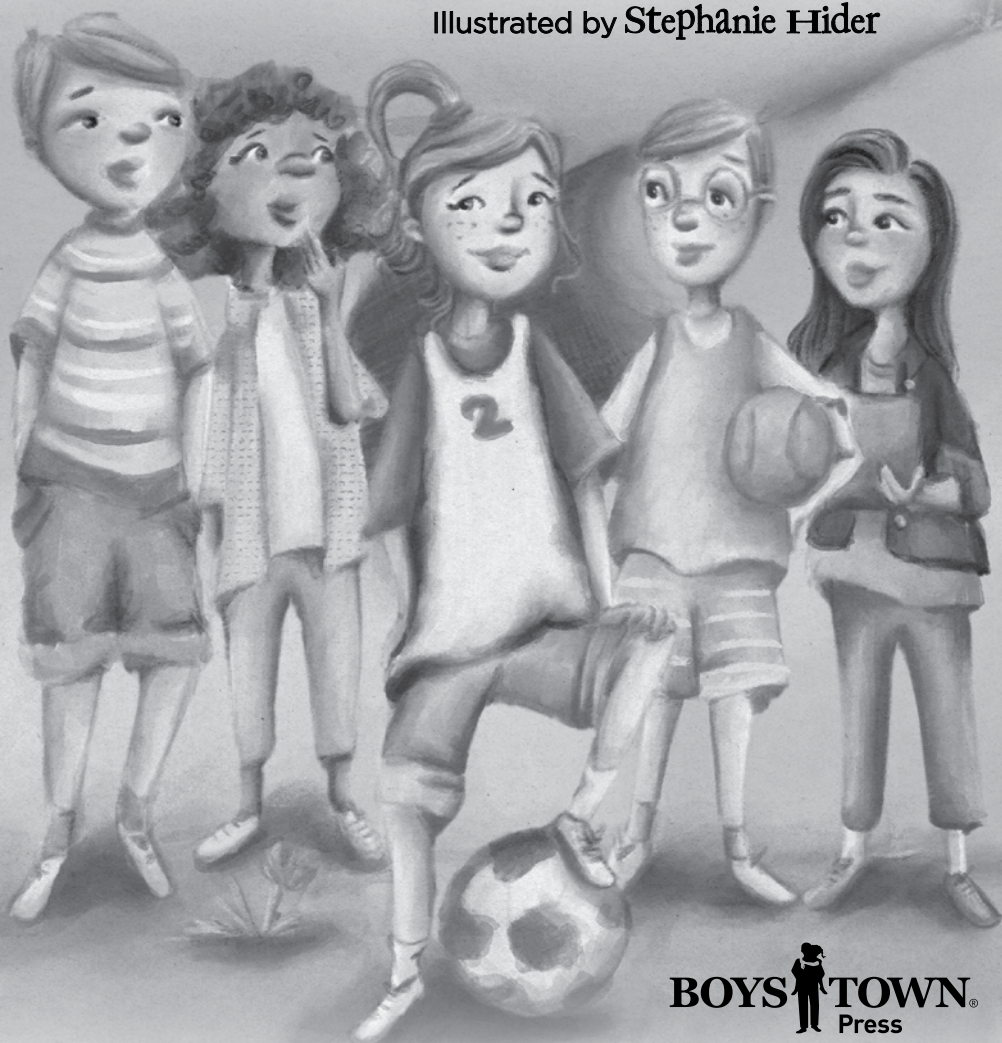


The GOOD, the BAD, and the Backstory

Written by **Melissa Minery**

Illustrated by **Stephanie Hider**



BOYS TOWN
Press

Boys Town, Nebraska

The Good, the Bad, and the Backstory

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PART 1: Morning



Ashley

Home
6:25 A.M.

I wake up when my dad kisses me on the cheek. This is part of our morning routine before he leaves for work at 6:30. I don't mind too much because I'm able to sleep for a while longer before my alarm sounds to start the day. Once up and out of bed, though, I have to rush to get ready for school. I always do my homework, make lunch, and shower the night before, so all I really have to do in the morning is dress and eat. This morning's breakfast is raisin toast smeared with peanut butter – my favorite!

I'm twelve years old and in the seventh grade. My mom and dad divorced when I was six years old, and I live mostly with my dad. I see my mom for a few hours on Wednesdays and Thursdays after school, and every other Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It's not ideal, but at least they don't fight anymore. I was pretty crushed at the beginning of the divorce. I didn't feel comfortable telling people about my feelings, so I had to keep on being "smiley" Ashley. That wasn't their fault, though; it was something I did on my own.

