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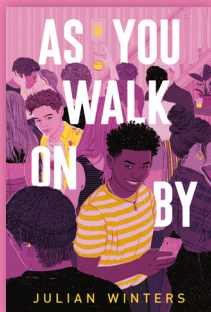
CONTEMPORARY

EDITION



**Amplify queer voices and
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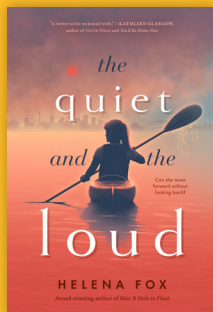




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As You
Walk On By

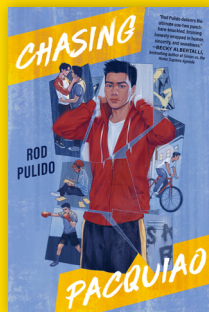
by Julian Winters



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The Quiet
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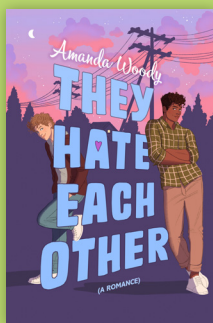
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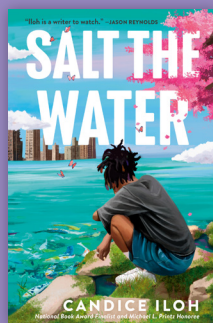
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AVAILABLE NOW

1

THE RULES OF A DARE

Rule number one to accepting any dare: never agree to something you're not 99.5 percent positive you can complete.

It's the easiest rule to honor.

Never ask a random peer an invasive question if they look like they've had a bad day and could potentially murder you on the spot. Don't agree to eat a ghost pepper if you have a low tolerance for spicy foods. Absolutely no streaking in a neighbor's yard if you can't outrun their usually playful but extremely protective Akita.

On second thought, no streaking. Period.

I know all this by heart. I also know the second Jay Scott opens his mouth to say, "Theoooooo, you're up!" at the beginning of lunch, I'm doomed. As if this never-ending week of studying and exhausting track practices weren't enough.

Now it's a Dare Day too.

Since freshman year, Friday dares have been a staple for me

and my two besties, Jay and Darren. Back then, we were awkward, hormonal nobodies. The self-appointed TNT—The Nameless Trio. As juniors, we're a tight, debatably corny crew who've become the heart and soul of the boys' varsity track-and-field team. But the dares were the gateway to breaking out of our shells here at Brook-Oak.

Jay started it all. On an arbitrary Friday in November, he crowed, "Someone dare me to do something!" It's as if he knew we were all tired of trying and failing to find our footing in a new environment. Out of the three of us, he's always been the most outgoing. Ready to jump into a fire without looking.

So I did.

"I dare you to run around the quad three times, as fast as you can . . . shirtless."

Not my most creative effort. What can I say? I'm not my best when put on the spot. He did it anyway because, of course. It's Jay.

A month later, he dared Darren to eat three packets of sriracha with no water. Then Darren dared me to propose to Brianna Matthews using only Taylor Swift lyrics. Once a month, on a Friday during lunch, Dare Day rolls around. It's an established tradition. And no matter how much we've grown out of it, none of us have the heart to disrupt the status quo. Least of all me.

There are some unspoken rules to this: Nothing illegal. Nothing that'll cause *too much* bodily harm. Only things that'll earn us weird looks or gauche laughs. Oh, and the occasional after-school detention after jumping on one of the quad's tables to sing Mariah Carey's classic "Always Be My Baby" for all to witness.

Not bragging, but I *nailed* that performance. Even added a little falsetto at the end to noisy applause.

That's another bonus: the attention from other students. I can genuinely say I've made several acquaintances—authentic friends too—from the stunts Jay or Darren have challenged me to do.

The dares solidified our group. We find ways to get in trouble together so no one takes the fall alone. All for one, one for all or whatever. Like last month when Darren had to reenact a scene from *Magic Mike* . . . shirtless.

(Seminudity is a recurring theme.)

Anyway, Jay and I stood shoulder to shoulder with him as we all got scolded by Vice Principal Clarke for disrupting the lunch period.

But none of our history prepares me for Jay's challenge.

"I dare you to ask Christian Harris to prom."

"Oh. Shit."

In my periphery, Darren's thick eyebrows shoot up his forehead.

We're outside. Early April in Louisville means the weather hasn't turned violently hot yet, but my face is on fire. My breath catches uncomfortably in my throat.

It's not an unreasonable dare. Public humiliation is very on brand for us.

It's just that . . .

Okay, I swear I'm not a serial crusher. *Anytime*. But briefly, I was a seasonal crusher. Fall of freshmen year, I was all about Jonah and his football-camp calves. Post-winter-break, it was nothing but Danesh and his sweater obsession.

Then came sophomore year and Christian Harris.

Brook-Oak is a magnet school. Christian's enrolled in the Young Performers of Tomorrow program. I'm in the High School

University program. But all general academic classes are taken in the main building. That year, I randomly selected the desk behind his in language arts.

Fine, it wasn't coincidental.

Christian was one of the rare out kids in our grade. I was too. It's not always the wisest thing to crush on the *first* queer person around your age you meet, but I couldn't help it. My strategic desk choices resulted in us being partners on a mock trial project. I still daydream about his radiant expression whenever I misquoted a passage or asked for his help.

Even now, my eyes are drawn right to him.

The body count in the quad is scarce today. It's the Friday before spring break. Most students are either holed up in our school's glass-enclosed cafeteria or the library, studying for last-minute quizzes.

Christian's surrounded by his usual cartel of band geeks, talking animatedly with his hands. There's this old song—"Brown Skin" by India.Arie—that my pops loves. It reminds me of Christian. Warm sepia complexion. Baby-faced with a wide smile, crinkled eyes when he laughs. It's not just the thirst talking either. He's genuinely friendly to everyone.

A true prom prince in the making.

"Well?"

Across from me, Jay patiently sips on a glacier cherry Gatorade, smirking. He's got a severe case of Confident White Boy Syndrome. Blond topknot, gray-blue eyes, mostly clear skin.

I chew the inside of my cheek.

Why did I ever mention my crush on Christian?

On my left, Darren says, “Give him time to think, bro.” He stuffs a handful of spicy cheese puffs in his mouth. Luckily, Coach Devers isn’t on lunch duty today. She’d annihilate him for breaking diet.

I’m not one to talk since I smashed an entire cup of soft pretzel bites ten minutes ago.

Darren chases his food with his own Gatorade. Jay always brings a six-pack from home for us on Fridays.

“What’re your terms?” he asks Jay. “What’s the reward?”

Another implicit stipulation of the dares—incentives. Little rewards. Since Darren and I aren’t typically as . . . *bold* as Jay, he’s found ways to encourage us to play along. Free iced coffees for a week. An extra pizza pie after a track meet. New cleats spikes.

“Glad you asked.” Jay unlocks his phone before scooting it across the stone table. The open tab is our school’s prom page.

This year’s theme: When You Wish Upon a Fairy Tale.

Cheesy? Yes. Is every junior and senior making a big deal about it? Hell yeah.

“If you pull it off, I’ll front your whole prom experience, Theo. Tickets. Car service. Dinner. Suit and shoes. All of it.” Jay reaches over to brush nonexistent lint off my shoulder. “Can’t have my boy looking weak when he scores a date with his dream partner.”

I roll my eyes.

First off, Jay’s family has that old money wealth. As in Scott Boulevard is named after his great-great-grandfather’s contributions to the city. They could afford our squad’s prom package, plus a fresh SUV just for Jay’s *shoes* to arrive in. I’m not hating—his mom and my pops go way back to their days at this very high school. It’s just facts.

Second . . . “dream partner”? Really?

Jay’s levels of trying too hard are infinite.

“Think about it, bro,” says Darren, nudging my elbow. “Picking up Christian wearing a sick Gucci suit for the night of your life.”

I know Darren’s overselling the idea because he’s dying to witness another wild dare. But he doesn’t have to.

Something my best friends don’t know is, I want this. Badly. I’m not as economically blessed as Jay, Darren, or 75 percent of the Brook-Oak students. Prom is a barely attainable goal for me. I’ve found an off-brand tux online. New shoes don’t even enter the equation. Dad volunteered his semi-dented, two-door Civic for the night. Dinner wouldn’t be more than a trip to a cheap, inauthentic Italian restaurant with stale breadsticks at best.

Between that and tickets, Dad would have to work a week’s worth of overtime. He refuses to let me get a job before I’m eighteen, which isn’t until November. I can’t stomach him doing all of that just for *junior* prom. Not with college app fees on the horizon.

Selfishly, though, I can’t stop thinking about prom night. Getting dressed up. All the selfies. Kissing a boy in the middle of a dance floor. After prom . . .

I want it all.

Using some of that Scott family money to fund my dream is high-key incentive enough.

“Wait.” I tilt my head. “What happens if I fail?”

At worst, a failed dare has included detention and being shamed by the group. Sometimes, one of us is the latest victim of #BOHSFail on Instagram. The hashtag has its own unique following—mostly Brook-Oak theater kids, students from nearby

schools. None of us have ever opted out of a dare.

But the prize has never been this large either.

Jay's mouth curls up on the left side, the way it does when he knows he's about to win at a round of Mario Kart.

"If you fail, then you have to wear MV High gear to our first practice after spring break."

My spine locks, shoulders pulled up to my ears.

