

Five Minus One

I walked into the gym. The smell made me feel alive. Most 16 year old girls hated that smell, they thought it would make their hair fall out. But me? I was born for the smell.

“Yo yo yo. What's up Will?” My friend Benji asked. He was about my height (5’1) And had brown hair. We’ve been friends for years the first time I met him I thought, huh, maybe having friends wouldn’t be that bad. Yep, I, Willow Frenchie Brown, actually thought a friend wasn’t bad.

“Hey Benji. Frenemies in any of your classes?” That’s what we call a group of 4 of the most emotional girls in our grade. I was friends with them last year. Not a good year.

“Thankfully no, but guess what” he nodded his head to the door. I turned and wouldn’t you know it, there were four of the fakest girls I’ve ever met. their foundation and powder and whatever the rest was made them look plastic. It match their personalities.

“Well, life. Over. Now.” After we did our warm up laps, a blond, tall, very cute boy walked in. I normally think guys are gross to like, but if you saw this guy, wow. “So sorry I’m late,” he said to Mr. Roberts. The counselor was showing me around. I’m new.” “Welcome to North High. What’s your name, son?” Mister Roberts asked. “My name is Brand.” When he said that I got a weird feeling in my stomach. I’ve never felt this before but I liked it.

The Frenemies were so totally in love with him, I wasn’t surprised. Then Veronica, the queen, tripped and fell on Vicki. Then Vicki lost her balance and fell on Jewel. Then Jewel made her landing stylishly on Lindsey.

That night I was FaceTiming my brothers, Austin and Jack. They were at college in Madison Wisconsin. My other two brothers were a junior, Luke, and a senior, Cody, in high school.

“So they tripped over a guy?” Austin asked.” Yeah. It was amazing.” They both laughed. Suddenly Jack looked weird. “ Whoa, dude, what’s up?” Austin asked him. Jack’s face got a bit pale. “I just- I have to tell you guys something.”

The next morning I woke up with an icky feeling in my stomach. How could Jack have such a crazy idea?When he told us I could see a small tear in Austin's eye, and he never cries.

That morning, when I got to lunch after a dreadful 1 through 4 hours, my table had a new member.

Brand's bright blue eyes stared straight into my soul. the feeling in my stomach returned.

“Hey Willow. What's up?” he asked. I sat down at my usual spot across from Willie. I'd known him since kindergarten.

“Uhhh... nothing.” Willie was staring at me. He knew me so well, but it looked like he was having a hard time reading my face.

“ Well Veronica looks mad,” Jess said. I looked over at Veronica's usual table with Vicki, Jewel and Lindsey. They were all staring at us like Mrs. Andrews stares at kids. Pure

hatred. "I think they're upset Brand is sitting over here with us," I said while wiggling my eyebrows. Brand laughed. "They keep staring at me. It's really creepy. I have only one class without any of them, the rest I have at least one of them." "That's pretty bad," my other friend Addie said with a laugh.

I still didn't know how to feel about Brand. He seemed nice, but hey, so did Veronica. I can't believe I had actually called her Ronnie.

My cell phone interrupted my thoughts. It was Jack. My heart skipped. I am answered. "Hey Jack." "Hey Will. Just wanted to give you a heads-up that I'll be there when you get home." His voice sounded excited. "Jack, when you tell Jackie," (that's our mom. She prefers her first name) ", She's going to have a heart attack." "Yeah yeah, I know, but this is something I have to do." "Fine," I said. "But if mom dies, you're staying." "Deal." He hung up. When I looked up, all my friends were staring at me.

"Where is Jack going?" Benji asked. "I don't know," I answered. "But I know it isn't somewhere good."

That night when I came home, Jack and Austin were standing in the living room. "Austin! I didn't know you were coming too." I ran across the room and hugged them, their enormous arms wrapped around me. "I was just putting out dinner." Jackie said. "Oooh, what are we eating?" said Luke as he and Cody came down the stairs. "Yeah, something smells GOOD," Cody added.