Mom got in a serious relationship soon after the divorce, which lasted two-and-a-half years. That was way too long of an emotional roller-coaster, so she's been single since. Dad started dating random women through a dating website. The longest relationship he had was about a year-and-a-half. That girlfriend moved into the house Mom and Dad had built together, but it turned out to be a temporary thing and she moved out and broke it off. Now Dad is happily married to someone else, and I have a younger stepbrother. Actually, it's pretty cool that at my dad's I have a brother, and at my mom's I get to be an only child!

About a year ago, Dad sold our house to build another one from scratch. It was sort of like baking a cake, except it took a lot longer. My bedroom in our new house is about the size of Mom's entire two-bedroom apartment.

I hop down the stairs in a good mood. I have soccer tryouts today for the middle school team, a step up from the recreation team I've been on since I was ten. I'm excited but pretty nervous, too. Sharon, my stepmom, is already in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Ashley. Well-rested and ready for the day?"

As I put some raisin bread in the toaster, I answer, "Yep. I'm imagining that I will play awesome and make the team." She's always talking about putting positive energy into the universe, so I humor her by being extra enthusiastic.

The toast pops up and I spread on a big glob of peanut butter. I eat, brush my teeth, grab my stuff, and rush out the door, barely making it to the school bus on time. I'm breathing hard as I make my way down the aisle to sit next to Kenisha, my best friend.

"Hey girl. Ready for tryouts?" she asks.

"Pretty much. I just have to get through the school day; it's going to be hard to wait," I reply.

PART I: Morning

Then Kenisha tells me something that ruins my day and maybe even what I thought was a friendship. “I heard that Taara said you were the worst soccer player in the school, and she’s going to feel sorry for you when you don’t make the team.”

Suddenly I’m aware of the other kids on the bus, and it feels like fifteen pairs of eyes and ears are focused on our conversation. I have taken a soccer ball in the face, but this definitely hurts a lot more. In fact, it wrinkles my heart. Why would Kenisha tell me something so hurtful, especially a rumor that she didn’t even hear with her own ears? Now I want nothing to do with Taara, nothing to do with anyone. Kenisha continues talking, but I stay silent the rest of the way to school.

I walk directly to class without a word to anyone.

Mrs. P is standing at the door, greeting kids as they enter the classroom.

“Good morning, Ashley. How are you today?” I force myself to answer that I am fine, but she can definitely tell I’m not. I’m supposed to work in a group with Taara and Kenisha today, so I ask Mrs. P if I can move to another desk. She knows something is up and probably wants us to work it out, so she says no. Now I am forced to talk to this fake friend. I’m having a hard time trying to cool my negative thoughts, so I start to doodle in my notebook. Then I remember what our school counselor, Ms. M, is always talking about: *When I let others control my emotions, I’m giving away my personal power.* Right then and there I decide to do two things: speak directly to Kenisha and Taara, and play the best soccer I’ve ever played in my life.

Kenisha

Home
6 A.M.

One minute, all is quiet, and the next, my ears are assaulted by the most annoying buzzing and my mom yelling from downstairs to shut off my alarm. This is how I wake up every morning during the school week. I used to try waking up to music, but I'd usually sleep right through it. I don't know why my mom doesn't just wake me up herself; it would save her a lot of yelling.

I'm so tired that I have to drag myself to the shower. But when I'm done, I feel ready to face the day. I head downstairs, where a bowl of oatmeal with almond butter is waiting for me on the table. It's not my favorite thing to eat, but it gives me the energy to "grow my brain and body," as Ms. M, our school counselor, likes to say. Mom walks around the corner and gives me "the look," which means I need to start getting to bed earlier so I'm not so tired in the morning.

I pretend not to notice this look, and in the best British accent I can manage, I say, "Good morning, Mother. How are you this fine day?" Mom can't hide her grin. She always

appreciates my silliness. Our moment together is interrupted as my younger brother and sister race into the kitchen.

“Oatmeal again?” my brother complains. “It feels like mush in my mouth.” My mom ignores him and continues to eat her own oatmeal. I’m the first to finish with breakfast, so I brush my teeth and gather up my stuff for school. As always, my brother and sister wait until the last minute to do anything and almost miss the bus.

I actually enjoy the bus ride to school because I get to see my best friend, Ashley. She was the first person to become my friend when I moved here three years ago, when I was nine. Being the new kid in school was not easy – everyone already had friends and didn’t seem to want any more.

For weeks, I’d sit alone at lunch and on the school bus. At recess, I’d walk around the playground, pretending I was popular, with lines of kids waiting for my attention. Then one day, Ashley put her lunch tray down on my table and asked if she could sit with me. After we were friends for a while, she told me that she felt sad when she saw me alone. Ms. M says that is called empathy, and that is when Ashley decided to help by trying to be a friend. She said she had told herself, “Maybe we will and maybe we won’t end up being friends, but I won’t know unless I try to find out.” I’m happy she did.