Mountainview High is our rival. An equally competitive college prep school on the other side of Wilder Park. We're pretty much neck and neck in academic achievements. It's athletics where things are imbalanced. MVH owns us in football, softball and baseball, and soccer while we continuously destroy them in basketball, swimming, volleyball, and cheerleading.

The sport that could tip the scales: track-and-field.

In two weeks, we meet in the conference finals.

Coach Devers unapologetically despises our rivals. Since her days as a track star at BOHS. Four straight years of finishing second to Mountainview in all the major events.

Not a single W against them.

If I'm caught wearing their apparel at a practice, she'll bench me. "Support whoever you want *outside of my lanes*," she tells us every year. Coach is strict about her rules. If dress code is broken, that means no conference finals, where a dozen or so college scouts will be in the stands. As the anchor of our 4x400 relay team, this is my chance to stand out. Senior season is too late to chase scholarships from the top colleges. I'd be missing an opportunity to hit an asterisk on Dad's plans.

I can hear his voice in my head: *All we have to do is follow*

The Plan. Stay focused. Your bright, unstoppable future is right there . . .

“Damn!” Darren’s howl pulls me back to the moment. “That’s . . . harsh.”

Jay shrugs listlessly. “Our boy Theo can handle it.”

I purse my lips. We’re both good at this—ego-boosting. While playing video games, during practices, before a dare.

“Coach will slaughter him,” Darren notes.

Yes, thanks for confirming my worst fears, D. In our group, he’s the Jiminy Cricket. Our conscience. The “hold up, this might get us arrested” voice of reason.

Every squad needs one.

“She’ll think it’s a *joke*,” Jay insists, laughing. “Wearing MVH gear right before we crush them at finals? She’ll send pictures to that dick-breath Mountainview coach.” He turns back to me. “Besides, how hard is it to ask a guy to prom?”

Very, actually, a concept Jay will never comprehend.

My eyes flicker over to Christian.

Despite being out since I was fourteen, I’ve never *approached* a crush before. But something about the way the sun brightens the brown of Christian’s eyes, I’m certain of this:

I want him to be the first.

I want his laughter against my lips as we kiss at prom.

“I’m in,” I say.

Darren nearly flails out of his seat. Jay’s eyebrows rise slowly like he’s simultaneously shocked and impressed. I don’t know why. Making bad choices is in my genes.

Exhibit A: Theodore Jamal Wright, my full government name.

For seventeen years I've lived with the knowledge that my name's an amalgam of Dad's favorite childhood TV character—Theodore Huxtable—and the actor who portrayed him—Malcolm-Jamal Warner. Clearly, tragic decision-making is inherited.

“Just . . .” I whisper, feeling the adrenaline tripling in my system. “Gimme a sec.”

“Sure,” says Jay. “Take all eight minutes you have left.”

“What?”

Darren, all smooth light-brown skin and undercut showing off his sharp jawline, holds up his phone to indicate the time.

12:52 p.m.

Fuck.

Another rule: all dares must be completed before the end of lunch. Since we've rarely shared classes at BOHS, a built-in prerequisite to prevent cheating was needed: *At least one member of the squad must be present to witness the dare.*

Scrambling, I open my selfie camera.

Overall, I don't look like a complete disaster. My sponge twists could use a touch-up. Glowing brown skin with gold undertones. No leftover pretzel mustard around my mouth. Plain black T-shirt and matching joggers. An old pair of Jordan 1 Retros in Smoke Grey.

Simple and classy.

“Ticktock, TJ,” sings Jay.

I lower my phone to give him an unobstructed view of my middle finger. I don't do nicknames. Surviving years of teasing from my elementary school classmates—*hello, Theodore Roosevelt!*

Ted! Teddy Bear!—earned me that right. Only Dad is permitted to call me TJ now.

“I’m going, *Jayson*,” I shoot back with an equally taunting grin.

Jay’s face reddens. Only his mom calls him that.

As I’m leaving, Darren narrates, “This is really happening. Way to lean into your confidence, Theo. Get yours. Step right into that big, bright, romantic—”

“Added commentary not helping, D.”

Darren throws a hand over his mouth, nodding.

When Jay’s eyes meet mine, he lifts a brow as if to say, *Well? Are you gonna punk out?*

Nah, I’m not. I’m Theo Wright, soon to be conference champion in the 4x400 relay. Christian Harris’s future prom date.

Across the quad, Christian and his friends are packing up. They toss their trash in the proper bins. Other students pivot toward the main building. I cut through a pack of senior cheerleaders, nearly knocking Makayla Lawrence over.

“Sorry, sorry,” I mutter, quickly helping her reorient.

As far as cheerleaders go, Makayla’s harmless. She’s pretty much sociable with everyone at Brook-Oak. According to rumors, she’s *extra* friendly with the guys.

“Be careful,” she says with a sigh, running to catch up with her friends.

Right. Find your chill, Theo.

How can I when Christian slings his canvas messenger bag over his chest? He beams at the short, curvy Black girl beside him. They turn in the direction of the stairs. He’s leaving, along with all my prom dreams.

I hop, swerve, and wiggle through another group of students.

I'm close enough to hear Christian's cool voice among the noise.

"Whatever, Keyona." He snorts. "Don't get mad at me 'cause I have better plans than mainlining *Gilmore Girls* with you this weekend."

The girl, Keyona, tosses fruit snacks into his messy, dark curls.

"Like what? Masturbate?"

Christian's light-brown cheeks instantly go dark red. I almost choke. Suddenly, my joggers are much tighter.

"No," Christian blurts. "Studying."

"Lies!"

"Practicing the new Lizzo song for spring tryouts?"

"More deception." Keyona tosses another fruit snack at him. "You know that song better than anyone on the drumline."

It's true. Christian is the star of our school's marching band. All eyes are on the way he goes *in* while playing the snare drums.

"A party," Christian finally concedes.

"I knew it!" Keyona swats his hip. "You're gonna be all over—"

Christian shushes her before she can finish.

I pause. *All over . . . who?*

Thing is, Christian, as charming as he is, hasn't ever dated anyone at Brook-Oak. Our school is far from ground zero for homophobia. The ZERO TOLERANCE and BROOK-OAK WELCOMES ALL signs posted around the halls say so. We even have a QSA—sixteen members deep, not that I'm one of them. Still, our small, openly out queer community seldomly does the whole hand-holding, kissing-between-classes thing.

But most people know Christian's gay and available.

I just need to make a move.

Beyond Christian's group I spot Aleah Bird. Her head is lowered, body curled inward as an impatient Coach Hollingsworth talks to her. My stomach flips. I keep waiting for Aleah to look up, scowl my way. Thankfully, it doesn't happen. Instead, she walks in the opposite direction.

It takes a beat to clear the last ten seconds from my brain.

Then I see Christian is five feet away. I lick my lips, willing confidence into my gait and—

WHAM!

I collide with another student. It's a slow-motion disaster. Papers fly. Index cards spill across the pavement. My arms flap wildly before we both thud against the ground.

The first "Ooooh" is the worst. Gasps and high-pitched laughter follow. A small crowd forms around us as I roll to my side. *Please don't let Christian be one of them.* Phones are out, even while Coach Hollingsworth threatens confiscation and suspension as she intercepts the crowd.

It's too late, though.

#TeddyBearEatsCement is probably already trending.

"Are you—"

Before I can fully ask the person I smashed into if they're hurt, I hear a clipped "I'm fine." The other student adjusts crooked glasses, scrambling to collect the items I sent airborne across the quad. All I see is the back of a shaggy, copper-brown head. Woven bracelets running up a forearm. A collage of anime stickers on a

backpack before they're lost in the wave of people fleeing to the main building.

Christian and his friends are gone too.

"You okay, Theo?" Darren asks between chuckles.

He and Jay stand over me. Without meeting his eyes, I give two thumbs-up. It's all I can do with the weight of failure pressing on all my limbs.

"That deserves a do-over," says Jay, reaching to help me up.

Once I'm standing, he slides an arm around my sagging shoulders. He leads me back toward the building. Darren falls into step next to us.

"How am I gonna get another chance?" I mumble.

The lunch rule was established for a reason. We won't see each other again until after school. Chances of me being in the same space as Christian on the Friday before spring break are also slim to none.

"Trust me," says Jay, his grin at Cartoon Network-villain levels of mischief, "I'll think of a plan."

2

PROMPOSAL GONE WRONG

“Chloe Campbell’s Spring Break Bash.”

Brook-Oak’s north wing hall is eternally crowded. Students collide in every direction trying to get to their next class. I almost don’t hear Jay over the after-lunch rush.

“Huh?” I ask, head mostly buried in my locker.

The walls and lockers are striped cerulean, gold, and ivory, our school’s colors. Please don’t refer to them as blue-green, amber, or white unless you want to face the wrath of alumni donors or a barrage of *The Devil Wears Prada* memes.

I pluck out my beat-up copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* for Mr. London’s class. Not my favorite book. At least he’s letting us pair it with *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, which I’m loving. I stuff the paperback into my JanSport before shouldering my door closed, pivoting to face Jay.

“Second chance!” he announces. “Tomorrow night.”

“At Chloe’s party?”

“Yes!”

“Sounds like a scam,” Darren says before I can, sidling up to us.

“It’s happening, my dudes,” Jay insists.

“How?” I ask.

He tightens his topknot, then beams as if he’s not just insinuated we waltz into a party hosted by the senior captain of the girls’ varsity basketball team.