We were all in the dining room when Jack says, "The reason I'm here is because I have some important news." We all looked at him. I glanced at my mom. She looked very happy. She probably thought Jack was going to say that him and his girlfriend of 4 years, Carter, were finally engaged. But, sorry Jackie, no. Austin grabbed my hand. Please don't say it, please don't say it, I thought. I guess that didn't work." "I'm joining the Army," Jack said.

I thought Austin would break my hand. My mom's face flushed. My dad's face was stone. "Jackie? Stacy?" Jack said. (you can probably guess Stacy is my dad.) "Nope," was all my mom said.

"Nope?" replied Jack. "Jackie, I'm doing this. I'm nineteen, I can do it." Jackie wasn't having it." No, I'm your mother, I made you. I decide."

We were all surprised. Jackie never yells. Well she never needs to, we're all pretty good kids.

"Jack, you can't do this. If anything ever happened to you, I don't know what I'd do." Jackie was being very defiant. But then, my dad spoke up. "I think you should do it." We all stared at my dad in bewilderment. "What?!" Jackie screamed."How are you okay with this?" Suddenly, my dad looked old. His eyes were sad, his hair had started to turn grey months ago, but I just noticed.

"It's his life. He is an adult now. If this is what he really wants, then he should do it." My mother looked like she wanted to fry his eyes. Luke and Cody looked at Jack with worry, fear, and admiration in their eyes. "Mom," Jack only called Jackie mom when it was important. "I can do this. In high school, remember how I did JROTC? I was pretty good!" "Yeah, until you came home crying because Toby Brinkman ran over you," Jackie replied harshly.

"Alright, that's enough," Austin spoke up. "Now, I don't like this either, but Jackie, it's his life. He's fighting for our country. Be proud of him." Jackie's face softened, but she still looked upset. I think she agreed with him, partly. "I'm sorry, but this conversation has made me tired," she said as she got up and gave us all hugs. "Jack, I want you to know that I love you, no matter what. And even though I don't like the sound of this, I'll support you because I know it's what you want." Jack's face looked overjoyed. "That means a lot to me Jackie."

The next morning, at exactly 4:23 a.m., Austin and Jack came into my room and woke me, followed by Luke and Cody.

"Hey Will," Austin said with a yawn. "Just woke you to tell you Jack and I are going back. Jack has to fill out a lot of paperwork and I'm driving him to the base he staying at in a few days." "Oh. Well okay." Tears suddenly sprang to my eyes. I really did not want them to leave. "This is all just happening really fast," I said.

"Ahh, Will," Jack said, coming over and sitting on my rather large bed. "You know I love you more than life itself, right?" he said, wrapping his arms around me. "Yes, and you know I love all of you so much, and I'm so lucky to be your little sister." They all sat down and we had a big group hug.

"Will, Cody and I are still here for another year or two, so we got your back," said Luke. His eyes were shiny, so we're Cody Austin's. "So sorry Will, but we have to go," Austin said sadly. Cody, Luke and I walked downstairs with them. "I love you," Jack said as he closed the heavy, wooden front door.

After they left, my two remaining brothers hugged me and Cody walked up to my room with me. "Love you, sis," Cody said as he started walking towards the door. "I love you too, big bro," I replied. As he left my room, my dog, Tugboat, jumped onto my bed. He knew exactly how I was feeling at all times, and right now, he knew how sad I was.

A few days later, Austin called and said Jack was at boot camp. "He's a strong guy," Austin said over the phone. "He can do anything they throw at him." I wasn't so sure. I mean, yeah, strong, smart, good listening skills. But was he ready for it? "Yeah, I guess," was all I said. Austin said he had to go so we said our goodbyes, and I was left thinking about Jack getting shot and never seeing him again.

A few weeks past and things stayed pretty normal. Except, Brand and I were the new couple in our grade. I wasn't one for dating, but he's so perfect and understands what I'm going through. His dad is in the Air Force.

"Hey Will," Brand said as he sat next to me during lunch. "Hi." Jess looked at me and jiggled her eyebrows. I rolled my eyes. "So, is Jack doing okay at boot camp?" Brand asked. "Yeah he called a few days ago to tell me, since he was doing so well, they are sending him to Texas in a week, ya know to help with all the hurricane stuff," I replied. "Wow! Already?" Willie asked. "Yep. But they are only sending him for about 2 weeks. He's going to be going around in rafts trying to find stray dogs or people who couldn't get out of the floods," I replied. "I'm glad that he's helping those poor people, but I wish he was safe here with us."

