



# THE HEIGHTS

THEIRS WAS A LOVE THAT WOULD LAST FOREVER

BRIAN JAMES

# THE HEIGHTS

## BRIAN JAMES



FEIWEI AND FRIENDS

New York, NY

To Emily B. — for creating such  
timeless characters.

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK  
An Imprint of Macmillan

THE HEIGHTS. Copyright © 2009 by Brian James. All rights reserved.  
Printed in the United States of America. For information, address  
Feiwe! and Friends, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-36853-1  
ISBN-10: 0-312-36853-4

Feiwe! and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

First Edition: May 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[www.feiwe!andfriends.com](http://www.feiwe!andfriends.com)

# THE HEIGHTS

# ONE



Always near the bay, I've felt like a fish. Pushed along through every day of my life the way fish are by the currents. Not caring much where the streams take me...never struggling this way or that. I'm fine with just drifting forward...moving in and out of the sunbeams like the cars move in and out of the fog on the city's highways. Never sure where I'm going...just that I'm going somewhere different than where I am.

Catherine says I feel that way because I was born in March...because I'm a water sign.

I asked her once what that had to do with anything.

—It has everything to do with everything, Henry— she told me. —It's the reason you're the way you are. Everything is written in the stars— saying it like it was the easiest thing in the world to understand because that's the way Catherine

is . . any question can be figured out by whatever idea pops into her head first.

The way I think of things is never as direct as hers . . more like the rise and fall of the tide before the water breaks against the rocks. Always like the waves brought by a storm . . like how there's too much water and not enough space. My feelings fight inside me like that. Push up against each other . . pushing one out of the way to let another take over.

I feel it happening now as I watch Catherine walking out of our school. My nervousness giving way to something better when I see the wind pick up off the bay like it's attracted to her. The sun clears away the clouds, lifts the shadows, and gives a warm color to her skin. I haven't been waiting more than five minutes, but it still feels like I've been waiting my whole life. Every day feels like that . . like I only exist for her.

She tucks her hair away from the breeze and waves to me all in one slight and simple motion that blends so easily with her smile . . her eyes pulling me toward her like a magnet as I push myself away from the tree I'm leaning against. It's only once I start toward her that I see she's not alone. There's a group of her friends trailing behind her . . after her . . crowding her like a net strangling a butterfly.

I'm not sure *friends* is the right word to call them . . more like parasites. Except Nelly, not one of them care about her . . or about one another. They just care about making her just like them . . a survival instinct to increase their number of clones. They don't see that she's special in any way. They don't even want her to be special. They want her to be the

same . . want everyone to be the same. I can't stand when she's around them . . the way they make her feel like shit for being different . . for being better.

She never sees it like that.

She needs me to see it for her . . to keep her safe from their popularity traps . . from the people who just want to strip away all the beautifully strange parts that make her the most perfect girl in the world.

I feel the shift inside me again . . the waves swaying as my feet stomp the ground with an angry pace. I clench my hands until my fingers turn white . . my eyes screaming as I walk up to her but keeping the rest of me calm because she hates when I'm mean. I have to do my best to hide it . . to play nice . . play along just until I can get her away.

It's not so hard. Around her I can usually stay calm just by glancing over at her every few seconds. Catherine's always been able to settle me down like that.

—Hey, you ready?— I ask . . cutting into the middle of the conversation and getting a series of nasty looks in return from everyone except her. But even Catherine's smile softens . . disappears almost completely when she turns to the other girls and tells them she'll see them tomorrow. —C'mon— I say . . taking her hand in mine.

I feel better once we're walking away . . once we're alone. I always do. I don't know why being alone with her makes such a difference . . why I can't be myself unless it's just us. Maybe it would be different if I'd been born in the winter like her. Maybe if I were a Capricorn like Catherine, I wouldn't get so crazy about things the way I sometimes do.

Everything would be —*perfectly reasonable*— just how she always says it is.

But then again, if I wasn't the way I am . . and if she wasn't the way she is . . maybe we wouldn't be so perfect for each other.

—*It's the reason we get along so well*— Catherine's always telling me. She says our astrological signs are compatible . . that the earth needs the water just like we need each other.