Brook-Oak isn’t as cliquey as it appears on the surface. From the beginning of freshman year, students are divvied up into our respective programs: High School University; Science, Math, and Technology; Journalism/Media; Visionary Arts; and Young Performers of Tomorrow. Yearly, hundreds of kids from across Jefferson County apply. Acceptance for the first three programs is decided by your academic performance in middle school, plus testing in. Auditions are required for the VA and YPT programs.

After that, everyone’s in survival mode. Magnet schools are competitive. You tend to figure out who your people are after seeing the same faces for a minimum of 180 days a year. Drama kids socialize with other YPT kids. STEM students chill with other science-y, tech-y, engineer-y, and math-y students. Band kids are tight-knit. Athletes befriend other athletes.

Chloe’s never hovered in TNT’s little social hemisphere, though. And I avoid the basketball team for . . . reasons.

“It doesn’t matter how,” says Jay. “We’re in!”

“That means Jayla’s involved,” teases Darren.

Jay doesn’t deny it.

“Perfect,” I sigh.

Jayla Owens is a junior on the cheer squad. She's pretty with pale brown eyes almost the same color as her complexion. Flocks of guys have been thirsting over her since forever. How she ended up with Jay is beyond me.

Especially since Jayla and I briefly dated.

I mean, what's dating in sixth grade other than a kiss on the cheek at a school dance, then a "Check yes if you like me" note passed around the following Monday morning?

Anyway, our tweenmance didn't end amicably.

I broke things off. Every day was nausea-inducing, knowing I didn't *like-like* her back. Guilt is so exhausting. After I told her, she shoved me in the chest, and I cried behind the jungle gym at recess. Two understandable, if not dramatic, reactions.

A year later, I came out.

I've heard that's why she's not my biggest fan. We haven't talked much, despite her dating my best friend.

"Tomorrow night. The dare's still on," Jay says, unearthing two energy bars from his backpack. He passes both to me. "You can't maintain proper energy off just pretzel bites, bro."

"Thanks." I tear into a bar. Peanut butter caramel, my favorite. Damn, Jay's always looking out for me.

Between bites, I say, "You sure we're not gonna have any trouble getting in?"

Chloe's parties are labeled as "exclusive to seniors and close friends only." Without an invite, you're likely to suffer extreme harassment from drunk seniors. Sometimes worse.

"It's a done deal," Jay confirms.

He shows us a string of texts from Jayla that are largely

inappropriate emoji usage or over-the-top love declarations. Neither Darren nor I signed up for another episode of *J & J: Sext City*.

Oh yeah. *J & J*—Jay and Jayla. They're *that* couple at BOHS, according to the underclassmen who idolize them.

#RelationshipGoals. #BaeForLife. #ImNotAHaterButThisIsGross.

As disgustingly cheesy as Jay and Jayla are, the thing I'll never say out loud is I want a version of that.

The lactose-free kind, of course.

For the longest time, it almost felt too dangerous to dream about. To give myself that kind of hope. Another boy's fingers laced with mine as we walk the halls. Being late for extracurriculars because we're too busy making out in an empty classroom. Maybe it's because the visual representation at Brook-Oak is severely lacking.

Having two straight best friends—plus a host of teammates regularly sipping from the heteronormative cup—isn't . . . easy.

When I came out, Darren was exceptionally chill. He hugged me tightly. Hasn't once asked an insensitive question about my sexuality. Jay, however, was overly enthusiastic about it. Captioned a photo of us as kids on Instagram with: #MyBestBrosGayWhatOfIt. Rainbow emojis included. Later that night, over pizza, he added an unsolicited "My cousin Jenny's a lesbian. So, I get you."

Back then, I lacked the vocabulary to explain how association by proxy doesn't give you the slightest range to what it's like to be *inside* that community. I still struggle with that. It feels weird to think about calling out my own best friend for the sometimes-problematic shit that slips out of his mouth.

Jay and Darren are clueless when it comes to being queer

and crushing on someone, even if that other person is out of the closet. The asking-someone-out thing isn't the same. Neither is dating when, at any moment, you could be risking your safety or theirs. Homophobic assholes can be anywhere. As progressive as Brook-Oak—Louisville as a whole—is, it's still a *lot* being gay here.

Lockers slam around us. Sneakers squeak on the vinyl tile. A group argues about song lyrics as they pass.

A new set of texts flashes across Jay's screen.

"It's your mom," Darren informs him.

"Shit." Jay quickly turns his phone around. He scowls while reading, thumbs smashing out a reply. "It's like she fucking forgets I'm at *school*."

I smile empathetically. Dad's the reason I leave my phone in my locker between classes. He's always sending me words of encouragement or checking to see how I did on a test. It's sweet but distracting.

"She says to tell her golden boy hello," Jay grumbles to me.

My face wrinkles. Another unwanted nickname.

"Anyway." Jay locks his phone, pocketing it. "Chloe's party? We're going, right?"

Darren's eyes dance between us.

"Okay." I finally exhale. "Let's do this."

Jay fist-pumps the air.

"We're gonna get kicked out," Darren comments, laughing.

"*You're* gonna get kicked out if you try break dancing while buzzed again," Jay says with mock admonishment.

I grin, looking around.

Brook-Oak's design is breathtaking from the exterior, but not the easiest to navigate once inside. It's a three-story, Gothic-lite structure—think Westminster Abbey, but modern and cooler—filled with over a thousand talented, genius, and/or privileged students.

Getting here was step one in Dad's Plan. It's all he talks about. A guaranteed strategy for me, a young, economically average Black kid, raised by a single parent, landing at a top college outside of Kentucky.

Brook-Oak's admissions committee was exceptionally clear that I scored in the bottom third of applicants. That I was "lucky."

Frankly, luck had nothing to do with it. I studied my ass off. Jay helped a lot too. We'd spend weekends at his house in the East End going over problem sets and science terms.

Now I'm here. Shoulder to shoulder with my best friends. One step closer to the future.

Jay and Darren part ways with me at the end of the hall. Darren's in the Journalism/Media program while Jay's a STEM student. I chuck a peace sign their way. "See y'all on the other side!"

Jay shoots me an uneven smile, nodding.

By tomorrow night, he'll be saying peace to half his trust fund after I ask Christian to prom.

The pressure to keep up with my classmates is very real. I test decently. I can fake a passable answer when called on. My papers are flawless. But remembering concepts taught in class has always been a battle. My handwriting is shit so my pops bought me a refurbished tablet to take notes on. It saves me the hassle of teachers yelling about using my phone during class.

Now my tablet's the reason I'm about to be late to American Lit with Mr. London.

The warning bell pierces my eardrums as I book it back to my locker.

Two-a-day practices are really paying off. I easily dodge the east wing slackers. Cut a corner like I'm trying to break a world record. Nothing's in my way . . .

Except Brad Jennings and Gracie Abbot having a last-minute make-out sesh by my locker.

Usually, I'd give them a pass for being in the genesis of hormonal overload. You love to see freshmen with priorities. But not today.

I clear my throat loudly until they part like startled squirrels.

Once I'm done, I almost trip over a sophomore dropping her backpack in my path. Darren's the hurdles champ in our trio. Still, I hit a respectable landing before I'm stopped again, five doors from Mr. London's class.

Luca Ramírez paces the hallway. He's whispering to himself, reading something off his phone. I don't think I've ever seen him this stressed. To be fair, Luca and I mostly socialize in passing. This isn't one of those times, though.

He looks ready to vom without one of our all-gender bathrooms in sight.

The roses-and-ivy pattern on his T-shirt is a nice contrast to his gold-brown skin. His hand skims over the top of his deep umber hair. It's styled like the crest of a wave.

I toss him a casual what's-up nod, then realize his eyes are still on his screen.

“Hey, Luca.”

His head jerks up just as his phone slips from his hands.

“Whoa, whoa,” I say, scrambling to swipe the device out of its midair plummet. Another reason I run track instead of playing other sports: *no catching skills necessary*. The phone bounces on its side, then lands facedown on the floor.

Luca groans defeatedly.

“My bad!” I kneel to pick it up. “I kind of came out of nowhere with that greeting.”

“Oh, right,” he says. “I forgot politeness is to blame for all phone casualties.”

Still on one knee, I snort loudly. Luca’s expression is softer, less puke-worthy. I ignore the late bell ringing. We’re the only ones in the silent hall.

That doesn’t last long.

Behind me, I hear . . . singing? Luca pales, lips parting. Whatever he says is drowned out by the Rolling Tones, our school’s competition-winning a cappella group.

Soon, I’m surrounded by a harmony of vocals and choreography and cheery faces. Two of the bass singers hold up a bright-blue banner. *PROM?* is dusted in gold glitter.

It hits me: *This is a promposal*.

Also, I’m on bended knee in front of Luca, raising his phone toward him like a freaking engagement ring.

Luca flails his arms around. He tries to stop the beautiful swell of voices singing . . . Hold up. Is that One Direction? Seriously? Luca Ramírez is promposing to someone with a decade-old boy band song?

You hate to see it.

“Stop!” he pleads, finally destroying what I realize is his promposal-ready hairstyle.

One by one, the Rolling Tones go quiet, mouths scrunched as they look around at each other.

Amanda Cox, the group’s leader, stomps between Luca and me. “What’s the prob, Ramírez?” She taps an impatient ballet flat on the floor. “You agreed to *pay* us to be here after lunch for a promposal. We even got special permission from Mr. Murphy to miss the beginning of class for this.”

“Not for *him!*”

Maintaining a neutral expression at the sharpness of Luca’s voice takes tremendous effort. As if I’m unworthy of being serenaded by a sweet but poorly chosen One Direction song. Like it’d be offensive to take *me* to prom.