"Heyo Willow," Brand called me over while I had started walking to my bus. "Hey, are you okay about Jack? I know how much you love him and I wish there was something I could do," he said as he gave me a hug. "Yeah I'm okay," I answered. "I'm just so worried about him. Why would they send him to such a dangerous place when he was only 19?" Brand

looked so sad for me, I had to cheer him up. "But to take our minds off everything, why don't we go bowling tonight? Can you drive me?" I asked. "Yeah, totally!"

His car was a beat up pick up truck and I loved it. My parents wouldn't let me get a car until I was 17. I don't know why. But when I do get a car, I'm getting an army green jeep.

"I can drive you home if you want, too." He knew exactly how to cheer me up. "Yes please! All those kids on the bus would give me a headache."

When we arrived at my house, there was a strange car in the driveway. Austin's car was also there. "Want me to walk you up?" Brand asked. I think he was just being protective because there was a car I didn't recognize. "Sure. And thanks again for the coffee." On the way he had gotten me a coffee, because he just has to prove that he's the best boyfriend ever.

As we mounted the steps to my house, we heard a scream. I looked at him, scared out of my mind. We raced up the steps and I slammed open the door. I saw something that terrified me to my very core.

My mother was crouched on the floor, crying like there's no tomorrow. My dad's arms were wrapped around her, his breaths coming in short gasps. Austin sat on the stairs, his head in his hands, bawling. Luke and Cody were standing at the top of the stairs, just staring down at all of us.

"What! What happened?" And that's when I saw the soldier. He had the saddest look on his face.

Oh no.

"He's gone!" Jackie screamed. I fell, tears streaming down my face. The whole world shook, and I barely heard Brand say, "Will. Will this can't be true. No." Him and Jack had become very close. When I was facetimeing Jack sometimes when he had time, Brand would come over and talk to him, too.

My world was over. Brand held me, but I broke away and ran to Austin. He looked at me with the saddest face I'd ever seen, tears all over his puffy red face. I fell into his arms and we cried, our tears flowing like a waterfall.

Then poor Jackie, all crumpled on the floor, let out a cry of emotion that only mothers can make. This was a nightmare.

After about 10 more minutes of this, Brand said he had to go. "Willow, I'm here for you. I'll come over again tomorrow," he said.

"I love you," I said.

I knew this probably wasn't the best time to say it, but it was true. I loved him with the part of my heart that my family didn't take up. He smiled. It was a sad-happy smile. "I love you, too," he said. Then he left.

My family got up, and as my parents thanked the soldier, Austin, Luke, Cody and I made our way slowly to the living room. We all bundled together under two huge blankets, and cried ourselves to sleep as we all thought of how incomplete our family was now without Jack.

The next morning, I woke up and only Luke, Cody, Tugboat and I were in the living room. Austin must've gotten up to sleep in his old bed.

I was in the kitchen making coffee after I had gone upstairs and gotten into sweatpants and an old, baggy shirt. I usually wore nice clothes, because it's nice to look nice, but today I was too... I don't even know. I looked outside to view the yard I played volleyball with Jack too many times to remember, when I saw Austin he was just sitting on the steps.

"Hey," I said as I stepped into the cool Wisconsin air. Austin didn't even look at me, just mumbled.

I sat down next to him, my long blond hair flowing. "Mom told me," he said after a few minutes of silence. "Huh? Tell me." he looked at me, his eyes saying 'you aren't ready'. I lowered my head "Austin, I need to know." He stared at me with his piercing blue eyes that matched mine. There was a sadness there I've never seen before. "he was in a boat. the hurricane had died down for about an hour so they decided to go out there to see if they could find anybody. They found a few people and two dogs. but then out of nowhere, there was a big wave that knocked their boat over. Only one man made it, but only because he had swam all his life and he could tread water for over 30 minutes. that was the man who was here last night."

my eyes immediately teared up, and I said I had to go inside. Austin came with me and walked up to his old room. I walked to mine and tried to sleep, but gave up and went on my phone. I had 3 missed calls from Brand, and about 50 from the rest of my friends. I guess he must have told them, or Jackie sent out an email.

