knock on the door. Mom answered it. "Ted! What are you doing here at this hour?" Mom smoothed her short curly hair with her fingers and tightened the belt on her fuzzy blue robe.

My toast popped up.

Dad grabbed my arm and whispered in my ear. "Who the heck is that drip with the thick glasses, and why is he bothering your mother at this hour?"

"It's Mr. Hawkins." I slathered raspberry jam my toast. "A new guy from Mom's office." I was tempted to make him sound like more of a hunk type than he looked, just to make Dad more jealous than he already sounded, but I didn't want to start any real trouble. And, really, Dad had given up any right to be jealous when he left Mom. Besides, I had to get ready for school.

"I have to catch the early flight up to Portland, Stelle," Mr. Hawkins said to Mom, "but I knew you'd need these figures." He handed her a folder.

"Why, Ted, thank you!" Mom's smile brought a rosy glow to her cheeks. "I really appreciate this. I know you had to go out of your way." She didn't mention that he probably could have emailed or faxed them to her.

Dad looked as if he was going to puke.

"No trouble at all, Stelle." Mr. Hawkins kind of slouched against the door, because otherwise he towered over Mom. He glanced at Dad and me for a nanosecond, then quickly said, "Well, Stelle, I'd better run if I'm going to make my flight."

Mom crushed the folder against her chest. "Thanks again, Ted."

"Any time, Stelle." Mr. Hawkins ran his fingers through his thinning blonde hair. "Well, bye."

"Bye, Ted." Mom started to close the door as Mr. Hawkins left. Then she opened it and called after him, "Thanks again!"

"For crying out loud, Estelle," Dad said. "He just dropped off some figures. You're behaving as if he'd brought you candy and flowers. Act your age."

"Look, Kurt," Mom said in the monotone that was her signal she was not going to put up with any crap. "What I do now is my business. And I am acting my age."

"Humph." Dad turned to me as I chewed on my toast. "Sivia, jam's no good for you. Isn't there at least some peanut butter in this house? A good, natural, sugar-free peanut butter? You need a nourishing—"

"Don't worry, Dad." I headed for the refrigerator. "I'm getting a big glass of skim milk. Very nutritious." Being a professor of Health Education at the university added to Dad's fanaticism about our physical condition. He sometimes acted as if he'd be busted back to assistant professor if anyone at the university caught us looking out-of-shape.

"And Russ." Dad shook his finger. "That doughnut is nothing but empty calories. Look at you. You're getting pear-shaped. Estelle, don't you keep any healthy food in this house?"

"That's 'healthful' food," Mom said, as she slowly and deliberately stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into her coffee. "Yes, there's plenty. And Russ is not 'pear-shaped.' He just has a trace of baby fat, which is perfectly normal at his age!" She slammed her spoon into the sink.

"Gee, who says divorce is wiping out family traditions?" Russ bit into his doughnut, dribbling crumbs onto the floor. "We're as dysfunctional as ever."

"Now see here!" The veins on Dad's neck popped out. "Ever since the divorce I show up here every morning to make sure you two kids eat a good breakfast, so you'll grow up fit and strong!"

"An occasional doughnut won't do any harm," Mom said through clenched teeth. "Our children are fit."

"And strong." Russ lifted his doughnut as if he were pumping iron.

"I just want my kids to be the absolute best they can be," Dad said to everyone in general and no one in particular. "Is that a crime?"

Mom stuck her hands on her hips. "Of course not, Kurt. I just wish you'd remember that nobody's perfect." She started to leave the room, then stopped and stared at Dad's head. "Speaking of perfect, is it my imagination, or is your hair suddenly as dark as Sivia's again?"

I checked out Dad's hair. It was almost dry now, and I could see that Mom had hit on something. The touches of gray were gone.

Dad's face burned red. The vein in his neck throbbed.

"Talk about acting your age" Mom fingered a lock of Dad's hair. "What's the matter? Was the gray making you look old enough to be Nicole's father?"