Luca’s eyes momentarily meet mine. His cheeks pinken. But his attention is quickly drawn back to Amanda when she starts snapping her fingers.

Yeah, no need to apologize.

“I told you, Amanda, this is for—”

Before Luca can finish, someone parts through the Rolling Tones.

“Luca?” Devya Anand stands dressed out in her phys ed gear, black hair tied up in a sloppy ponytail. The hallway lights glint off the tiny stone in her left nostril and the confusion in her almost-black eyes. “What’s going on?”

Luca rushes toward her, shouting, “Now! Now!” He drops to one knee, cupping Devya’s left hand.

On Amanda's order, the Rolling Tones restart their performance. It's even cornier the second time around.

I shrink backward. Heat prickles under my skin. It's not because I've been embarrassed *again* by a clumsy disaster. I've had my fair share of trips to the top of the #BOHSFail pile—thank you, Mariah Carey. Attention like that fades as quickly as it comes in high school. Someone's always right behind you, ready to fall flat on their face and catch all that shame you were just suffering through.

I'm anxious because, for a fleeting moment, I got a taste of what it's like to be Jay and Jayla. Like all that swoon-worthy shit in rom-coms isn't strictly meant for the straight kids.

My eyes scan back to Devya. Her expression is . . . definitely not the way I'd look if, say, Christian was promposing to me.

In fact, last I heard, Devya and Luca broke up during winter break. Darren made it a Thing at lunch one day. They were another *J&J* at Brook-Oak: posting couple-y photos using the cutest animal filters on Insta. Repeat hand-holding-in-the-middle-of-the-hallway offenders. Legitimate prom court contenders.

If this is Luca's take-me-back encore, things aren't going as planned.

"Luca, I—" Out of nowhere, Devya's face goes from apprehensive to euphoric. Peter Vasquez, another junior with great hair—and Devya's rumored new boyfriend—shamelessly slides on his knees into the Rolling Tones circle, shoulder-checking Luca aside.

"Dev, babe. I wanted to do this differently, but . . . me and you? Prom?" Peter says it so casual, so *easy*, unlike Luca, who was stuttering out an entire speech ninety seconds ago.

“Ohmygod, hells yes!” Devya shouts.

I wince as Luca collapses on his ass. Devya squeals happily while Peter lifts her into the air. The Rolling Tones don’t miss a beat, shifting into a Harry Styles song like this was all by design.

A cold feeling sinks into my bones. I kind of want to help Luca off the floor. But a familiar boom of thunder cracks through the hall, one I’m used to hearing on the track, not when I’m late to class.

Coach Devers might be only five foot six, but her presence feels like seven foot two. She nudges into the circle with a repeated “Excuse you” while clapping.

I jump back. When a Black woman claps like that, it means *Move*.

Coach clocks every face in the area, including mine. No one speaks.

“Another one of these, huh?” She signals toward the prom banner. “I don’t get you kids’ obsession with making everything a cinematic spectacle.” Her eyes squint at three of the Tones filming everything. They immediately lower their phones. “Can we please keep it to non-class time? You’re here to *learn*, not gain YouTube followers.”

“I’m just trying to get verified,” whispers one of the Tones.

I frown. *Not the time, dude*.

“Get to class,” demands Coach, “before I start handing out in-school suspension like Kangol bucket hats at a LL Cool J concert.”

“LL who?” asks Zain Ahmed, a senior Tone.

“Now!”

The Tones scatter like cockroaches. Everyone except Amanda,

who glowers over a still-in-shock Luca. “Don’t forget to Cash App me our agreed fee,” she says. “I won’t charge extra for the encore. This time.”

If Rachel Berry from *Glee* and a made-for-Netflix mob boss had a child, it’d be Amanda.

“Ms. Cox?” Coach tilts her head. “Are you collecting personal funds for a school-sponsored club’s performance?”

“At a discounted rate,” Amanda mumbles, tipping her chin up defiantly.

“Care to discuss *my* discounted rates for Saturday detentions after school?” They’re almost the same height, but that might be because Amanda’s facade is starting to wilt. Coach adds, “Trust me, I give better deals than Amazon.”

Amanda takes two cautious steps back.

“No, ma’am.”

“Good.”

Amanda throws one last stink eye at Luca on her way to class. Thoughts and prayers for whatever teacher has her for the next ninety minutes.

“You too, Ramírez. Show’s over,” barks Coach.

Watching Luca collect himself is beyond tragic. He doesn’t attempt to hide the ache on his face as Devya and Peter, hands clasped, walk away. He pauses in front of me.

“Oh, hey.” I grin so hard my cheeks feel permanently inflated. “What’s up, Luca? Are you good? Need some water?”

What the hell is wrong with me? Yes, that’s what everyone needs in the face of public—and videoed—humiliation: to stay hydrated.

“No.” He exhales. “Can I have my phone back?”

I forgot I’m still holding it, despite the edges of a freshly cracked screen digging into my palm.

Luca mutters a half-assed “thanks” when I hand it to him. He drifts down the hall without another word.

“So.” I know that tone in Coach’s voice. Disappointment followed by a speech. “Is this how you spend your time when you’re not preparing to destroy MVH at finals?”

I chuckle quietly. Inside the halls and on the track, Coach is usually all business. School Faculty 101. But on occasion, she lets out her sense of humor. She isn’t afraid to scream at you to pick up the pace while also roasting your poor form.

“No, Coach.”

“I hope not.” Her mouth trembles like she’s suppressing a smirk. “Can’t have VP Clarke catching you cutting—”

“I wasn’t—”

The twitch in her right eye says not to interrupt her. “You had your meeting with Dr. Bernard last week, right? About Duke?”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, nodding.

“You’re working on getting that recommendation letter?” Coach lifts an eyebrow.

“I am, Coach.”

It’s a lie. I’ve been low-key avoiding thinking about the letter ever since Dr. Bernard suggested it. She made it sound so simple. *Just ask him*, she’d said with a Colgate-bright smile. *You’re best friends with his son. Should be no problem!*

As if she knew what it’s like to ask Jay’s dad for anything.

“That’s what I like to hear, Wright! Always making your dad

proud.” Absently, she fixes her dreads, smiling at the wall behind me. “By the way, how is Miles? Still . . . happily unattached?”

I wish I could say the shy glint in her eyes was at all shocking. That this was the first time an adult *hinted* at my pops’s romantic status. But it’s not.

Dad and Coach—and everyone else who hasn’t moved past their glory days in this part of Old Louisville—attended Brook-Oak together. They might’ve dated? I can’t keep up with the multitude of folks Dad still acknowledges with an authentic smile everywhere we go.

I swallow my annoyance.

“He’s . . . good.”

“I’ll have to text him sometime.” Even with her dark skin, Coach looks flushed. “Maybe I’ll Facebook him.”

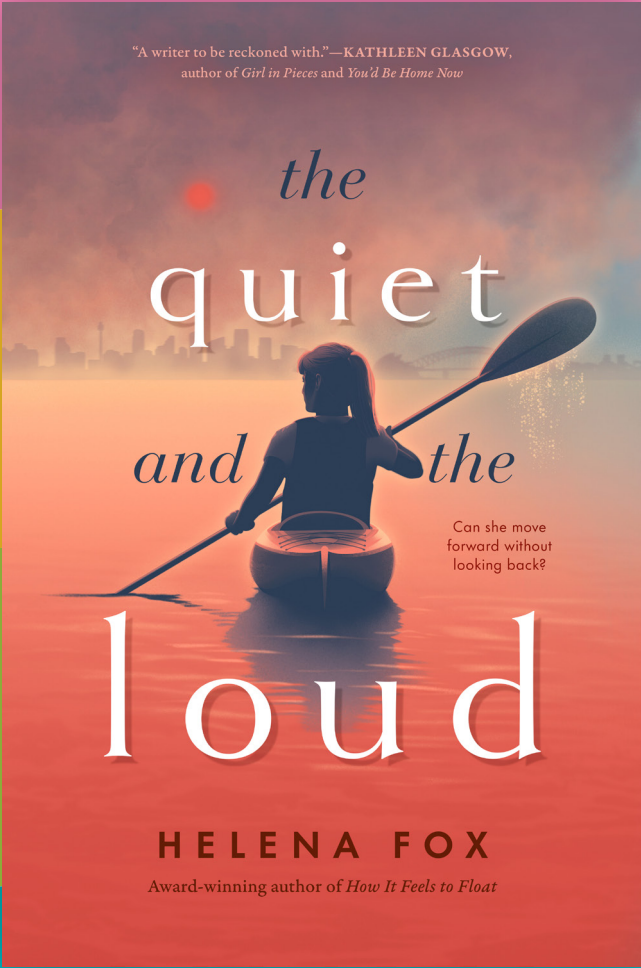
“Uh, sure,” I say, desperate to get away from the conversation. “I’m gonna head to Mr. London’s class now.”

“Smart. We can’t have Miles Wright’s son missing finals!”

Of course not.

The privilege of being the son of the great Miles Wright never, ever ends.

"A writer to be reckoned with."—KATHLEEN GLASGOW,
author of *Girl in Pieces* and *You'd Be Home Now*



the
quiet
and the
loud

Can she move
forward without
looking back?

HELENA FOX

Award-winning author of *How It Feels to Float*

AVAILABLE NOW

1

Cool air. Slight breeze and sun, rising.

