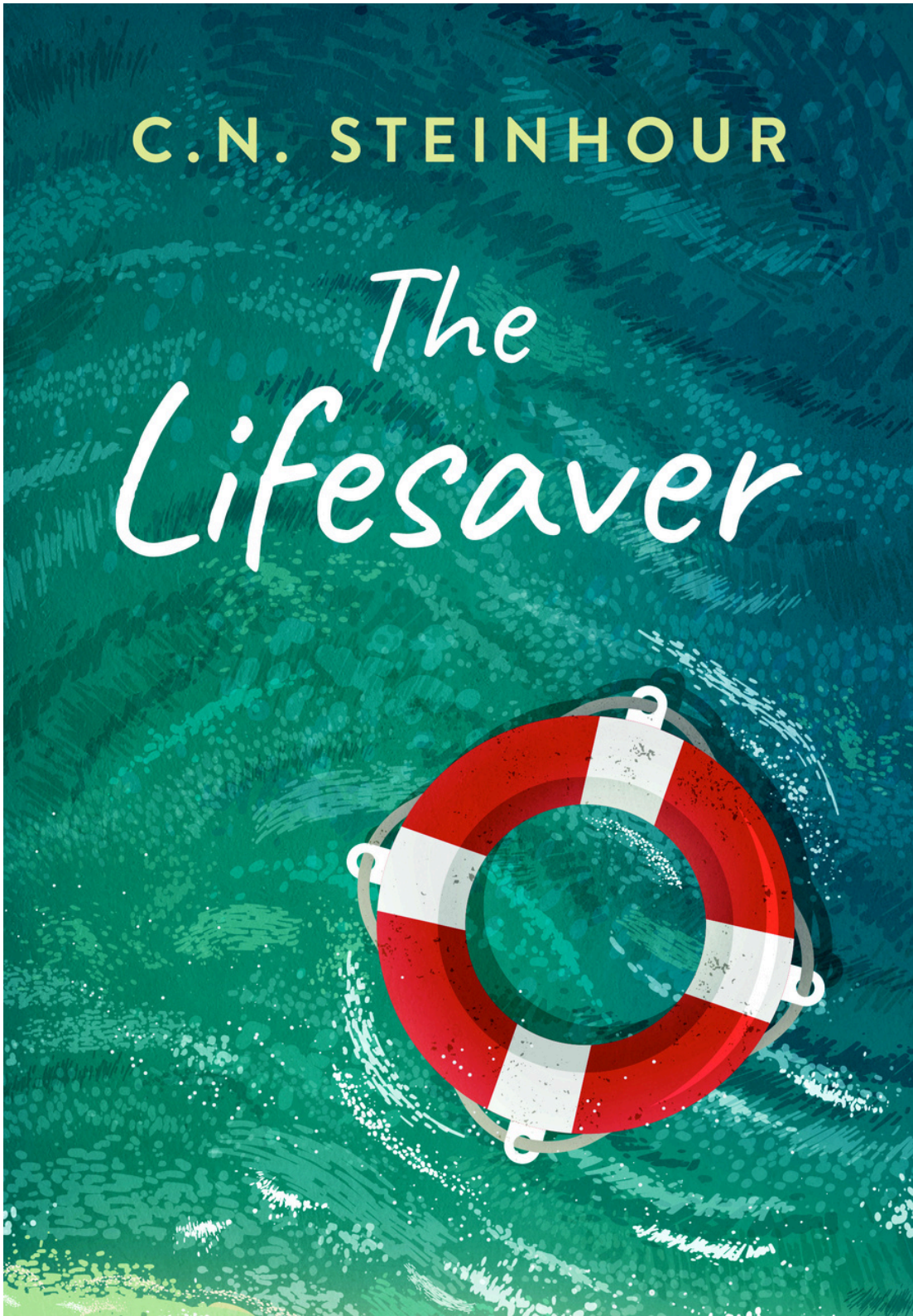


C.N. STEIN HOUR

The Lifesaver



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C.N. STEINHOURL

C.N. Steinhour is a YA author who delights in creating lively and memorable characters. She began her life as a traveler, being the military brat of two Air Force veterans. She eventually settled in Virginia to marry her high school sweetheart. When she's not writing, she can be found tickling the ivories or cuddling with her gentle rescue cat. *The Lifesaver* is her first novel.

