

Second-Chance Summer



Anne Warren Smith



The fourth book in the well-reviewed fiction series that began with "Turkey Monster Thanksgiving." Nine-year-old Katie plans a backyard talent show unaware that her dog will forget her amazing trick; that her friend Sierra will be immobilized by stage fright; and that pesky Claire will uncover Alex's terrible secret. Katie's relationship with her absent mother improves immensely in this humorous story of summer vacation, pets, friends, and problems of modern-day, blended families.

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[1. Families – Fiction. 2. Dog Ownership – Fiction.
3. Friendships – Fiction. 4. Abuse, mental disorder – Fiction]

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Chapter 1

Surprise Guest

The doorbell rang, followed by knocking, followed by another ring. Claire Plummer's voice called from my front porch. "Katie!

Let us in!"

Us?

Usually, Claire comes by herself. She lives across the street from me, so we see a lot of each other. Sometimes, Claire and I are friends; sometimes we are not.

I clattered my drawing pencils down on the dining room table and held up my latest drawing of Lucy, our yellow lab. Her ears perked up to listen. A bit of yellow made her eyes shine. Her mouth held her green tennis ball. Her yellow tail almost wagged off the picture.

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Lucy was my most loved thing in the world. Well, except for Dad. Mom. My little brother Tyler. And my best friend, Sierra. Lucy was my most loved pet!

This picture would go to Mom in Branson, Missouri. She lives in Branson because she's a famous country-and-western singer. She and Dad are divorced. She has never seen Lucy.

"Katie?" Claire's voice sounded frantic.

"KATIE!" She rattled the screen door.

When I got to the door, there she was on my front porch, dressed all in blue. Her blue tennis shoes matched her blue headband and blue sunglasses.

When she saw me, she turned and yelled at some kid on the sidewalk. "Come on!"

I looked out at the boy on the sidewalk. "Alex Ramirez?"

"Don't ask," she said and squinched up her face.

"Hi, Alex," I called. What on earth was he doing here with Claire? She had spent all of fourth grade making sure she never had to sit beside him.

Alex shoved his hands into his pockets and kicked at something on the sidewalk.

Claire pushed into the hallway and whispered to me. "They left him at my house." Her lips quivered with outrage.

“Who left him?” I whispered.

On the sidewalk, Alex came closer. He sat down on the bottom step of my porch, holding his head as if he had a headache. He probably knew how much Claire hated him.

“His mother. MY FATHER! They’re moving a big display into her store, and they said there wasn’t room for us in the car. They said they’d be gone an hour.” Her lips quivered with frustration. “I love it that Mrs. Ramirez and my father are friends. But why did she ever have a kid like Alex?”

“He’s not so bad.”

She tossed her blond curls. “Look at him. Wearing that worn-out shirt.”

“You can come in,” I called to him.

He turned, and a little bit of hope showed on his face. “Hi, Katie,” he said.

“It’s too bad he didn’t dress up for your house,” Claire said loudly.

He pulled up the sleeves that were too long and hunched his shoulders under the plaid flannel.

Claire thought it was strange that he had worn that flannel shirt every single day in fourth grade. I thought it was strange, too. But I didn’t think it mattered.

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“Are your shoes clean enough?” Claire asked him.

“We take dirty shoes off at my house.”

“Sorry.” He bent to untie his shoes.

“We don’t do that here,” I told him. “Leave your shoes on.”

Behind me, we heard the thumps and bangs of my little brother Tyler and the scrabble of Lucy’s feet.

“Oh, no!” Claire said, stepping back toward the door. “I forgot about your brother. AND your vicious dog!”

Chapter 2

Born To Perform

T Tyler ran toward the kitchen, probably getting a drink of water, but Lucy rushed into the front hall, her yellow tail waving at us.

“EEK!” Claire yelled, and ran down the hall to my room. She slammed the door. A second later, she opened the door and hollered. “This room is full of trash, Katie!”

She ran across the hall to my dad’s room and slammed that door instead.