Sydney Harbour lies belly up—made of glisten, glass, and water—and I'm on it, in the kayak Mum and my stepmum Mel gave me for my eighteenth birthday. My body snugs the boat like a seed in its pod. My paddles cut and pull, leaving ripples. Above me, a sea hawk spirals; a gull glides, dipping down, and ahead of me, a duck, flipped over, waggles its feet and rummages the wet for breakfast.

The water is polished flat. If I wanted, I could lay my palm on the harbor's skin and rest it there. No big boats go by this early: no ferries, no sailboats, no water taxis. Nothing on the surface but the sheen of early light, a distant clump of rowers, and here and there, a bird.

Below lies everything else:
bull-sharks roaming the muddy dark,
fish and cans and plastic bags,
fallen boats and rusty fishing rods
and all the other lost things.

Behind me, my house on the peninsula drifts out of sight. Flanked by mansions, the house is old, tin-roofed, and jittery. The windows stick, white paint flecks from the eaves, and the barnacled dock at

the end of the yard is slowly sinking into the seabed. The house belongs to Mel—her family has owned it since houses were being built on the peninsula. It hasn't been smashed or remade yet.

Mum, Mel, and my grandfather rattle around the worn house, clacking and pecking at each other. Gramps is eighty-four and always losing something—his teeth, his shirts, his shoes, his pills. He spindles the rooms, circling upstairs, downstairs, shouting. It drives Mel crazy. She's always saying, "Sara, that man scrambles my mind."

"Tell him, don't tell me," Mum always says back.

"He's *your* dad," Mel says.

"He's his own person, Mel."

And round and round they go.

Life in my house is like one of those black-and-white movies where people run fast through one door and out another. Music jangles; everyone's limbs jerk and bolt. My best friend Tess said once, "Your house is like a carnival ride, George."

But I confess: Sometimes I sit in my room, there on the top of the higgledy-piggledy house, stare out the window, and dream of quiet.

I paddle west and upriver. I sweep past sleepy coves and boat shacks, past rotting piers and rowing clubs, past apartment buildings and fancy gold-brick houses with their gold-brick swimming pools. I pass parks and yachts and slatted rocks.

In time, I turn into a bay and pause. I trail one paddle, carving a thin path of bubbles, coasting. A single cloud scooches over the

sky, teasing rain. A crow calls from a tree. I rest the paddles across the boat. And breathe.

My phone buzzes in the front pocket of my life jacket.

It's a message from my father in Seattle.

Georgia, it's Dad. I have some news. Please call me back.

A pulse moves through my body—old, murmuring, like the thrum you feel when tectonic rocks turn over in their sleep. News from Dad could be anything—he's surprised me before.

I don't like surprises. When did we last speak? My birthday, I think. Dad and I don't really talk.

I flick the message away with my thumb.

The sun eases upwards, gathering heat. Trees wave from the park, by the shoreline. The sound is *hush-hush*, a *hellohellohello*, a soft listing in the leaves. I have lain on the grass under those trees before. I've sketched their twisting branches, made patterns on the page.

I close my eyes. Listen to the slap of water against the side of the kayak, listen to the trees.

My phone buzzes again.

I check it. It's Dad. Again.

Georgia. If you could please reply I would appreciate it.

It hasn't even been three minutes.

My stomach squeezes. I should have eaten before I left. Or brought along one of Mum's granola-bar experiments—Mel always brings them whenever we paddle together. "Always be prepared, George," she says. "What if we get marooned?"

My thumb hesitates over the phone. What should I write back?

Sorry, Dad, can't call. Am marooned. Need to use all battery power to Morse-code passing sailors for help.

A jellyfish glides under the boat.

Or: *I'm busy, Dad. I'm paddling to Hawaii. Call you when I get there.*

The crow rattles the air from his faraway tree.

Or: *Dad, listen: I'm in my happy place right now. Do not disturb.*

I put my phone away without replying.

The bay tilts and shivers.

It's too late—I'm disturbed.



The night Dad left me in the middle of a lake, it took a while to get me back.

“George! George!” Mum cried from the shore.

“Mum! Mum!” I cried from the boat.

“*Coooo-ee!*” called Dad. He must have slithered out of the lake and slopped over to Mum.

“Come this way!” Mum waved with her flashlight. She was a reedy voice and a thin pinpoint of light. I wanted to fly over to her like a bird.

But I couldn't *come this way*. I swiped at the lake surface. My oar skipped like a stone. The boat wobbled; I screamed and Mum screamed. We woke all the bugs and all the birds. We woke the sleepy moon. The lake heaved and shivered and I couldn't breathe. I felt crinkly with fear, eaten up. I couldn't stop crying.

I heard a sound then—a boat, coming. A spotlight lit me up. A shadow sat behind the light.

“Hey, darlin', we've got you,” the shadow said. His voice was broad, like a pancake. I couldn't see his face.

“Mum!” I cried.

Another shadow at the back said, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” but his voice sounded gravelly, and my best friend Tess said strangers took people and kept them in cages in their basements and maybe these shadow men were going to kidnap me and keep me in a cage?

The men’s boat bumped against the dinghy. It rocked. I yelped. I saw a hand, reaching—

so I jumped into the lake and swam away.

Water sucked at my legs. My arms flailed, and the monsters rose. The men’s boat followed, the spotlight chasing me.

They were coming! They were coming!

I thrashed away and all around me I felt the fingers of the water pulling at my skin. I could hear the screaming eels, coming to scissor off my flesh.

I gulped in a breath—and gulped in the lake instead.

I choked, coughed. Twisted.

And sank.

Then came the feel of water, the weight of water. My arms rose up. My eyes were open. I could see nothing. I could see *everything*.

A shadow man dove after me like a seal. Before I could die, fingers grabbed my body; I felt a *whoosh* and we rose till our heads broke the surface. The man lifted my face out of the water. I could feel his hands on my skin—a stranger, a *stranger!*—I cried and beat at his hands.

“Leave it alone, you wriggler,” the man shouted, and his eyes shone like stars into mine.

I was hauled onto the flat of the boat. I coughed out lake water

under the empty moon, then lay on my back, blank. Too shocked to cry, too drowned to scream.



The crow calls again.

Aaark.

Aaark.

Aaark.

I look around—

No lake. No night. No strangers, no Dad. Just me and a bird and a bay and a boat. Wind plucks water and sprays me. The hair on my arms stands up.

I breathe in, shake my head to clear my father out. It's time to move and keep moving; you can get stuck sitting still. I pick up the paddles, start turning, when I see a shift on the shore, someone coming from behind the trees and trotting down towards the water.

I squint—it's a girl, I think, wearing a red sundress. She stops, pulls a camera and tripod out of her backpack, sets them up, and now she kicks off her sandals and jumps, fully dressed, into the bay.

Into this water? With the muck and the jellies and secrets and sharks?

Yes. But not too deep; she's okay.

The girl does a handstand in the shallows. Now she flips back upright. Now she's running through the water, kicking up a spray. Now she's doing *cartwheels*.

I can't stop watching. The girl whirls on the beach, drops flying,

sundress riding up. She's like a picture I might draw when I can't sleep. Her dress flaps—it pins itself to her body as she spins.

I seem to have paddled closer. Now I can see the girl's brown skin, her tangled hair and wide shoulders. She's about my age. She's upside down, right-side up. Bright drops flick from her body. She's all movement and muscle, curves and motion. My breath catches, like in those books where they say, "Her breath caught. Her bosom heaved—"

The girl pauses, looks out over the water, spots me and laughs. Her sound shivers the river, tingles me. She lifts her hand and waves. Her face is wide open, her arm like a flag . . .

And I'm waving my hand right back at her.

Why am I waving?

Why am I *staring*?

I drop my hand, scrunch it in my lap. *Très embarrassment*, my friend Laz would say. I turn the kayak, start paddling away. But then, like in those movies where the spaceships are being drawn by some enormous gravitational pull, I slow, and turn back to see the girl.

And she's disappeared.

I look around. How did she leave so fast? Did she duck behind the trees? I paddle forward, almost to the beach, but the girl is nowhere to be found.

I even look up, in case she's in the air and flying.

But if she is, she's going much too fast to see.

2

I'm out of the bay, heading west again, upriver. My paddles cut and pull. I fly over water, *quickquick*. It feels so good to move fast, to feel wind and spray, to think about a girl cartwheeling, to not think about Dad, to feel the sun on my back—

My phone buzzes again. This time, it's ringing. The *burr* vibrates up to my chest.

Is it Dad? Done with waiting already? What will he say? What will *I* say?

I check.

It's Tess.

"You up?" she says.

"Yeah. I'm in the kayak—I just saw—"

"I'm so fucking tired!" she says. "Got my assignment in, with like five minutes to spare. And then the baby kicked all night."

Tess is six months older than me. She's almost finished her first year of uni, unlike me, who is not at uni—I am on a gap year, which Tess didn't love because it meant we wouldn't graduate at the same time. Also, Tess is pregnant. *Resplendent with child*, Laz likes to say.

In about a month, Tess will be a mum. I've known her since we were babies, and now she's about to launch an actual baby out of her actual vagina.

I can't even imagine.

"Hey, Tess, I'm in the middle—" I start.

“Want to get coffee?”

“Um. Sure. When?”

“Now. Well, like, soon?”

“I’m paddling.”

“Well, I need coffee. And I’m starving—there’s nothing good to eat here. Come to our café at eight?”

I look around. The water hums. The sun arcs upward. Birds flit, dip, duck under. I’d have to sprint back downriver, then run to the café to make it in time.

“There will be pastries, George,” says Tess. “When have you ever said no to a pastry?”

That would be never. Tess knows all my wants and weaknesses.