ME 7:30 AM

HEY, SORRY I HAVEN'T ANSWERED

BRAND 7:31 AM

NO WORRIES. I'M SO WORRIED ABOUT YOU. I CAN'T IMAGINE.

ME 7:33 AM

YEAH THX. I'M NOT GOING TO SCHOOL TODAY BTW.

BRAND 7:35 AM

I UNDERSTAND. I'M SORRY, I HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL> I'LL SWING BY AFTER SCHOOL.

ME 7:36 AM

OKAY, DRIVE SAFE. I LOVE YOU

BRAND 7:36 AM

THX. I LOVE YOU TOO.

"Hey Cody," I said as I made another lap around the house. He was just staring at the table. It had so many marks. Each one had a memory. Stacy said we have to get rid of it

soon, and I just realized I didn't want it to go. I was so used to it and I used it all the time, but now that I knew it was going to be gone, it just felt like another horrible thing.

"Hey Will. Luke and I were talking about maybe a movie marathon for the rest of the day. What do you think?" Cody asked. "Sounds like fun, we could use some fun." "Okay, I'll get Austin, Jackie and Stacy," Luke said as he got up and started up the stairs.

"Shoot, I have a game tomorrow. Can I borrow your car?" I asked Cody. "You don't have to go," he replied. "But if you really want to, then I'll go with you. It'll be nice to get our minds off... the stuff."

he meant Jack. But I didn't want to get my mind off him. I couldn't forget what had happened.

Jackie, Stacy, Austin and Luke came back downstairs. We decided on "Evan Almighty", Jack's favorite movie.

During the part with all the birds in his office, there was a knock on the door. I got up and walked to the big wooden door. "Hey Will," Brand said as I open the door. He had saved me from the part of the movie where Jack would always say, "I'll never stop wanting to know how they got all these birds in there at one time."

"Hi," I said. I gave him a big hug. He was so sweet. Can you get me chocolate covered strawberries, fluffy blue socks (my favorite color) and my favorite show, "Friends". all 10 seasons.

"oh my gosh! how can you do all this? It must have cost you a fortune!" I exclaimed. "nah, I just wanted to do something to make you smile." as he said this, he pulled me in for another hug and kissed me on my forehead. "we were watching a movie, but I kind of got sick of it," (lie, I just can't cry anymore.) "There's a TV upstairs in the second living room. Want to start watching friends?" I asked.

"Yeah, want anything else?" He asked me. "I'm just going to get my water."

As I walked back into the living room, I said to Jackie "brand and I are going to watch Friends upstairs." My dad looked at me and wiggled his eyebrows. I gave him the deadly stare that only a daughter can give her father. "That's fine, Willow," Jackie said.

As I mounted the stairs, Luke yelled, "no monkey business!" Then, "Ow!" "Dude shut up," I heard Cody say.

The rest of the day was pretty great, considering my brother had just died. Brandon I watched 10 episodes of friends, and my brothers came up and if we wanted to go eat food someplace. They let me pick, and of course I picked Culver's. lots of eating that day. Wednesday however, did not go as smoothly.

"Hey, everyone is talking about you like you're famous. Why are you trying to steal my- our- light," Veronica said to me when I arrived at school. "Um, I'd rather not talk about it," I answered. "Well that's too bad," but Vicky as I tried to walk past them. "Hey, leave me alone," I said. "Then tell us!" queen V yelled. I didn't want to, but I wanted them to leave me alone. "my brother died, okay? That's it. Now, get out of my way."

They stood there. Just stared at me for a minute. At my unbrushed hair, my sweatpants, my glasses that I only wear when I'm too lazy to put in my contacts. I think they knew I wasn't lying.

"Which one?" Veronica asked, looking concerned. "Jack," I answered. Her face lightened up just a little bit. "Ohh so it's better than Cody dying. I mean, Jack was a lot older than you, so you weren't that close." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Are you kidding?" I yelled. "Jack was the best! Do you even have a heart?!"

Veronica just looked at me. 2 of her 3 shadows didn't know what to do. I think they agreed with me, they were just too scared to admit it.