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BOOK FACTS

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S C A N T O O R D E R

"As I drop to my knees beside him, I feel a spark of recognition: Tristan Chevalier. From my school, my grade. Way too young to die."

When Avery Taylor stumbles across an unconscious classmate in the river, he fears a life is at stake. Although his quick actions are enough to save Tristan, Avery's left with more questions than answers about that fateful night:

What was Tristan doing in the river in the first place? Could all the rumors about him be true? And why should Avery care so much, anyway?

Joyful and raw, *The Lifesaver* is an emotional look at the human connection and how it can change a life in more ways than one.



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Sample Interview with C.N. Steinhour, Author of *The Lifesaver*

C.N. Steinhour, author of the young adult book *The Lifesaver*, talks about writing on tough topics for teens today.

Q: What inspired you to write *The Lifesaver*?

A: I was listening to music while drawing some fan art, and Eve 6's song "Friend of Mine" came on. The song is about someone who's pleading with their friend to stay alive and not try suicide. I started thinking about my psychology classes, when we talked about how human connection and little acts of kindness can sometimes help someone who's struggling with suicidal thoughts. The idea for these characters popped into my mind, and I knew I wouldn't be satisfied until I had gotten it all down on paper.

Q: Suicide is a deep subject. Was it hard writing a book about it?

A: Yes, it was very hard at times. I wanted to make sure I captured the feelings of the characters without triggering readers who may have had similar experiences, which is a fine line to walk. It was important to receive sensitivity reader feedback for that reason.

I think overall, positivity balances out the book. Some scenes are emotional, of course, but I inserted a lot of humor in it, too. Telling the story from Avery's perspective helped also because he's a happy-go-lucky guy.

Q: Were the characters inspired by real people?

A: Not specifically, though some of their mannerisms are similar to people I know. I see a lot of myself in Avery and Tristan. My husband also used to keep his keys on his belt loop in high school [laughs].

Q: You married your high school sweetheart, didn't you?

A: Yes! We had a long-distance relationship through the last two years of high school, too. Everyone said it couldn't be done, but we've been together now for almost twenty-five years. I think grown-ups often underestimate teens and the depth of their emotions. I hope I give teens enough credit in my work.

Q: How do you write for teens, with all the changes in technology and trends?

A: It's tough. It takes so long to publish a book that by the time it's out on the shelves, any references to new technology or trends are going to be outdated. And after COVID, most contemporary novels are going to be that way. You just have to roll with it. What's more important is capturing the essence of being a teen, which is more consistent across generations.

Q: Is there anything you wish you could say to your teen readers?

A: I'd say that your feelings are valid. You know best what you're going through. If you feel like you can't handle it or are thinking about suicide, tell your doctor or text or call 988, which is the National Mental Health Hotline. You can also use their online chat feature at 988lifeline.org.

“RUN, TAYLOR!”

“Go!”

“Taylor, run!”

The cheers fill my ears as my feet pound across home plate. This was the best game I’d played all year: not only did I strike out the other team’s best hitters, but I also popped a fly ball in the bottom of the seventh that landed way past their outfielders, allowing us to score three more runs and one more tally on our list of wins.

I look toward the stands, but I can’t see anything through the blur of blue and white uniforms as my teammates crowd around me to pound me on the back. A gap appears and I spot my girlfriend, Ashley, standing on the front bleacher. I see her wave before my view is obstructed once more.

My best friend and fellow teammate, Drake, throws his arm around my shoulder. He’s my height, with dark skin and the whitest smile I’ve ever seen, which he shows often. He yells something unintelligible in my ear.

“What?” I yell back.

“Coach wants to see you!”

I stand on my tiptoes and peer over the shoulders of my team members. Coach Barnes is hovering by the backstop with a man I don't recognize. When Coach sees me looking in their direction, he beckons me over. I make my way through the crowd and trot up to them. Coach claps me on the shoulder. I wince. He used to play professional football, back before he got middle-aged and grew a beer gut, and he hasn't quite figured out that high school baseball players aren't built the same as NFL linemen.

“Good game, Taylor,” he says.

“Thanks, Coach.”