“I might be late,” I say, wavering.

“That’s okay. I’ll wait.”

I give in. “All right. I’m coming.”

“Great! See you in a sec.” Tess hangs up.

I pocket my phone. Turn the kayak.

The sun calls: *Leaving so soon?*

The water says: *But we were just getting started.*

I ignore them. I dig the paddles in and run the river path home.

Tess and our friend Laz are in the corner of the café when I get there, drinks already on the table.

“Perfect timing! Here you go,” Laz says, pushing a latte towards me.

“Hey, George.” Tess shoves over the sugar bowl.

“My heroes.” I bend and plant kisses on their cheeks.

Tess makes a face. “Yuck, you’re sweaty.”

“Well, duh,” I say.

“That’s what happens when you run, dear,” says Laz to Tess.

She sticks her tongue out at him.

I peel off my wind-jacket and sit. I’ve jogged from home. I didn’t have time to shower or change. I dragged the kayak onto the dock, ran up the side path out to the road—past the picket fences and the park and the Johnson’s dog, *bark-barking*—zigzagged right and down and left and up, and now I’m here. Sweaty and ready for coffee.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” I say to Laz. I take a spoon and start sugaring my drink.

“You didn’t?” Laz looks over at Tess. “You didn’t tell her I was coming?”

“I didn’t tell her because I didn’t know,” she says. “You woke up after I rang.”

“Oh, you slept over?” I say to Laz.

“Yeah. It was horror movie night.” Laz stares over at Tess. “As though I wouldn’t want to come.”

“Sometimes you sleep till the afternoon, Laz.” Tess flicks her red hair; it ripples like it’s on fire.

“I only did that *one* time.”

“Well. I was hungry. I needed to eat—”

I sip my coffee—it tastes of sugar, milk, and just a hint of coffee. “Perfect,” I say, interrupting the Laz-and-Tess show.

“You’re welcome!” Laz says, and grins at me. He’s ridiculously beautiful. Smooth, tanned skin, sleek Greek cheekbones, and

gray-blue eyes. I'd probably swoon if I were into boys. And maybe he'd flirt with me if he were into girls.

Tess leans over the table, her hair swishing forward. She mock-whispers: "Also. The pastries are on their way."

"Nice!" I say.

Tess grins. And it's like she's clicked her fingers and summoned them, because a plate arrives just then—six pastries, all chocolatey and shiny.

I lean towards Tess and lay my palms on her cheeks. "Marry me."

"You're too young," Tess says. She grabs a pastry and rips it in half. "Anyway"—she points to herself—"not gay."

"Close enough. Gay adjacent." I point to myself and Laz.

"Adjacent. Ha," Laz says to me. "Her overlap length is huge. Remember that girl last year?"

"Overlap length? Don't start your engineer speak, Lazaros. It's too early," says Tess.

But Laz continues. "Imagine you're a beam, Tess, crossed with significant length over another beam. That's you and that girl at the pub last year." Laz sits back. "Your gay overlap is strong, my friend."

"Jesus," Tess says, shaking her head.

She and Laz start talking over each other, as usual.

"It wasn't like anything even—" says Tess.

"Dude, you basically—" says Laz.

"Let me talk, shithead," says Tess.

"Same to you, lumpy," says Laz.

Here we go.

Laz and I met in art class three years ago; I introduced him to Tess. Within seconds, she decided Laz was her emotional twin, or emotional punching bag, or something in between, and Laz decided the same. Watching them is like watching a TV series that never ends.

“Anyway,” says Laz, putting a hand in front of Tess’s face. “This is not important. I have news.”

“What?” Tess says. She has chocolate on her cheek from the pastry.

“Adesh told me he loved me last night.” Laz wipes the chocolate off with a thumb.

“He did?” I say.

Laz nods, grinning. Adesh, Laz’s boyfriend, has been in the picture for four months. They met through Laz’s climate group at uni. They’ve gone on marches, posted flyers, shouted in corporate atriums together. The two of them are pretty inseparable. It’s impressive Laz is even here with us now.

Tess says, “So what did you say?”

Laz smiles. “I said, ‘Same.’”

“Awwww,” Tess and I say together.

Laz looks soft and vulnerable for a second. Then he says, “So, when are you losers going to catch up?”

Tess chucks a chunk of pastry at him. “I don’t want to be with anyone right now.”

“Liar.” Laz picks the pastry off his lap and pops it into his mouth.

“Not lying.”

“I’m all good too,” I tell him.

“Liars, both of you,” says Laz.

“Well, I met someone at the shops yesterday,” says Tess. “We had a moment.”

Laz leans back in his chair. “Was that before or after he saw your elephant-sized arse?”

Tess frowns. She squints at her half-eaten pastry. “Okay, I know I’m enormous right now . . . but they said not to worry about the weight gain—” She stops, looks uncertain.

A darkwater feeling hums inside my body. I touch Tess’s hand. “You’re super pregnant, Tess. You look totally normal. And anyway, what’s wrong with having a big arse?” I stare at Laz.

Tess stares too.

Laz twitches under our laser beams. “Sorry. Shit. That was probably a dick thing to say?”

“Yeah,” says Tess.

Laz reaches over, squeezes Tess’s hand. “Sorry, T.”

“Thanks.”

“Really though, I am.”

Tess lifts her shoulders, drops them. “Don’t worry. It’s fine.” *Fine* comes out glittery, like Tess has just tried to polish it, make it shiny enough we can talk about something else.

So I talk about something else. “Hey, so I saw this gir—”

Laz’s phone rings. He glances down. “Oh! It’s Adesh!” He gets up, motioning to the phone. “He auditioned for this play and he’s been waiting to hear—” Laz presses answer. “Hey, lover,” he says, and walks outside to the café veranda.

Tess looks at me. “You saw a who?”

Oh good. She was listening. “A girl. By the river. While I was out in the kayak before.”

“Oh, yeah? What was she doing out at dawn? Burying a body?”

“Cartwheels,” I say.

Tess tilts her head. “Really?”

“In the water. It was cool,” I say, and I’m about to tell Tess about the way the girl’s sundress flapped and clung, and the way the water flicked from the girl’s skin, and the way time seemed to slow—but now Laz is bouncing back to our table, and he’s saying “We’ve got to go! It’s an emergency!”

“It is?” says Tess. Instinctively, she puts her hand on her belly.

“It’s Adesh. He just got into the play! He’s going to get naked. There’ll be a horse, I think? I can’t remember the rest. Anyway. He wants to celebrate.” Laz raises an eyebrow. “If you know what I mean.”

“*Riiiiight*,” says Tess, nodding.

“Now?” I say.

“Mmm-hm,” says Laz. “At his place. Before my uni lecture.”

“Okay. Well, have fun,” says Tess.

“Um. Yeah. The thing is . . . I need a ride.” He looks at Tess, stares into her soul.

“From me.” Tess stares back, unblinking.

“Always so smart.” Laz grins and taps Tess’s nose.

“Is it far?”

“It’s almost at your place. Just a little bit sideways from your place. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes out of your way. It’s nothing.”

Tess and I look at each other. Laz’s sense of direction isn’t prize-winning. There are stories we could tell.

Tess sighs. “All right,” she says. “You better not get us lost. I’m so baby-brained, I might crash into a tree.”

“You’re not going to crash into anything,” says Laz, pulling Tess out of her chair. “I trust you with my life.”

I get up and notice the two and a half leftover pastries. “Who wants these?” I point to the plate.

Laz shakes his head. “You take them. Too full. We ordered too much, Tess. We don’t even have money and we always order too much.”

“They were two for one!”

“They were?” says Laz.

“Yeah—they were a day old. Maybe two? Bargain.”

“Seriously? Yuck.”

“Come on, you couldn’t tell the difference—”

“You could have told me!”

They’ve turned for the door; they’re walking away.

I wrap the pastries in napkins and ask at the counter for a bag. I’ll have them later when I’m drawing, or doing one of the random online uni courses I started because my gap year got boring, or after my next paddling session . . . or at some moment in the undefined future when eating a leftover, unknown-days-old pastry will feel like a great idea.

On the café veranda, Tess jiggles her keys, beeps open the car. Pokes my shoulder with a finger.

“Want a ride?”

“Um.” I hesitate. My house is only a fifteen-minute jog away. If I ride with Tess and Laz, I’ll have to listen to all their noise . . .

I look out at the road, the space above the road. The air beats with promise.

“George?” says Laz, already by the passenger door. “An answer today, please.”

“Oh! Uh. No, thanks. I really like—” I begin.

Tess laughs. “Fine, go on then, weirdo,” she says, and pecks me on the cheek.

I glance down at her belly. “You could come with me if you like,” I say. “I’ve heard it’s good for people in their millionth trimester to have a little run. Laz could drive the car. Shout out the window. Be your hype man.”

“I could do those things.” Laz nods.

“Very funny,” Tess says. She eases herself into the driver’s seat.

Laz grins. “No? Okay. See you tomorrow, Georgie.” He waves and climbs in.

I wave and watch them drive away. The radio is blaring already, music thumping out of the open windows. I can see Laz’s and Tess’s hands moving as they talk. Notes thrum and shimmer—I feel their colors in the air. Down the road they go. The car goes left; the colors turn, and follow the car out of sight.

CHASING

"Rod Pulido delivers the ultimate one-two punch: bare-knuckled, bruising honesty wrapped in humor, sincerity, and sweetness."
—**BECKY ALBERTALLI**, bestselling author of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

**ROD
PULIDO**



PACQUIAO

AVAILABLE NOW

ROUND 1

Whenever I text Brandon from school, I almost feel like a superhero. Not that there's anything super heroic about texting my boyfriend, but it puts me in danger of exposing my secret identity.