I love the sound of her voice when she says —*We need each other*— I hear it in my head as we walk away the last of the afternoon . . playing it back over and over as the clouds linger above the path leading us through Fort Point Park . . her fingers between mine and even though we don't say a thing, I can still hear the words she's told me nearly every day since the day we met. —*We need each other*—

I don't remember much about that day, but I remember the cold. It found its way into the center of my bones like a ghost passing through my skin. I remember being alone . . wandering the city by myself until her father found me —*Where's your mother, son?*— he asked but I was too frozen to answer. I didn't know the answer. I'm not sure there was an answer because I'm not sure that I wasn't born on that day . . born five years old and shivering.

I can remember him gathering me in his arms and carrying me to his car. I remember the headlights cutting through the night like the glowing eyes of an overgrown insect. Then he brought me to his house and I saw her standing at the top of the stairs. I remember her perfectly. I remember her hair was like a sunset drawn with red crayons. And when



she smiled at me, her face was warm. It was the first time the cold ever left me.

Catherine was different than anyone else in the world. I knew it just by staring at her. She wasn't just another girl . . . more like a star plucked from the sky and trapped between tiny bones . . . a star capturing heat that I could hold on to for warmth. My very own star that I knew would guide me forever as long as I held on tight and never let go. It's the only thing I've ever understood as easily as she seems to understand everything.

—Henry? What are you thinking about? I mean right now, what are you thinking about?— she asks me suddenly. Her voice always has a way of pulling me back from my thoughts . . . pulling me toward her no matter how far away I've drifted.

I hold her hand a little tighter as we walk.

—You know . . . just about things— I say.

She smiles softly like the dawn. —I think I do— she says.

The air fills with the sudden sound of cars driving on the Golden Gate Bridge, suspended high above as we pass under. Once we're on the other side, we'll start to climb up the hill that will bring us just as high . . . alongside Baker Beach and all the way down to Sea Cliff Avenue where our home sits a few yards from the steep rocks that look down into the ocean. Until then, we're alone. The entire city of San Francisco fades away behind us. The school day disappears into the past. Nothing exists except Catherine and me walking together like we've done every day that I can remember.

She glances over at the wind whipping across the brown

surface of the water in the distance. A flock of gulls take off like balloons set free from a child's hand, floating forever up to heaven when the gust hits. Catherine watches them like they're something made of magic.

Her hair gets swept across her face and I watch her hands tuck the longer strands behind her ears. It slides through her palm the same as it did the night we met . . still the same motion of her wrist at sixteen as she had when we were five.

—Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be with them?— she asks.

—Be like with who?— I ask. Her eyes wander up to the sky, borrowing the color from it. I know then that she means the birds. —The seagulls?— I say. . thinking as I talk . . imagining myself in flight. —I don't think it would be much different from this— I tell her. —I mean, it would be different just because we were flying. . but I doubt it would feel any different—

I can see her tongue pushing against the inside of her cheek the way it always does when she's thinking. She considers my opinion for as long as it takes to climb up the last steep hill before the path flattens again, giving us a perfect glimpse of the taller buildings that peek in and out between the trees . . the downtown buildings that always draw your eyes to the pyramid rising higher than the rest. Catherine stares at it for a moment before spinning around to face me again. —But how could it not feel different?— she asks. Her words sound small and curious. Then she pulls her hand away from mine and stops walking as if standing still will help her understand. She places her hands on her hips . . leans

her weight on one leg and demands that I either agree with her or give a better answer.

I struggle for words . . . trying to let my thoughts settle into little pools that are easier to collect than waves. It's easier to think when she's around . . . easier to steady the storm. —Well— I say—I mean . . . it's like if you were a bird . . . and I was a bird . . . we'd still be you and me just with wings and feathers and stuff like that. But we'd still be us . . . we'd still be talking about this, just the other way around—

Catherine narrows her eyes. She studies me and I can almost see her trying to work out what I've said. —Okay, I guess that sort of makes sense— she says. She takes my hand again and starts walking again. —But I still think it would be different— she tells me. —I think I'd feel dizzy always going up so high and swooping back down—

She starts laughing and I can't help but smile. We've always been contagious to each other in that way. I've never doubted that it's why Mr. Earnshaw let me stay . . . let me grow up as one of the family and gave me his last name even though Earnshaw means wealthy and Caucasian and I was just a scrawny orphan with Mexican skin. He did it because I've always been able to make Catherine smile and he's just as addicted to her smile as I am.