“I want you to meet somebody.” He waves a hand at the man standing next to him. “Avery Taylor, this is Ed Morris. He's here from the Major League Scouting Bureau. Ed, this is the kid I told you about. I wasn't lying when I told you he was good.”

“Never doubted you for a second, Bill,” Morris says. His grizzled face looks like it's seen its share of summers on the field. He stretches out his hand. I shake it nervously.

“How old are you, Mr. Taylor?” he asks.

“I'll be eighteen in July.”

“You're graduating this year, correct?”

I exhale. “Fingers crossed!”

“Have you committed yet?”

“Sir?”

“Have you signed with any colleges yet?”

“No, sir. I've gotten a few offers, but I'm still deciding.”

He considers me with a half-smile on his face. “Mr. Taylor, how fast do you think you threw today?”

I pulled out all the stops this game, so I know it had to have been pretty fast, but I don't want to guess too high and sound like a cocky

bastard. I eye the radar gun in his hand. "I was hoping you could tell *me*, sir."

Coach Barnes answers for him. "You threw a ninety-five, Taylor," he says with an undercurrent of pride in his rough voice.

Ninety-five? That's the fastest I've ever thrown. Most high school pitchers don't even break ninety, and here I threw a ninety-five miles-per-hour fastball in front of a Major League scout. I can't believe it.

They both smile at my stunned facial expression. Morris continues. "I'm going to cut to the chase. We're searching for talent. From what I've seen today, I believe you have the talent we're looking for. I can't make any promises, but if I'm right, and if today is any indication of what we can expect to see from you, then we may just be looking at a frontrunner for the June draft."

He hands me a sheet of paper. I glance at it, but my thoughts are swirling too fast for me to read the writing.

"If you think you might want to play in the big leagues, then fill out this questionnaire and get it back to me. You don't have to fill it out right now. Go home; talk it over with your parents or your advisor, if you have one."

"It's your big chance to make something of yourself, Taylor," Coach growls as he gives me a meaningful look.

Morris holds something else out. "Here's my card. I look forward to hearing from you."

"Thank you, sir," I manage to spit out as I take the business card.

I shake his hand again, then head back toward the bleachers in a daze. I didn't know a scout would be at the game. It's probably better that I didn't; I most likely would have screwed up and embarrassed myself if I had known I was being evaluated for my career potential.

Ashley runs up and plants a big wet kiss on my lips. "You did great!"

She's really pretty—one of the hottest girls in the school—with blue-green eyes and dyed blond hair befitting a cheerleader. I know I'm lucky to be with her.

"Thanks." I beam down at her.

Drake appears by my side and says, "Hero of the day!" He's not as good at baseball as I am, but he doesn't hold it against me.

"So what did that guy want to talk about?" Ashley asks.

"He's a scout. He mentioned the draft."

"*What?*" Ashley says.

"No way!" says Drake.

I smile, but for some reason, I feel queasy inside.

"That's awesome, Avery." Ashley kisses me again.

"Do you wanna grab dinner?" I ask her, trying to shift the subject away from myself.

"Can't. My grandmother just flew in so I've got to spend quality time with her. I told her I'd be home right after the game ended, so I should probably go. Do you need a ride home?"

Before I can reply, Drake says, "He can ride with me."

"Okay. Thanks, Drake," Ashley says. She pecks me on the lips, then looks me in the eyes and says, "Call me."

"I will."

She flashes us one last brilliant smile before she turns and heads toward the parking lot.

Drake looks at me. "You ready to go?"

"Actually, I think I'll walk."

His eyebrows shoot up. "You sure? It's a long way."

"Yeah, it's cool. I've got some things I need to think about."

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

The sun sets as I make my way home. I walk slowly, not only to enjoy the scenery, but to give myself time to think about my future

before I go home and have my future determined for me by my father. I know he would love nothing more than to see me go pro, but I'm not sure if that's really what I want. It sounds stupid, I know. I could have fame and fortune, why not go for it? The thing is, baseball has always been just a game to me, not a career path. I'm afraid that if I did it for a living, all the fun would be sucked out of it.

The problem, though, is that I have no idea what I would do instead. People are always asking me what my major will be and what I'm going to do after college, as if they expect all high school seniors to have their whole freaking lives planned out. The questions make me feel inadequate, so I just tell them my father's plans for me instead of admitting that I'll most likely end up begging for change on the streets due to my own lack of direction.