"My dad died. That's a bigger deal than your brother that you hardly even saw. God, such a drama queen," she said fiercely. Then I did something I probably should've done a long time ago. I punched her right in the jaw. That shut her up.

When Austin came to pick me up, I passed Luke and Cody in the hallway. They were mad when I told them what had happened they high fived me and said they would get her.

"Why did you do it?" Austin asked the second I opened the door to his old red truck. After I told him the story that felt way longer than it was, he said nothing. His gaze was fixed on the road.

"Well?" I said after a minute of silence. He looked at me briefly and saw the fire in my eyes. He had it his too, but more calm.

"Will, you shouldn't have done that. Yeah," He said before I could say a word. "She deserved it and probably a lot more, but it wasn't the right thing. She's a stupid little-" he said a word I choose not to have in my story. "Who needs to learn to keep her mouth shut. But you just brought more attention to yourself. Word spreads fast in this small town, and you'll need to know when to hold back. You hear me?"

I definitely heard him. And now I felt like I had let not only Jackie and Stacey down, but also Jack. He would never do anything like that. Except of course if he had fought in the army.

"Yeah I hear you, Aus," I replied.

When we got home, I told Jackie and Stacey why I'd been sent home, and they understood. They were surprisingly calm, and I was very glad they didn't think anything of it, because Luke and Cody were the fighters.

"Come on! I'm gonna be late!" I yelled As Cody walked down the steps like a snail. "Sheesh, calm down sista."

I drove because I knew the way. As Cody was flipping through channels from the passenger side, "Brown-Eyed Girl" came on. Cody looked at me as I tried to fight back the tears. Jack used to sing this to me, and I would always tell him he was an idiot because my eyes are blue.

One tear rolled down my cheek, but that was all.

When we arrived in the gym, my team did stretches, then we had first serve. Jess was on my team, and her serve was amazing. It went straight over the net, but the other team was good, too. They sent it right it right in the middle of all of us. Their serve.

I looked over into the stands and saw Cody cheering me on. Then beside him was Jack. His icy blue eyes stared right at me. I couldn't move. The only thing I felt was a gut wrenching pain that I would never see him again, and a ball hit me in the face.

"Will!" I heard someone far away yell. "WILL!" Not so far away anymore.

I poked my head up and saw Cody looking at me as I layed on the gym floor. That girl had served HARD. But luckily I had 4 brothers who constantly threw soccer balls, footballs, volleyballs, shoes, and pillows at my head. Well, I had 4. Now 3.

"Bro, cool it. I'm good. Thanks to you guys always throwing things at me," I said, laughing. Cody helped me up, and for the rest of the game, coach had me sit out. But when I came back for the second game, we destroyed em.

When I walked into the house, it smelled like BO. I had just had a game, but this was like somebody hadn't showered in days. Then I remembered, Jackie hadn't. Also, She usually sprayed everything with Febreze. But not these past few days.

"Hey, how'd you do?" Luke asked as I walked into the kitchen. "Good. Got hit in the face by a hard serve though," I replied. He giggled. I threw a water bottle at his head. *WHACK* "Thanks," he said as he picked it up off the floor. "You're very welcome."

The next few weeks were pretty much normal. The only reason I wasn't suspended was because I was a very good student and I never done anything like this before. Also, I promise I wouldn't do it again (which I wouldn't.)

we are all in the car going to visit at college (the day after the funeral) and "Brown Eyed Girl" came on. We didn't change it, and we didn't cry. We just smiled and saying, and thought about Jack's piercing blue eyes.

10 years later

Now I live about 30 minutes from the big house I grew up in. Brandon I got married 3 years ago. He joined the army. He was in it for about two years, but after the birth of our first two boys (twins) Shannon and Jack, he came home. He decide kids are more important. Luke and Cody live about an hour away right next to each other. both of their wives are so amazing and now I have two nieces and 1 nephew. Austin lives about 10 minutes from me and we see each other almost every day. His wife and his three boys come over a lot and I'm so thankful that I have them. But every now and then, when I listen to Brown Eyed Girl, or when I see someone with piercing blue eyes, I think of Jack and the horrible few weeks that we had had.