The sun breaks in and out of the leaves as we walk . . . the shadows of so many trees dancing under our feet. I steal glances at Catherine but she's gone somewhere else . . . staring off into the horizon like she's trying to memorize the different shades of copper blue that streak the sky. She only comes back because I squeeze her hand tighter . . . bringing

her closer to me . . . a reflex that happens whenever the breeze catches the faint scent of soap from her skin.

Her body goes soft like she's just waking up . . . her chin resting on her shoulder when she looks at me . . . facing the sun so that her freckles fade in the glare, asking me if she's drifted off again.

I nod. —Don't worry about it—

Catherine takes a deep breath . . . stretching out her arms as she comes alive. —You know what Mrs. Crane said today?— she asks. I shake my head. Mrs. Crane is our homeroom teacher and Catherine's physics teacher and is capable of saying just about anything . . . most of it guaranteed to be insane. —She said I daydream too much— Catherine tells me.

—That's because she's crazy— I say and we both laugh . . . but mine is fake . . . half fake anyway because what I'm really thinking is how I'd like to run back there and tell Mrs. Crane what a lousy bitch I think she is.

—Yeah, I guess— Catherine says but she lowers her head . . . keeps her eyes on the ground as her shoes step over stray leaves. —You don't think she's right, do you?— she asks, suddenly looking at me.

—Are you serious?— A hint of anger in my voice because I hate when she doubts herself . . . when all the things other people say creep in and make her forget how much better than them she really is. It's why I have to protect her . . . shield her from all the bullshit the world throws at us.

Her mouth forms the shape of a question when she bites her bottom lip . . . she shrugs her shoulder and says —Maybe— She says sometimes she gets so completely lost in what she's

thinking about that it's like she disappears. —Does that make me weird?—

—I don't think you should worry about anything Crazy Crane says— I tell her and she tells me that's not what she means . . . not really anyway. —Then what are you talking about?— I ask.

—I don't know . . . nothing I guess— she says. —It's just . . . sometimes I think I should pay more attention to things . . . try to be more like everyone else, you know?—

—No. I don't— I tell her honestly. —Being like everyone else is boring. Besides . . . you're interesting and they all suck—

She smiles differently then . . . a secret smile when she says —thanks— and begins swinging her arms . . . playfully digging her elbow into my side . . . letting me know I've said enough to stop her from worrying for now.

We see the house as soon as we reach the sidewalk. The steepled roof catches the light, making it look like a house out of a fairy tale. Not that every house in the Heights doesn't already look that way . . . each with its own view of the cliffs where the sidewalks fall into the ocean . . . with their endless mazes of rooms and expensive furniture . . . but there's something about ours that seems better and makes all the others fade into the scenery. Maybe it's the soft white color that seems to hold on to the twilight even after the sun has set . . . or maybe it's the large windows on the fourth floor that look into Catherine's room on one side and mine on the other. Or maybe it's just because it's home.

Whatever it is, I've always thought our house was really Heaven in disguise. Sometimes instead of thinking I was

born the day Mr. Earnshaw found me, I think it's really the day I died. But either way it doesn't matter. . . dead or alive doesn't matter. . . as long as every day ends with me being washed up on its porch, I'll be fine. Because as long as there's the house, there will always be Catherine.

Nothing else will ever mean anything to me.



*I want to kiss Henry.*

*I've never kissed him. Not the way I want to. I've only ever kissed him the way we did as little kids. A quick touch of our lips and that's it. But sometimes, I want to kiss him differently. I want to kiss him the way Nelly's always kissing boys. The way I've only ever pretended to kiss other boys, but never really meant it.*

*I think everything would immediately make sense if we kissed that way.*

*We'd know right away if we were meant to be brother and sister, or if we were meant to be soul mates. It would just happen instantly. Poof! The same kind of magic that turns frogs into princes. He either becomes my prince or he stays a frog and at least then I'd know.*

*There's always been this kind of confusion between us of how we're supposed to be with each other. It's been there from the beginning, since my dad first found him on the side of the road the same way Nelly's dad found a puppy once. But I could tell just by the way he looked at me that we'd be together for the rest of our lives. It's the kind of thing you know the same way birds know how to fly or fish know how to swim. What I don't know is just*

how exactly we're going to fit together. That's why I've made up my mind to kiss him tonight.