I take a shortcut through the woods, then follow the road until I come up to the river. As I walk across the bridge, pondering the practicality of joining the circus, I hear a splash nearby. Curious, I lean over the rail and peer down into the water. The streetlights are too far away for me to see anything clearly, but I think I see a large dark spot near the middle of the river. I squint. The way it's shaped, it almost looks like . . . a *body*!?

I sprint the rest of the way across the bridge and leap as fast as I can down the hill to the river's edge. As I get closer, I can see that the mysterious object is unmistakably a person. I throw my jacket on the ground and, without stopping to think, I plunge into the dark water.

Muscles strained from baseball scream in protest as I race to beat the current. The figure is floating just a few yards offshore. I slide an arm around it—him—and tug him back toward the reeds. His head dips beneath the water. I adjust my grip higher, struggling to keep us both afloat. This is nothing like they taught us in swim class.

Limbs shaking, I stumble out of the river and drag him up the

embankment. As I drop to my knees beside him, I feel a spark of recognition: Tristan Chevalier. From my school, my grade. Way too young to die.

His skin has a sickening pallor and his lips are tinged with blue. I check his pulse and put my ear to his mouth. Nothing. No breath, no heartbeat.

My CPR training kicks in: I tilt his head back to clear the airway, then pound on his chest with the heels of my hands. Pump, pump, rest. Pump, pump, rest. I do this several times, then I put my mouth over his and force air into his lungs. After what feels like hours, even though it's probably only been a few minutes, he finally starts to cough. I turn him on his side so he can spit up the water (*So much water!*) from his lungs.

I check him over, but aside from the coughing, he doesn't appear to be hurt. I fall back on my heels and take long breaths to slow my rapid heartbeat. As I concentrate on breathing, I watch the color come back to his face. He's always been pale, but nothing like this. I brush his wet bangs off his forehead and out of his eyes. Without his hair in his face, I can see that his eyes are an astonishingly pale blue, like a lake that's frozen over. I don't know why I never noticed before; usually that's something you notice about a person. Maybe it's because his hair is always in his eyes, or maybe it's just that I never really looked at him before.

As I watch him splutter, I think about what I know about this kid, which isn't much. Even though we're in the same grade, I don't remember ever having a class with him. Mostly, I see him walking through the hallways with his head down, avoiding eye contact with other people. His dad is some sort of politician, but that doesn't seem to help Tristan make many friends. Rumor has it that he's gay, but I

don't know how people would know that since he doesn't seem to talk to either boys or girls.

His lungs finally clear, he sits up and wraps his arms around his legs. I notice that he's not wearing a coat, even though it's March and still chilly outside; he's just wearing a loose, long-sleeve T-shirt over his blue jeans. I look around for my jacket and see it lying several feet away on the dead grass. I pick it up, brush it off, and walk back over to him. I attempt to put it around his shoulders, but he shrugs it off. *If he's not going to wear it, then I will.* I put it on, then sit cross-legged next to him. He doesn't say anything to me; he won't even meet my eyes.

I start to put two and two together. Loner high school student drowns in the river, at night, while fully clothed. This wasn't an accident.

I have to try to talk to him. Something tells me he won't be very forthcoming about his suicidal tendencies, but I can't just ignore the issue, either. I try to break the ice with some humor. "Do you always do crazy stunts at night, or do you do them during the day, too?"

Without looking up, he says, "Nighttime's usually the best time to avoid nosy people who butt into other people's business, but apparently that's not always the case. Are you always a lifeguard, or do you actually have a real job?"

Well, I didn't expect that. The kid has a smart mouth.

"Actually, I was a lifeguard once. Last summer. At the community center."

"Hmph."

Silence seeps into the air between us. I have to say something to distract him—and myself—from the cloud hanging above our heads.

"I wouldn't mind doing it again. Being a lifeguard, I mean.

Though most of the time I was bored out of my skull, I like the idea of helping people. Maybe I should consider being a police officer, or a firefighter, or—”

“Or a knight,” he interrupts.

“What?”

“Yeah, you could ride around on a white steed and rescue damsels in distress and all that crap.”