Ashley runs on to the bus and slides into the seat next to me.

“Hey girl. Ready for tryouts?” I ask.

“Pretty much. I just have to get through the school day; it’s going to be hard to wait,” Ashley answers.

Before I can stop myself, I commit a horrible friendship crime. “I heard that Taara said you were the worst soccer player in the school, and she’s going to feel sorry for you when you don’t make the team.”

I don’t even know why I say this because I know it is mean. I wouldn’t want anyone to say something like that to

me. And rumors aren't cool. Well, I guess a small part of me knows why I did it. It's because even though I'm so happy she's my best friend, I can't help but be jealous of Ashley sometimes. I'm jealous that she always seems so happy and doesn't get as irritated as I do. I'm jealous that she's so good at soccer and can make friends more easily. But most of all, I'm jealous that she still has her dad.

You see, my dad died in a really bad car accident when I was seven years old. I didn't really understand that death meant he would never be coming back. At the funeral, I put pictures I'd drawn for him inside his casket. I remember that it was raining that day – it was kinda like the sky was crying, too. Now that I'm older, I seem to miss him more and more. I especially miss how we'd explore and go hiking in the woods together. He called me his “wood elf.”

About two years after he died, Mom started dating a guy who's now my stepfather. It was hard enough to lose my dad, but then my mom replaced him and we had to move. We left our home, our friends, and our family behind in the town I'd lived in my whole life. The day we drove away in a van that held all our stuff, I cried until my face was a puffy mess of snot and tears. I didn't think it was fair, and I haven't really let myself like my stepfather because of it.

I can tell that I hurt Ashley's feelings with my insensitive comment. But instead of apologizing, I keep talking. She doesn't say anything the entire ride. As soon as we get to school, she rushes out of the bus, and I don't see her again until I get to my seat in class. I keep looking at her and try to make eye contact, but she ignores my attempts to get her attention. I hear her ask Mrs. P if she can move to a different desk, but Mrs. P answers no. I decide that I have to figure out a way to fix this.

Ryan

Home
7:53 A.M.

I open my eyes in a panic and look at the clock. “Shoot. I’m late again,” I mumble to myself. I must’ve forgotten to set the alarm, and there’s no one here to do it for me. I basically have to do everything myself. There’s no time for a shower, only time enough to throw on some clothes and rush out the door. I missed the bus so I’ll be walking the two miles to school. I also won’t be eating until lunch since I missed breakfast at school and there’s nothing at our apartment except a bottle of ketchup. (Okay, maybe that’s a slight exaggeration.) This has become a familiar routine. Some days, I don’t even want to try. But then I think about Gary and how I don’t want to end up like him.

Gary is my mom’s ex-boyfriend. I have never met my real dad because he left before I was even born. The tough guy inside me wants to say, “Whatever, I don’t want him in my life anyway.” But the truth is, it hurts a lot to know someone who helped make me didn’t want to stick around to get to know me. My mom met Gary when I was eight, about four years ago.

She was working at a restaurant and he would come in every-day so he could see her. Eventually, she gave him her phone number and they started dating.

Everything was fine at first, but then he hurt his back at work. The doctor told him he needed to “take it easy.” Gary took that to mean that all he could do was sit and watch TV. I don’t know what happened exactly, but Gary turned into a monster after he got hurt. It was like he had a “monster switch” in his back. He didn’t talk in a normal voice anymore. All he did was yell. He would call me and my mom horrible names or make hurtful comments. He was the biggest bully I ever knew. I hated how he treated us, but what could I do? We lived like this for a couple of years, and then one day, my mom was wearing sunglasses in the house, which I thought was really weird. It turns out she was trying to cover up her bruised face. When she picked me up from school later that day, we didn’t go back to Gary’s. We started over, on our own.

Mom quit her job at the restaurant and was able to get a job at the post office. She makes more money, but the hours stink. Mom works when she should be sleeping. She’s a hard worker, but I hardly ever get to see her. She made a deal with the older lady who lives in the apartment below us to watch me, so I’m never completely alone. But I have to be responsible for a lot more than other kids my age. Things are not perfect, but my mom is doing the best she can. She’s even thinking about enrolling at the community college so she can become a certified accountant.