Part of me wants to tell him, but I figure it's probably better not to say anything. I don't want it to feel too planned. But I don't want him to be freaked out either. I mean, maybe I'm way off. Maybe he only thinks of me as a best friend. That would be a disaster.

He wraps his hand tighter around mine and I feel myself go weak.

"Did I drift off again?" I ask and he nods. He's used to it, though, and tells me not to worry about it. Daydreaming's a bad habit, though. I do it all the time. Sometimes I forget that other people aren't part of them. Like with the birds a few minutes ago. I imagined flying over the city and looking down on all the people scattered on every block, wandering in different directions, and wondered what it must look like to the seagulls. I forgot that Henry wasn't imagining it too and I just blurted out and asked him something that probably didn't make any sense.

I know he doesn't mind, but it bothers me sometimes. I worry about going off on these tangents. About people thinking I'm strange. I know my teachers do. They're always calling my name and snapping their fingers to bring me out of these trances. Today was the worst. My head was full of thoughts about princes and frogs and happily ever afters. My physics teacher lost it. She doesn't have any patience for that kind of behavior as it is, so she certainly couldn't handle the way I was acting today.

"You know what Mrs. Crane said today? She said I daydream too much," I tell Henry. He tells me that's because she's crazy and

*I give a polite laugh, thinking about her Einstein hairdo and the way her eyes are always wiry like she's had too much caffeine. "Yeah, I guess," I agree. She is kind of crazy, but that doesn't mean she's wrong. "You don't think she's right, do you?" I ask.*

*"Are you serious?" he says.*

*There's something in his voice that makes me wish I never said anything. Something that lets me know he's going to say something to her tomorrow in homeroom. It's going to cause trouble, but I can't take it back now. Might as well go forward. So, I bite my bottom lip and shrug.*

*"Maybe," I mumble. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but lately I've felt kind of out of place. It's sort of why I want to figure out about me and him. Because falling in love with him is either part of what makes me strange or part of what will make me not care so much. I can't explain any of that to him without giving away too much. So I stick to the other things that worry me. I tell him about how I've been so spacey lately. "It's like I disappear and don't even realize it. Does that make me weird?"*

*He says I shouldn't worry about anything Mrs. Crane says.*

*"That's not really what I mean," I say. I start to bite my nails when he asks me to explain it more. "I don't know," I say, shaking my head. "Nothing, I guess." I'm lying, I just don't know how to say what I'm trying to say. What I'm really trying to ask him is whether or not it's completely wrong to feel the way I do about him because I know it's not normal. So I find a different way to say it. I ask him if he thinks I should try to be more like everyone else.*

*"No. I don't. Being like everyone else is boring," he says. I want to tell him that it might be boring, but that it also makes things easier. But then he smiles at me and the words go away. I get lost in*



his eyes that are almost as black as his hair. Usually he's staring off into the distance, like he's watching something in the future that the rest of us can't see, but every once in a while he stares right at me. It freaks most of our friends out when Henry stares at them like that, but not me. Maybe because with me, there's always the smile too. His real smile, not the one he uses for taking pictures. It's a smile he only really gives to me. "Besides," he says. "You're interesting and they all suck."

I smile then because I know I'm special to him. I've always known it, but it's still nice when he says it. Makes me care less about being normal. It's his way of trying to protect me from myself.

He's always trying to protect me from everything. Even when we were little. He'd get so crazy if anyone tried to pick on me. I remember the first time he came to my rescue. His first day of school with me. There was this boy Philip who always pulled at my ponytail. Held on to it and teased me until my eyes would get pink and then he'd chant, "Crybaby Catherine," until the other kids laughed at me. Well, he tried it on Henry's first day and never tried it again.

Henry knocked him down the second Philip's fingers grabbed for me. It startled me. The way Henry went off so suddenly like an explosion. The way Philip fell like something that had been broken. I remember being afraid at first by how Henry was standing over him like he wanted to do something worse than just knock him on the ground. It was like he snapped or something.

But then he looked at me and it was like everything stopped.

He stopped.

And I knew then that he would always come back to me. That he'd always be gentle with me because I'd always be able to calm him. The stars made it that way, that we'd always be able to