Dad’s office door opened and he peeked out. “I’m trying to work in here,” he said. “Please keep the noise down.” He waved at Alex and me and went back into his office.

“I didn’t know you had this great dog,” Alex said. He squatted down and hugged Lucy, his curly hair looking almost black next to her yellow.

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“We got her at the beginning of summer,” I told him. “She’s the best dog in the world. She does tricks and everything.”

Lucy leaned against him as he scratched around her ears. She groaned with happiness and tipped her head back and forth under Alex’s hands.

“Do you have a dog?” I asked him.

“Used to,” he said pushing his face into Lucy’s fur. “We had to give him away when my dad left.”

“How come your dad didn’t take him?”

Alex’s hands stopped rubbing Lucy’s head. He looked at me and away again. “He couldn’t,” he said.

His parents must be divorced, too, I thought.

Tyler ran into the hall, his arms and legs covered with dirt. “My friend, Alex,” he yelled. “Did you come to play with me?”

“I dunno,” Alex said.

“I got holes out there! We need bridges!” Tyler grabbed Alex’s sleeve with one grimy hand.

“Careful,” I said. “That shirt is...” I started to say “special,” but then I wondered if Alex wanted me to say anything.

“That’s right. I’m the bridge man.” Alex grinned at Tyler, not even looking at how dirty he was. The two of them had ended up one day, together by

accident, reading books about bridges at the library. Alex didn't seem to mind spending time with a five-year-old.

"Come see my great holes," Tyler said. Alex and Lucy and I followed him out the back door.

As soon as I got to the porch, I remembered Claire.

"You can come out now," I called.

"I'm not going out with those boys," she called back. She came into the family room, looking around for enemies. She noticed my pencils and paper on the table. "Let's stay inside. We can draw."

"Come out, Claire. It's more fun out here."

She picked up my picture of Lucy. "I see you're trying to draw her."

"Be careful of that," I said. "It's for my mom."

"I don't know why you didn't get a cat. They're easier to draw."

"She's the best dog in the world." I picked up the black pencil and outlined Lucy's tail.

Claire snorted. "My father is not happy about your dog," she said. "He is very afraid Lucy is going to poop in our nice yard."

"We take her out with a leash," I said. "She won't do that." In purple, I wrote LUCY at the top of the

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picture. I sighed with satisfaction. "My mom will really like this."

"Do you think she cares about a dog," Claire asked, "now that she's a famous singer?"

"She wants to keep knowing us," I said.

Claire looked down. "You're so lucky, Katie." Her blond curls covered part of her face. Her hands were very still.

Claire's mother had died in an accident when we were in second grade. We both didn't have mothers at home, but at least, my mother was alive.

Claire shook her hair back and picked up a blue pencil. "She would probably like a picture of me."

"She remembers you already," I told Claire.

"When we saw her after her concert in Portland, we showed her some photos. She said, 'Is that little Claire Plummer?'"

"What do you and your mom talk about when she calls?" she asked as she began to draw.

"She tells me about her concerts."

"What do you tell HER?"

I pressed my lips together. "Things."

"She and I would have so much to talk about," Claire said.

"I don't think so," I said.

“We both love to get dressed up and be on a stage,” she said. “We love having people clap for us.”

I frowned at her. “She’s a professional, Claire. You’re not.”

“I am, too. My father just signed me up for modern dance.” She jumped up from the table and fluttered her hands out like little birds. “My first class is tomorrow.”

She floated around the family room, bowing to imaginary watchers as she went. Claire was right; she and Mom WERE alike. Most of the time, they both acted like they were on a stage.

I looked again at my Lucy drawing. Suddenly, I could see how awful it was. Her legs looked like four yellow sticks. And her head! Way too big!

Mom would shake her head before tossing that picture into the wastebasket. Well, I would beat her to it.

I picked up my picture, wadded it, and tossed it into the trash.

Chapter 3

Awful Boys

Claire was drawing herself, and I was drawing a picture of my best friend Sierra, with long, brown braids and lots of freckles, when Mr. Plummer came to the door.