I also get to flex my poetry powers. My thumbs hover over my phone like two asps about to strike. A flurry of tapping follows. I read the text over, and, with a groan, delete it from existence. For the past few days, this has been my pattern: *write, groan, delete, repeat*. Bran deserves more—especially today—but I don't have a hell of a lot of options. Or time. A few more tries and the piece is more or less complete:

*Like the Bat-Signal at night
I'll come running when you call
You are my one and only
Just like Nick Fury's eyeball*

I count the number of syllables, making sure there are twenty-eight total. Four lines, seven syllables each. The structure of the Filipino poetry form *tanaga*.

“Aw, comic book fanboys in love. Happy anniversary, B!” Rosie, a strikingly pretty Latina and my best bud, plops onto

the seat beside me and brushes back her dyed-orange drapes of hair.

“Announce it over the loudspeaker, why don’t ya?” I whisper. With a sigh, I tap send, and the text flies out into the ether. At the surrounding lunch tables, the usual goes down: chatting, eating, littering. Thankfully, nobody seems to have noticed Rosie’s characteristic outburst.

“Sorry, mi amigo.” She lowers her voice to a near-acceptable level. “Hey, I made you something to mark the occasion. *Relax*. I didn’t use your names.”

She pulls a black picture frame from her bag and sets it between us on the table. My breath catches. It’s a painting of a dark purple heart set against a backdrop of blue and black swirls. Written across the heart in calligraphy are the initials B + B. It’s incredibly detailed, gorgeous, thoughtful. Before I can thank Rosie, someone else cuts in.

“Who’s B-plus-B?”

Shit. Right off, I know the owner of the shrill voice: Charlotte Wilkes—the nosiest girl in school, possibly all of MacArthur Park. A one-teen TMZ.

She whips her platinum-blond hair over her shoulder and takes a seat across from us without being invited. “What, your nerdy ass finally nab a girlfriend, Bobby?”

My stomach clenches, but I’m ready for her question. Been ready for months, practicing my answer out loud ad nauseam in front of the bathroom mirror, in the shower, probably even in my sleep. “I actually do have a girlfriend. She’s homeschooled, she’s a total geek, and she’s cute.”

The key to selling a good lie is to cloak it in layers of truth.

Charlotte leans in closer. “Uh-huh. So what’s the name of this cute geek of a girlfriend nobody’s ever seen or heard of?”

“Brandy.”

She squints, game for the challenge. “Where’d you meet?”

“Where else do geeks meet? The comic shop.” Also the truth.

“Right. Got a pic of her? Let’s see.” She grabs for my cell, but I slip it into my pocket. Okay, I wasn’t ready for that one. My phone has a few selfies of Brandon and me; no way can I let her see them.

“Um, we don’t—she doesn’t like taking pics.” My eyes dip slightly. “She’s kind of shy.”

Charlotte smirks. “Sure she is.”

“Hey, chica,” Rosie says, “back off with the interrogation.”

“Yeah,” I say, “don’t you have a Gossipers Anonymous meeting to get to?”

“Whatever.” Charlotte’s distracted by a gathering at the center of the quad, and she dashes toward the commotion.

Air shoots from my mouth. *Close one.* The knot in my stomach starts to loosen, but it quickly tightens again. In the middle of the crowd, a giant student repeatedly pummels a smaller boy with spiky blond hair. Freshman, from the looks of it.

“Fuck that little faggot up!” somebody yells.

I wince at the slur, even though hearing it at school has become a regular occurrence. There are some words I never want to get used to.

Onlookers cheer, while others barely take notice, numb to the routine. He floors the boy with a punch to his jaw, making him spit blood. Possibly a tooth. Before any teachers arrive, the

bell clangs off-key, and the larger boy disappears through the stream of bodies.

Rosie sighs. “Another peaceful day at Westlake High.”

As a few students help the battered boy to his feet, blood spills from his lips—a graphic reminder of why my secret identity can never get out.

I rise and shove the frame Rosie made into my backpack. The gift really is amazing; Rosie’s so thoughtful. Just wish she’d been thoughtful enough to give it to me anywhere but school.

At the end of the day, I hop on my bike—a cherry-red seven-speed—and tear off campus like I stole something. Back in 2008, when I was only nine years old, Dad gave me this bike right before he died. He’d used it every day to get to his job at the laundromat. Without this bike, our family would not have eaten. As he lay withering away in bed, the cancer shredding his stomach, he said he wished he could have given me more. That memory slips into my thoughts every time I go for a ride.

I pedal over cracked concrete, past brick walls decorated with various gang tags, then hang a right onto the obstacle course of chaos known as Alvarado Street. A red SUV swerves and nearly clips me. The driver blasts his horn—’cause it’s *my* fault he texts and drives. They say driving in L.A. will make even the most chill person freak out. I wouldn’t know, but somehow I doubt it’s as terrifying as biking through it. I wouldn’t risk the trip without a good reason.

Brandon Elpusan is better than a good reason.

The shadows of the 101 Freeway swallow me as I ride under

the overpass, through the shanty tent town. My body slumps at the sight of so many families who are even poorer than Mom and me living on the street. A few blocks later, I cut into the hilly residential of Silver Lake, where the streets are cleaner, the homes larger, the graffiti nonexistent. Silver Lake sits barely three miles from MacArthur Park, but it's a whole other world. A richer, whiter one. More than just the 101 divides the two neighborhoods.

Five minutes later, I coast up to the Villain's Lair, my favorite comic book shop in L.A. Six months ago to the day, I met Brandon here. He'd just started working as a cashier after school, and we hit it off right away. We talked for nearly an hour that first day and had a highly informative discussion regarding the age-old question: *Why don't the Hulk's pants rip when he transforms?* We decided on gamma-irradiated stretchy pants.

I chain up my bike and open the glass door. Posters of iconic heroes dominate the walls—Wonder Woman, Teen Titans, the Avengers—along with lesser-known characters like Deena Pilgrim and Savage Dragon. I breathe in the familiar scent of lemon air freshener and new comic books, and the stress of the school day fades away.

Bran leans over the cashier counter, sporting a *Dawn of the Dead* tee, the sleeves tight against his lean arms. Like me, he's Filipino, but his brown complexion is a shade lighter—probably because he spends so much time indoors at the Lair. The boy could use more sun, but other than that, he's perfect.

He brushes back his dark bangs and greets me with a dimpled smile that makes my palms sweat. "Welcome to the Villain's Lair. May I help you?"

I grin back. “Hope so. I’m looking for a dope gift for that special geek in my life.”

He furrows his brow in that cute way he does. “Right. Well, we just got in some super-cool hardcover editions: *All-Star Superman*, *Powers: Who Killed Retro Girl?*, *Civil War*.”

“Hmm, hardcovers?” I chuckle. “He’s not *that* special.”

“Really now? Okay, you know what makes the best gift? Poetry. Writing your own, I mean. It’s personal and shows you put real thought into it, instead of just being lazy and buying something off the shelf.”

“That’s what I keep saying!” I lean in closer. “So what’d you get me?”

“Bought you something off the shelf.” Bran gives me a grin that makes my earlobes warm and pulls a flat rectangular package from behind the counter. “Happy anniversary, B.”

It’s obviously a comic book, but which one? Out of all the millions of comics in the world, what single issue did he pick to mark our big day? My fingertips tingle. I tear off the wrapping paper to reveal *Alpha Flight*, issue #106.

I’ve read it before as a reprint, so I immediately recognize the issue. Alpha Flight is Marvel Comics’s designated Canadian superhero team—they’re basically the D-list Avengers with maple leaves across their chests. On the cover, in mid-scream, is the mutant speedster Northstar. Issue 106 deals with him saving an abandoned baby who has AIDS, and ends with Northstar coming out as Marvel’s first gay superhero. Landmark stuff.

I bite my lip, crossing my arms so I don’t fling myself into Brandon’s. The first out queer superhero—it’s perfect. Still, a nagging thought wiggles into the back of my brain: *Is he trying*

to tell me something? He's out to his family and friends—has been for a couple years. Me? Besides Brandon, exactly two people know: Rosie and my mom.

“Thanks, Bran. This is incredibly sweet.”

“Of course,” Brandon says. “And I really love the poem, B. It's a Marvel/DC epic crossover in four lines.” He means it. And he doesn't seem to mind that I'm so dirt poor I can't afford a real gift. He tries to take my hand, but a stranger walks up to the counter with his purchases. I back away and let Bran ring up the customer.

Bran's boss, Larry, the owner and manager of the Lair, is pretty laid back and always lets me hang out—as long as I help out around the store. While Bran works, I stock shelves, chat with the regulars, and try to stay out of the way.

A few hours later, closing time arrives. Bran activates the store alarm and hits the lights, and I follow him to the front entrance.

I want to do something to mark the moment, to show Bran what I have yet to say in words. *What the hell, the store is empty.* Before he can open the door, I take his hand, lean in, and kiss him. Softly at first. He flinches in surprise because I'm never affectionate in public, but then he pulls me close. Adrenaline courses through me, and my chest heaves. Is that his pulse thumping or mine? Even in the dim light coming inside from the streetlamp, I see him blush. It's catching; my cheeks flush.

Bran's lips split into a grin. “Now that was a good present. So what did you think of mine?” I follow him out to the deserted sidewalk. The night is gorgeous, as smoggy, starless Los Angeles nights go.