"At twenty-six, Nicole is not a child." Dad bit off each word. "Besides, I'm not seeing her anymore."

"Oh. Excuse me," Mom said. "I have trouble keeping up with your bimbos."

Russ opened his mouth to say what I was sure would be something disastrous, so I stuffed another doughnut between his lips.

After a brief pause that apparently gave Mom's comment the time it needed to find its mark, Dad exploded. "The women I date are not bimbos! And they certainly don't come skulking around my place before dawn with some cheap, phony excuse to see me."

"Don't tell me you're jealous of Ted Hawkins!" Mom tried to look indignant, but I could see she liked the idea.

"Jealous?" Dad pointed to himself. "Me? Of that wimp? Don't be ridiculous."

Russ reached for a third doughnut. He tried to act as if he thought Mom and Dad's fights were a big joke, but the doughnut binges gave him away.

"I hate to break up this lovely family get-together," I said. "But I have to get ready for school."

Mom and Dad looked at each other, then the floor, then at me. Finally, Mom said, "I've got to get ready for work." She gave Dad a small nod. "Good day, Kurt."

Dad returned the nod. "Estelle."

Russ started to follow Mom out of the kitchen, but Dad clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Russ, I'll be over right after dinner to shoot baskets with you, then I'll help you with your math homework."

"You don't have to help me with math," Russ said.

"I know I don't have to." Dad patted Russ on the back. "I want to. You've got to keep that average up so you can get into a good college, and then into law school some day."

"Sure, Dad." Russ headed for the stairs. "How else will I get to be a judge on TV?"

Dad forced a small laugh, then, before I could escape, directed his attention toward me. "Sivia, I've talked to the softball coach at the university and she's recommended someone I could hire to help train you."

"Train me? But I already know how to fetch." When that failed to get a laugh, I said, "Er, I don't know. I ... my hand. Maybe I won't even be able to play softball."

"Not play?" Dad actually gasped. "Don't be ridiculous. Practice hasn't even started yet. You'll play. You'll lead your team to another league championship!"

"Dad, you know what they say. 'Don't count your shiny trophies'"

"Don't worry." Dad gave me a reassuring smile. "As long as Willamette City High has its star pitcher, the number-one spot is guaranteed. In fact, I bet that this year you'll lead them straight through the state playoffs. Imagine. Champs of the whole state of Oregon."

I put on a big swallowing act, as if a softball-sized lump was forming in my throat. "What" Exaggerated gulp. "What if I don't want ... I mean, what if I can't play? I mean, you know, if my hand doesn't heal." I held up my wrist, trying to make it look as limp and pathetic as possible.

"Relax. The doctor said it'll be fine. Just put ice on it whenever you can, and keep it elevated." Dad checked his watch. "I've gotta run. See you this evening." He gave me a quick kiss and was gone.

So much for my wounded-bird routine. I dashed up to my room, running late, as usual. I suppose Dad meant well with his morning pit stops. But, more often than not, he and Mom would get into a fight, or he'd subject me or Russ to some lengthy piece of advice, or all of the above. Then we all had to operate at warp speed to get ready on time.

Just try to put on a touch of makeup all with one hand taped up. And then there was the matter of getting into my bra, even though it was a mere wisp of material. I mean, I didn't have nearly as much to put into a bra as Marcy Stratton. She actually *had* curves. I just threw them. Other than exceptionally long legs, I didn't have much of a body.

I also didn't have what our softball coach, Ms. Romanos, called Marcy's "leadership qualities." After a season on the team with Marcy, I decided "leadership qualities" was teacher-speak for bossy-bitchy. She sprayed misery across the entire softball field with one of her insults or her infamous "Look," something that teachers and coaches and other assorted authority figures of course never saw. It was a wrinkled-nose, half-sneer designed to make the recipient feel lower than the puddles on the locker room floor.