“I figured you were over here,” he told Claire.
“Where is Alex?”

Claire waved her hand toward the backyard.
“Playing in the dirt.”

“Could I speak to your dad, Katie?” he asked.

I ran down the hall to Dad’s office where he writes his engineering reports for Mr. Flagstaff. He likes his job because he can work at home and be around Tyler and me at the same time. He came out, holding his glasses and rubbing his nose where they pinched.

“Wally,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“I have a favor to ask,” Mr. Plummer said. “I’ve asked Nina to go out for dinner with me, but we need child care. For Alex and Claire.”

Beside me at the table, Claire looked up. A secret smile crept across her face.

“Not a problem,” Dad said. “I’ll pull some hamburgers out of the freezer.”

“I’m taking her to Le Bistro,” Mr. Plummer said, rubbing his hands together. Claire jumped up and ran to her dad. “Le Bistro is the best. She’s going to fall in love with you!” She grabbed her dad’s arm and hugged it. “Any day now, Mrs. Ramirez will be my new mother!”

Mr. Plummer smiled down at her. “We’ll see. We’ll see.” He grinned at Dad. “I’ll go change into something to wear to dinner. See you later.” He went out the door.

“I was ready to quit work for the day anyway,” Dad said as he went toward the kitchen.

“When she’s my mother,” Claire told me, “I’ll wear beautiful clothes every day. She’ll give me motherly advice.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Everything!” Claire rolled her eyes at me. “Whether I should get my hair cut. What to wear to

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my piano recitals. Mothers are full of good information.”

“They’re only going out to dinner,” I said.

“But it’s Le Bistro,” Claire said. “The most romantic restaurant in town.” She sighed with happiness. Then she looked out at the backyard where Tyler had dragged out the hose and was filling holes with water. She wrinkled her nose. “Your yard is a mess. My father could give your father advice about fixing it up.”

“I bet he could,” Dad said. He passed us, carrying a bag of charcoal.

Tyler ran onto the porch to gather up the small trucks and cars he had piled there. “These trucks are waiting for roads,” he yelled through the door. “Come help us.”

“Not me,” Claire said putting her hands over her ears.

“Let’s go see what they did,” I said. I started across the porch.

“You’re not supposed to leave half your company alone,” she yelled through the door.

As Dad poured charcoal into the grill, black dust rose up. “Katie,” he said quietly. He tilted his head toward Claire. “Ladies,” he said then, “could you

please make a plate of lettuce and tomatoes and cheese to go with our burgers?"

Ladies. That sounded perfect for Claire. I turned around. Sure enough, she was nodding.

In the kitchen, she made me wash my hands three times. "I saw you touch that dog," she said with a shudder.

I got out the lettuce.

"Boys are sure awful." She peered out the window.

"You're just not used to them," I said. "They're not so bad."

She took my lettuce leaves off the plate and tore them smaller. "Even boys can't get huge things like these in their mouths."

"You should see Lucy eat," I said. "We figured out she doesn't even chew."

"Lucy is hard to like," she said. "She beats on you with her tail."

"She's wagging. She knows lots of commands. I tell her to sit," I said, "and she plops right down."

"Why is that so great?" Claire sliced cheese into perfect squares.

"Sierra loves her," I said.

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“That’s Sierra,” she said. “Sierra and I are different.”

I nodded. Claire and Sierra are very different. There’s a good reason Sierra is my forever friend and Claire is my sometime friend.

“Where is she?” Claire asked. “I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Her grandma was visiting.” I handed Claire the tomatoes to slice. “She’s coming over tomorrow.”

“Maybe we can do something,” Claire said, “after my modern dance class.” She cut the tomatoes into even slices. Our platter was looking pretty.

We ate on the back porch, crowded around our patio table with Claire sitting between Dad and me so she wasn’t next to Alex or Tyler or Lucy. I breathed in the wonderful smell of hamburgers and catsup. Lucy stuck her nose up, breathing in the same smells.

“No feeding Lucy at the table,” Dad said. “If you have something for her, we’ll put it into her dish.”

