



Even After Always

Steven Ives

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Merging out-of-the-ordinary events with everyday relationship dramas, Even After Always is a captivating bildungsroman.

Steven Ives's stirring coming-of-age novel *Even After Always* mixes mystery and romance into its story of misfits on the trail of a killer.

CJ is a sensitive, intelligent, misunderstood high school student who struggles to fit in and faces class bullies. Reeling from his sister's death from cancer, he is adrift in his studies and feels aimless in his coastal Maine town.

CJ is re-energized when a free-spirited wanderer, Izzy, drifts into his life. They bond over their shared outsider status. But their growing relationship is placed in jeopardy when Izzy reveals she's on the trail of a serial killer who might be behind a local girl's disappearance. She also claims that she was one of the killer's victims in a past life.

This character-driven novel is fueled by the funny, frank repartee between CJ and Izzy, who share their offbeat perspectives on the world: Tough and tender Izzy names twenty-three unbreakable rules for friendship; CJ, who has far-out theories on time and space, is melancholy but charming. Their appealing dynamic is maintained even as the plot tightens and they draw closer to the elusive murderer.

The story is slower to flesh out others in CJ's life, though, including his well-meaning but downtrodden father; a neighboring police officer who provides commonsense perspective and support; his befuddled, smart-aleck classmates; and his estranged mother, who is spotlighted in a moving passage when CJ tracks her down in Boston, where he notes that "the buildings seemed like huge arms, lit up from the inside, grasping at the clouds" and "highways twisted and turned, spiderwebbing the landscape as far as [he] could see."

On its surface, this is a dark tale. Its gritty settings are played for atmosphere as CJ and Izzy roam between run-down gas stations and eerie abandoned sawmills and farmhouses in their search for the killer. The mystery mechanics maintain a beating heart because of CJ's and Izzy's personal appeal, even as their hunt plays out along conventional lines. CJ overcomes numerous major setbacks and rediscovers his lost courage and confidence in the process. And beyond the book's edge-of-your-seat climax is a cathartic denouement whose impressions linger.

Friends at the margins seek their own versions of peace and find their connection blossoming into something more in *Even After Always*, a suspenseful coming-of-age tale about the power of human connections.

HO LIN (October 19, 2024)

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