What is his problem? I just helped him and he’s being such a jerk about it. Instead of getting worked up about it, though, I play along.

“Oh my God, I didn’t think of that. I wonder where I would get a suit of armor from. I could go around and drink mead and enter jousting tournaments and sing love ballads to fair maidens. That would be badass.”

At the word “sing,” he seems to perk up a little. He peers up at me. “Do you sing?”

“Uh, no. Not well, anyway. Do you?”

“Yeah, a little. I mean, I used to. I haven’t recently.”

“Why’d you stop?”

He shrugs and picks at the blades of grass around his feet. *Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.*

He seems to like music, so I say, “Do you play anything? Like, any instruments?”

“Yeah. I’ve played the piano since I was, like, six.”

“You do? That’s pretty cool.” I never really thought of a piano as *cool*, but it’s better than nothing, which is what I play. “What kind of music do you play?”

“Well, my piano teacher always makes me play the typical classical pieces. Chopin, Mozart, you know. My parents eat it up. But when they’re not around, I mostly play classic rock.”

"That's awesome, dude. I wish I could rock out on an instrument and have my own jam sessions, but I can't play anything."

"Oh, everybody can play something. The piano is like the easiest instrument in the world to learn. It's not rocket science."

"Then maybe you can teach me sometime." I don't really mean it, but it seems like something a friend would say. And I know that right now, he needs a friend.

"Yeah, maybe." The way he says it, I know *he* knows I don't really mean it. I feel ashamed.

"So what's really going on?" I finally ask.

"What do you mean?"

As if he doesn't know.

"I'm not stupid, Tristan. I don't believe you were out here alone in the middle of the night because you had a sudden urge to go swimming in freezing water."

"I didn't think you knew my name," he mumbles.

"Of course I do." I don't tell him it's because he's been the butt of tasteless locker room jokes the last few years. "We've been going to the same school since, what, ninth grade?"

"Eighth. We were in home ec together, remember?"

I rack my brain. I can barely remember that class, but now I vaguely recall a scrawny sandy-haired boy who always sat in the corner and never talked to anyone. He was a lot smaller then. He's still shorter than I am, though not by much. He's still skinny, too, but he's no longer the skin-and-bones figure I remember from middle school.

"Oh, yeah. Right. You've grown," I say lamely.

"So have you." I may just be imagining it, but it looks like he's blushing.

I quickly change the subject. "Are you nervous about exams?"

"I haven't thought much about them."

Of course he hasn't. He wasn't planning on surviving until the final exams.

"I am," I admit. Maybe if I'm honest with him, he'll open up. "If I don't ace my finals, I may be stuck taking summer school. Assuming my parents don't kill me first. I try to find time to study, but it's hard, what with baseball and fencing practice and—"

"*Fencing?*" he says.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"You mean like poking each other with tiny swords?"

"They're called sabers, but yeah. That's the general idea."

"Oh my God, you really do want to be a fucking knight. What a loser."

Did he seriously just call me a loser? Normally, I would punch him in the face, but that seems ridiculous considering I just saved his life. I think I see the corners of his mouth twitch, but it's hard to tell in the darkness.

"So what if I want to be a fucking knight?" I retort. "And if you call me a loser again, I'll cut you down with my battle-axe and throw you back in the river as fish food."

"Okay, Lancelot." He finally smiles.

He shivers, and I realize how cold it's become. If we don't get inside soon, we'll both probably come down with hypothermia.

"Come on, I'll walk you home," I say.

I scramble to my feet and reach out a hand to help him up, but he doesn't take it. He slowly stands up, wraps his arms around himself, then trudges up the hill without waiting to see if I'm following or not. I shake my head and walk after him. His legs are shorter than mine, so I catch up to him easily.

“Where do you live?” I ask.

“Around the corner.”

He’s not kidding—he literally lives the next street over from the river. I find myself wishing that it were farther, not only so there’d be more distance between him and the place of his attempted demise, but also so I could have more time to gauge his current emotional state. It looks like my time is up, though.

“Well, see you tomorrow,” I call out as he steps onto his porch.

“Yeah, maybe,” he replies without looking back.

I watch, feeling more than a little disturbed, as he disappears into the house. As I slowly walk home, I reflect on the events of the night.

He never thanked me for saving his life.

QUESTIONS?

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