“Good idea.” Claire nodded. “You should never get dog spit in your hand.”

I rubbed Lucy’s hairy back with my bare foot. “Don’t worry,” my toes said.

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At that moment, I saw Alex's hand creep up over the edge of the table. He dropped something black and squirmy onto Claire's plate.

Chapter 4

Changes Ahead

Claire didn't see the black and squirmy thing; she was too busy making us cut our hamburgers in half before eating them. "Good manners are very important," she said as she smoothed her paper napkin across her lap. "I'm sure my father is using good manners tonight while he's at Le Bistro with Mrs. Ramirez."

Finally, she looked down at her plate. A roly-poly bug lay curled beside her hamburger.

"EEEEEEK!" She jumped up.

Lucy rushed out from under the table and barked. Claire shrieked again and ran into the house.

Dad brushed the bug off her plate. "Sow bug," he said. "Won't eat much." He looked over at Claire who was standing behind the screen door. "Sorry," he said.

She came out and inspected her plate, making sure the bug was gone before she sat down. “How did that bug get there?”

Alex picked up a potato chip and crunched it. Tyler looked at him and picked up a chip of his own. They both crunched. The crunches were full of guilt. Finally, Dad said, “Please pass the catsup,” and we got back to eating.

For dessert, we had ice cream with sliced bananas and chocolate syrup, and no bugs.

“Your dad is missing this nice dessert,” Tyler said to Claire. He held his spoon up with ice cream and stringy chocolate dangling from it. Dad pushed Tyler’s hand down toward the dish, but it went back up.

“He is on a date. With Mrs. Ramirez,” she said looking away from Tyler. Her face held that same quiet smile, like a secret.

I knew she was thinking about mothers.

Alex took the last bite of ice cream and as he pushed his empty dish away, it tipped over with a clatter. “Oops,” he said. “Sorry.” His face turned as red as Tyler’s hair.

“Not a problem,” Dad said.

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Alex rubbed the edge of the dish with his finger. "It's not broken," he said quickly. "Not even a chip."

"Don't worry about it," Dad said, smiling at him. "You guys planning to build more highways out there?"

He nodded. "We're not quite done."

Tyler grinned at us, scooped the rest of his ice cream into his mouth, and followed him off the porch.

Claire carefully wiped her lips, which didn't even need wiping.

Dad gathered our dishes together and the three of us carried everything to the kitchen.

"I'll load the dishwasher," I said, "and then I am definitely going to play with Tyler and Alex."

Claire pushed in front of me. "You can't just put the dishes in, you know. You have to rinse them first."

"I never do," I said, dropping in the ice cream bowls.

"Did Ms. Morgan call you yet?" she asked Dad. Ms. Morgan had been our wonderful fourth grade teacher. For a while, Claire had it figured out that Ms. Morgan might marry her dad and be her new mother. That was before Mrs. Ramirez.

Dad looked surprised. “She’s still in Minnesota visiting her family.”

“Now that my dad has decided on Mrs. Ramirez, you can have Ms. Morgan. It’s only fair.” She straightened all the little bowls I had put into the dishwasher.

Dad’s eyes blinked behind his glasses. “Janna Morgan and I are just friends,” he said.

“I had to convince my father about Mrs. Ramirez,” she said. “It’s taken all summer because he still missed my mother. It’s time for Katie to have a new mother, too.”

Dad rubbed the knives with a sudsy sponge and rinsed them under the faucet. He turned the knives back and forth under the water, and his face was sad.

Dad’s face always got that look when he thought about Mom and him being divorced and her not living with us anymore.

Claire checked the potato chip bag. “Empty,” she said. She rolled it up with a crackle and jammed it into the wastebasket as Dad went out to close the barbecue. She turned to me then, her blue eyes serious. “Don’t you want Ms. Morgan for your new mother, Katie?”

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“I love Ms. Morgan,” I said. “But Dad says falling in love takes a long time – sometimes years.”

“He’s making a big mistake,” Claire said. “Someone else is going to fall in love with her. You’re going to lose her.”