I walk into school and check in at the main office. I may have missed my first hour of class, but it’s important to me to be here. First of all, I get to eat breakfast (when I’m here on time) and lunch. (Remember about the ketchup being the only thing in the refrigerator? Yeah, food is good.) I’m also

PART I: Morning

able to shoot some hoops in the gym after school, and considering that I want to be a pro b-ball player when I grow up, I need a lot of practice. And, I want to do well in school so I can go to college to be an architect and design houses. This is my Plan B in case the basketball thing doesn't happen, but I'm going to have to work extra hard in math.

I step through the door to my class and sit down.

"Good morning, Ryan. Nice to see you today," says Mrs. P with a smile.

Andrew bends toward me and whispers, "Hey punk. What took you so long to get here? Think you're better than everyone else?" Andrew is the kid who everyone wants to be like, except that he's the meanest kid in the school. He has picked on me since first grade, but I'm nothing special. He bullies just about everyone, even the boys he's "friends" with. Andrew and I are as different as different can be. He's the tallest boy in the school; I'm the shortest one in the seventh grade. He looks like he's always at the beach with his blond hair and tanned skin; I have red hair and freckles. Things like basketball seem to come easy to him; I have to work harder since I'm smaller. If he wasn't always hurting people, he could be a good leader, maybe even the class president someday.

Mrs. P divided the chaos of twenty-five kids into squads, with our desks grouped together in teams of five. I sit with Andrew, Ashley, Kenisha, and Taara. I sense something's up with Ashley, she's usually smiling and the first one to say "Hi" to me. For some reason, I feel sad watching her doodle on her paper. I also notice that Kenisha keeps looking at Ashley, like she's trying to get her attention. But Ashley doesn't look up from her drawings. (Probably some girl drama.) Andrew's tapping his pencil on the desk, trying to annoy me. But I've become an expert at ignoring him, and

I know he'll stop soon, as long as I don't give in. Taara's the only one who's actually doing what she's supposed to be doing, which is reading and completing a science worksheet.

I know I need to focus and do my work, but I have a feeling Ashley needs a friend. On a piece of paper, I write "soccer during outdoor time?" and slide it over to her. This takes a lot of courage for me. She looks at me after she reads it, smiles, and nods yes. Score!

Andrew

Home
6:30 A.M.

“Sweetheart. Wake up, now,” Mom says in a sing-song voice that makes me want to throw up. Doesn’t she realize I am twelve years old?! I roll over and ignore her.

“Okay, then. Five more minutes. I’ll get your breakfast ready.” Mom’s soft footsteps on the wooden stairs are replaced by heavy, impatient thuds. It’s my dad coming to get me out of bed, and he isn’t nice about it.

“Andrew, you better be out of bed and dressed...”

Before he finishes the sentence, he swings the door open, and I see the snarl on his face. He has a pitcher of water in his left hand, lifted and ready to pour. Luckily, I’d jumped out of bed as soon as I heard his voice. That was a close call.

“Sorry, sir,” I say, my heart beating like a drum in my chest.

He growls, “You will be if you don’t get your act together,” then walks out and goes down the stairs.

I try to avoid my dad whenever possible because I feel bad when I’m around him, like I don’t do anything right. He expects me to be perfect. If I don’t get all A’s, I’m grounded.

Pages 16-172 are not included in this excerpt.

CHILDREN/LIFE SKILLS

Seventh-graders Ashley, Kenisha, Taara, Ryan and Andrew all go to the same school. Though you can tell by looking at them that they are each different people, there's so much more to each student than others know.

This unique story presents a timeline of events from sunup to sundown, in a day in the life of these five young people.

See how each character wakes up for the day. Experience what their home life is like. See the same event happen to each at school, and how it is felt, lived, differently.

When a hurtful comment is made on the bus, it starts a snowball rolling that affects all three girls in different ways.

See the effect of Andrew's rough morning routine on Ryan and others.

Over the course of the story, the reader and characters soon realize that there are so many more layers to each young person than one initially sees. Complex feelings for some. Complex home lives for others.

The book addresses important concepts, such as making friends, building relationships, showing empathy for others, building resiliency and coping mechanisms, and making and accepting apologies.

By the story's end, the reader has an opportunity to walk in each character's shoes.

The author helps the reader better understand how one simple event can impact so many in different ways. This story, proof that there is more than one side to any story, is a must read for children in grades 4-8.



MELISSA MINERY is a certified school counselor in New Hampshire. She has worked at the elementary- to- high-school levels and as a career counselor with young adults. She's always doing something to "grow her brain" and loves going on adventures with her family and hiking in the white mountains. This is her first published work.

STEPHANIE HIDER is a children's book illustrator currently living in Oklahoma with her daughter and maltipoo pup, Neko. Stephanie is an avid gamer, self-labeled sci-fi geek, and prolific reader whose favorite word is *plethora*.

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