If I'd been tuff-stuff last year, I guarantee she'd have been on my back more. But as long as I kept a low profile, it wasn't too bad, and I was pretty good at keeping a low profile. When I pitched in those two games at the end of the season though, she got on me. Between innings she gave me The Look if I allowed a hit or walked a batter.

"Sivia!" Russ pounded on my door. "Let's get movin'!"

"Hang on." I grabbed my books and rain poncho, flung open the door, and almost collided with Russ's fist, which was poised to pound on the door again. "Ack!"

Russ lightly tapped my forehead, grinned, and grabbed his skateboard from the hall closet. We used to bicker a huge percentage of the time and, except under supreme parental pressure, wouldn't be caught dead walking to school together. But lately we seemed to have sort of an undeclared truce going. Maybe Mom and Dad splitting up had something to do with it. Or maybe we were just losing our touch for creative insults.

As soon as we stepped out the back door, our puny, tiger-striped cat attacked Russ's shoes.

"Tigger!" Russ shouted and stamped his foot. Tigger galloped across the yard and gleefully ran up the maple tree. At six, Tigger was no longer a kitten, but he'd never given up his morning ritual. He had a thing for Russ's feet. If he wasn't attacking them, he rubbed against them or curled up asleep on them. No one else's feet were good enough. I and my feet resented this.

Though dark clouds menaced the sky, the heavy rain from last night had stopped. I was just hoping it would stay stopped when flat drops splashed on my poncho with big, fat *splops*.

"Hey, you know the old McCarthy house?" Russ asked as he effortlessly glided along on his skateboard, something I tried but never mastered. He seemed oblivious to the rain, but then he was often in a state of obliviousness.

"Over on Moss Street? What about it?" I pulled the hood on my poncho tighter, so the wind wouldn't blow the rain down my neck.

"Someone's moved in. And they're building all these cool ramps around it. I'd trade anything to try my board over there."

"I'm sure you would," I said, "since you've spent most of your formative years on that thing." He had the scars on his elbows and knees to prove it.

"Hey, maybe the new owners are professional skateboarders! Maybe I can meet them. Maybe they'll let me ride that ramp—"

"Maybe you should focus some of that enthusiasm on your math homework, so Dad'll get off your case."

"Shoot, I got a B minus last term," Russ said. "That's not exactly flunking."

"But you know you've got the brains to do better." Gah! I was sounding just like Dad.

Russ stuck out his tongue. "You're as bad as Dad," he said, confirming my self-evaluation. With that, he wheeled around the corner toward the middle school.

I huddled deeper into my rain poncho and sighed.

The wind picked up and blew the rain sideways, right into my face. I shivered. It was awfully cold, considering that spring was only a few weeks away. It rarely snowed in this part of Oregon, but the damp chill seemed to slice right into the bone marrow on days like this.

Suddenly a truck whizzed by close to the curb, splashing me with a small ocean of water. My rain poncho did its job, but my feet were as wet as fish.

"Thanks a lot, fool!" I yelled at the driver. He immediately pulled over and stopped. I saw then that the truck was actually a van. A black van with a silvery, modernistic version of Pegasus, the winged horse, painted on the side. Uh, oh. I took a couple of steps back farther from the curb, in case it was some creep who purposely splashed innocent girls and then tried to grab them.

The driver, who looked about my age, leaned out the window. His dark hair stuck out like bristles on a brush. A large silver medallion on a thick chain swayed across his glowing pink sweatshirt, which had the sleeves cut off.

He beckoned to me with a hand clad in a black bicycle glove. "Sorry about that. Want a lift?"

"No, thank you." I coated each word with frost. First, the jerk tries to drown me, then he tries to pick me up. Did he really think that was the way to seduce me? Or kidnap me? Or whatever.

"You sure?" he asked with a lopsided grin that almost bordered on being a smirk.

"Positive." I pulled the hood of my poncho tighter and headed off for school. I hadn't even stepped on school grounds yet, and already my day was disintegrating.

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