I frowned at Claire, suddenly nervous about losing Ms. Morgan even though I didn’t have her.

She rinsed the sponge and handed it to me. “Wipe that counter.”

I wiped a bunch of crumbs into my hand and stopped. “If your dad marries Mrs. Ramirez, it’s going to be really different at your house.”

“It will be wonderful,” she said. “She knows all about making things nice. I might even help her at her bride store.”

“I was thinking about you getting a brother.”

Her face turned pale. “A brother?”

I tossed the sponge and the crumbs into the sink. “Did you forget that Alex will be your brother?”

I turned just in time to see a glass fall out of Claire’s hands and land with a crash.

Chapter 5

A Very Short Phone Call

For the rest of the evening, Claire curled up in a chair in the living room and bent over her book, pretending to read.

Alex and Tyler and I made a road that twisted over cliffs and down gorges. Alex had great ideas.

“How do you know so much about roads and bridges?” I asked.

“My dad. We used to go to the beach. We built dams and stuff in the sand.”

“I bet you miss him.”

“Yeah.” He was packing the sides of the cliff and didn’t look up.

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“Our mom is a singer,” Tyler said. “She travels all over the place. Is your dad a singer?”

Alex shook his head. “No.”

“Don’t you ever get to see him?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about him.” Alex turned his back to me so all I could see was his flannel shirt and his dark hair curling over the collar. “We need some little stones,” he said to Tyler, “for a river bed.”

A bunch of questions pushed against my lips. Just then, Lucy came to see us. When her feet knocked down one of our cliffs, I took her into the house where we played ball in the long hallway. Claire said no when I asked her to play.

Lucy danced in front of me, panting, watching the ball in my hands.

“Get it, Lucy,” I shouted as I tossed the ball down the hall. She barked three times and ran after it. When she brought it back to me, all wet and slimy, I heard the phone ring in Dad’s office.

“Roxie,” Dad said. “What a surprise.”

“Mom!” I yelled. Lucy and I ran into Dad’s office.

He was looking at his calendar – at the month of August. “I can drive them to Spokane on the 20th,” he said. “Pick them up on the 31st.”

I heard Mom's voice go on for a while. Then Dad turned to me. "She's right here," he said. "Want to talk with her?"

I reached for the phone. "Hi, Mom," I said.

"Hi, honey," she said, her voice sounding so pretty almost like she was singing on the phone. "Grandma and I were wondering if there's anything special you and Tyler want to do while we're together in August."

"Do?" My mind went blank. The silence stretched out while I thought about being at Grandma's, being with Mom. "Maybe we can cook together," I finally said. "I've been wanting to learn how to make some things."

When she laughed, I knew I had said the wrong thing. "I'm not the right person for that!" she said. "But your grandma will like doing kitchen things with you." She was silent a minute. "Anything else?"

"I'll bring a deck of cards," I told her. "We can play Crazy Eights."

"We can certainly play games," she said.

Her voice wasn't excited. I wished I could say I was going to take modern dance. Or needed advice about my hair. I sighed. "Tyler is in the backyard

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building roads,” I said. “He’s too dirty to talk on the phone.”

“I’ll talk with him next time,” she said. “Got to go, Katie.”

I didn’t look at Dad as I handed him the phone.

Lucy met me in the hallway, huffing around the green tennis ball in her mouth. “Not now, Lucy,” I told her and pushed past her to the living room where I sat across from Claire. We both pretended to read.

“Your mom called?” she finally asked.

I nodded.

“Short phone call,” she said.

“She didn’t have much time,” I lied.

“I should have talked with her,” she said.

I glared at her. “She’s MY mother, Claire.” But then I thought about how her being my mother didn’t mean we had anything in common.

A few minutes later, Mr. Plummer came to the door to say they were home.

“At last!” Claire said. She left without saying goodbye.

“Those are some highways,” Dad said later as I was getting ready for bed. “Alex has engineering skills.”

“His father taught him.” I picked my pajamas off the floor and started to put them on. “Too bad Claire hates him.”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “I thought they got along just fine. Except for the bug on the plate.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Claire and Alex did NOT get along.”

“They’ll work things out,” Dad said.

I climbed into bed and held out my arms for a hug. Dad smelled like charcoal and hamburgers. He kissed my cheek, turned out my light, and went down the hall.

He was usually smarter about things. After all these years of knowing Claire, he really didn’t know her at all.

As I snuggled into my pillow, I thought of the things I could have told Mom. About the pictures we were sending. About Sierra coming tomorrow. About Lucy playing ball with me. If only I had known ahead of time that she might call. I would have been ready.

I turned over and pushed my head deeper into my pillow. Thoughts of Alex Ramirez walked into my head. He didn’t know it yet, but Claire was going to make his life miserable.

Chapter 6

Lucy In Disgrace

The next morning when I woke up, the first thing my eyes saw was the beautiful poster of my mom hanging next to my closet door. She was almost life-sized, holding her guitar, wearing white boots and jeans and a vest with beaded fringe. I talked to that poster a lot, telling Mom all the things I never remembered to say in a phone call. “Claire is probably going to have a new mother,” I told her. As usual, Mom’s poster didn’t answer.

After breakfast, Dad rescued my picture of Lucy from the trash. He smoothed it out, gathered up other papers from me and from Tyler and put them into a big envelope. “She’ll be happy to get this,” he said.

I pushed my spoon through my bowl of cereal. “She might not even open that envelope.”

“Of course, she will.” Dad sat down beside me at the table. He pushed his mug back and forth and

looked down into his coffee. Dad loved coffee. He loved smelling it almost as much as drinking it. “We know she’s busy,” he said. “She’ll still love seeing your drawings.”

I stirred my cereal.

“You and Tyler will be with her at the end of August.”

I stirred in the other direction.

“It’s good for you to spend time with your mother.” He touched my cheek with his finger. “But I’ll miss you and Tyler. I always count the days till you get back home.”

Tyler ran down the hall with Lucy waving an excited tail. “She wants to go for a walk,” Tyler said. “I asked her, and she jumped up and down.”

“You said the word ‘walk’?” I asked. Lucy rushed to the door and rushed back to us, panting.

“Eat up,” Dad said to me. “Lucy’s taking us to the park.”

A few minutes later, the three of us walked down the driveway with Lucy. I patted my pocket, which was full of kibble. I wanted to practice her tricks.

“She’s so well-trained,” Dad said. “Look at her, walking beside us, even without her leash.”

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Tyler jumped in front of us. “Halt,” he said. “It’s my turn to put her leash on.”

As he reached for the leash, Lucy all at once realized that she was free. She danced ahead and shifted into zoom. Like a yellow race dog, she sped down the driveway.

“Get her!” Dad called. We all began to run.

Lucy stuck her nose into every bush and zigzagged across our yard with us behind her. All at once, she crossed the street and ran toward Claire’s house.

“Not that way,” I shouted. “Not there!”

She didn’t hear me. Her tail waved in excited circles when she saw Claire and Mr. Plummer in their front yard. She ran straight toward them and toward the roses Claire’s dad was always trimming.

Mr. Plummer straightened up and waved his pruning clippers. Claire held her arms out as if she was a fence that might stop a dog.

“Go home,” Mr. Plummer shouted in a ferocious voice.

Lucy’s head and tail went down. She backed away from him.

She was afraid of Claire Plummer’s dad.

“Lucy,” I called. “Kibble.”

She knew that word. Her tail went back up as she ran toward me. Just before she crashed into me, she sat down. Her nose touched my pocket as I reached for her collar. I pulled out the kibble. In a split second, all that was in my fingers was dog breath and dog spit.

As Dad and Tyler panted up beside us, Claire stalked forward and put her face six inches away from mine. “Your dog,” she said, “is out of control.”

Lucy backed away from me and squatted. I looked behind her to make sure.

She was doing exactly what Mr. Plummer had worried about. Pooping on his perfect lawn.



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