Bran tries to take my hand, but I stuff it inside my pocket.

“You mean the comic book hinting that I should just announce my complete gayness to the world already? Not too subtle is what I think.”

“Dude, I should be able to hold my boyfriend’s hand when we go for a walk.”

“Easy for you to say in the queer haven of Silver Lake. Not gonna fly in my hood.”

“Come on. It’s not that different from here. People are just people.”

I stare at Bran. Sometimes I can’t believe he’s so naive about certain things. “Yeah, well, you don’t go to War Zone High, where there’s a fight every other day. And what if someone from my school sees us? What’s my motto?”

He sighs. “Self-preservation.”

“And it’s a damn good one.” I climb onto my bike and almost ride off, but a tugging in my chest stops me. I can’t stand the thought of leaving on a bad note, especially today. “Give me time, all right?”

He breaks eye contact and sighs, but eventually nods. “You know, you said the same exact thing back on our three-month anniversary.”

His words make me wince. *How much more time will I need? And how much longer will he continue to wait for me?* The questions linger like the cold breeze on my neck as I pedal away.

Despite nearly dozing off during the ride, I make it home okay. To say our apartment is small would be charitable. It’s basically two bedrooms the size of walk-in closets, a tiny kitchen with a used restaurant table for two, and a living room fur-

nished with a dingy couch Mom found on the curb five years ago. It's sparse, but it's home. Right now, it's an empty home. As usual, Mom won't be back from waitressing until well after midnight.

I down a plate of leftover rice and chicken adobo for dinner while trying not to fall asleep. I accidentally bite into one of the tiny black peppers, and it gives me a much-needed jolt. After eating, I wade through twenty problems of algebra homework, then belly flop into bed beneath a poster of my childhood hero, boxing champ Manny "Pacman" Pacquiao. It's the only thing decorating my walls.

As sleep begins to overtake me, the final thoughts that sprinkle my mind are of Brandon. How his scent reminds me of comic books and long bike rides. How he brushes back his bangs like a curtain, revealing the shine and warmth in his eyes. How I would do almost anything for him—except, it would seem, come out.

My eyelids blink open to the wail of the alarm. The clock reads 7:24 a.m.

And I'm late.

I rush through my morning routine at triple speed, skipping breakfast and a shower. On my way out, I pass Mom, asleep on the couch, her uniform a map of condiment stains. Another late night of waiting tables for her. I'd love to actually speak to her, but she needs her rest. I peck her on the forehead and let her snooze.

My favorite time to bike through the neighborhood is in the

early morning. The air is cool, and fewer cars are on the road. My mind wanders to Rosie and her gift, then to Brandon and that kiss. *Damn.*

Pretty sure I love him. I should've said it. It was the perfect time to say it.

I pop a mini wheelie up the curb and speed into the school lot. Without coming to a full stop, I hop off my bike and guide it into the rack.

At the west double-door entrance, the metal detector wand declares me weaponless, and I pass through with five minutes to spare. Enough time to unload my books at my locker.

Up ahead, a crowd clogs up traffic—probably another pointless fight. I break through the gathering and stop short. My heart booms like a bass drum in my chest. Scrawled across my locker door in bright red letters are the words: BOBBY AGBAYANI IS A FUCKING FAGGOT!

I read the slur again and again, my pulse clicking like a metronome on high speed. Sweat forms across my forehead as I try to process how this could have happened.

“This is bullshit,” I say through clenched teeth.

Heads turn from the graffiti over to me. They're all wondering if it's true. Most have already made up their minds. Their expressions say, *Of course it is. Knew it the whole time.*

My skin burns. Wish I could crawl into my locker and slam the door behind me forever. I rack my brain. I have to do something, anything, to fix this—or I am dead.

“Who wrote this?” I say, struggling not to yell. The crowd stares without answering. Any one of them could be the perp.

Giggles come from the back: Charlotte and her clique of gossip mongers.

“You do this?” I snap.

She throws me major side-eye. “Oh, don’t be accusing me of shit, Bobby. You the one everyone’s wondering about.”

“So, you a gayboy or what?” someone yells from the back.

I scan the crowd of faces, some smug, a few sympathetic. All want an answer straight from my lips. I remember my rehearsed lie. It’s the only thing that can save me now.

Screw it.

“Yeah, I have a *boyfriend*. He’s homeschooled, he’s a total geek, and he’s *damn* hot.”

ROUND 2

The crowd's in an uproar as I plod away. *What in the name of Thor, God of Thunder, did I just do?*

I'm actually out.

Like, completely.

This was not the plan. Not that there was a plan. But I was robbed of the decision, the choice of the how and the when.

"Told you," Charlotte says. "Boy's a total butt pirate."

Some dude makes a crack—something about packing fudge. Hilarious. If you're going to be a homophobic douchebag, at least be original about it.

My eyelid flutters out of control like a strobe light. Some anonymous asshole just drew a huge target on my forehead—in a place where people love to take shots. On the plus side, Brandon will be happy. So there's that. Maybe I'd laugh if my jaw would stop chattering.

When I enter algebra class, Rosie rushes up to me. "Hey, you okay?" The first bell hasn't even rung, and she's already heard the news. Hooray for texting.

"Not here," I tell her.

I hurry to my seat and hide behind my propped-up binder until class starts. Unfortunately, Eric Ocampo, a Pinoy kid who sits directly behind me, doesn't catch my dire need for privacy.

When we were in third grade, we'd have playdates at the park, even a few sleepovers. That was before Eric turned into a meth head. Now he's just another screwed-up kid who peeks over my shoulder for the answers. Which is doubly annoying because his breath reeks like burnt plastic.

"Ay, pare, that was messed up," Eric says, using the Filipino word for friend. He nudges my arm. "What they wrote on your locker?"

"Yep." I manage.

"Ay, I got your back, bruh." He holds out a fist over my shoulder.

A sigh slips through my lips, but I bump his fist with my own. "Good to know."

"I know you ain't bakla."

The Tagalog gay slur is another gut punch to my psyche. I shut my eyes and pretend I'm sipping an ube milkshake on a Hawaiian beach, far from the special hell that has become my life.

Eric leans over my shoulder, and his breath makes me gag. "Ay, you do the homework? What you get for the first page?"

I try to follow along with Mrs. Jennings's lesson, but instead of the numbers on the board, my mind dwells on the scarlet letters across my locker. By second period, the word will have spread over the entire school—but that doesn't mean I have to leave the damn announcement up.

After Jennings finishes her lesson, I raise my hand and ask to use the restroom. She usually frowns on bathroom breaks, but I'm part of the minority that actually does her assignments.

On my way out, Rosie raises her brow at me. I look past her.

The halls are empty, quieter than a morgue at midnight. Appropriate, since I feel like I'm a pallbearer at my own funeral. I hurry by my locker without looking at it and exit the building. The morning light splits the clouds and hits me in the eyes. I shield my face and hurry across the quad to Mr. Hopkins's office near the basketball gym.

The door is open, and classical music filters out from a beat-up boom box. I peek my head in. Every kind of cleaning solution assaults my nostrils. Hopkins sits at his desk, filling out paperwork. He's a short, thin white man known for the raggedy Lakers cap perpetually attached to his noggin.

I knock. "Hello? Mr. Hopkins? Um, someone wrote all over my locker. Will you clean it up? Please?"

"Good morning." He rises, extends his hand. "I'd love to help you, um . . ."

"Bobby." We shake hands; his grip is firm, but not imposing.

"Bobby, I'd love to help, but I need to get down to the boys' restroom and clean up some graffiti. Write your locker number down, and I'll try to get to it tomorrow."

Tomorrow? Hell no, that is not going to fly. "You sure you can't get to it now? What they wrote is, um, pretty messed up."

"Sorry, son, but someone wrote, 'Principal Peterson, your lunch is served' right above the toilet. In huge block letters. So, you can imagine that kind of takes priority."

I try to stifle a laugh with my hand, but I'm not entirely successful.

Hopkins turns off the music, tips his hat to me. "You have yourself a good day."

Have yourself a good day? This guy has to be the most polite janitor ever. Does he hold open the toilet-stall door for you too?

Hopkins pushes a cart full of cleaning supplies outside the Dutch door and shuts the bottom half.

Splinters line the top edge of the door, which would make a suitable deterrent to most trespassers. Unfortunately, I'm more desperate than most.

Hopkins continues down the path toward the gymnasium, humming the classical piece. I wait until he rounds the corner, then climb over the door, which earns me a lovely splinter in the tip of my right index finger. Perfect. I ignore the throbbing pain and grab an abrasive sponge and an all-purpose cleaner off the shelf.

Back at my locker, I picture the vandal in my firing sights and shoot the hateful words with the spray setting on wide. I scrub the message, putting my elbow and all my built-up hostility into it. Neither the ink nor my anger fades. *Damn it.* Whoever did this sure picked the right marker for the job.

I spray the door again. Rosie rounds the corner, clutching a bathroom pass.

"Figured you'd be here. Jennings was ready to call the office. Lucky for you she said I could wrangle you in." She puts her hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

I shrug, continue scrubbing. "Yeah, I planned to post a coming-out notice on the school website anyway. Something short, tasteful. This just saves me the hassle."

She leans against the lockers. "What happened? How'd it get out?"

“*What happened?* You gave me that frame at school, and Charlotte figured it all out and shifted her mouth into overdrive.”

“Hold up. You’re blaming this on me?”

“You got a better explanation?”

“Yeah, maybe you aren’t as slick as you think you are. Maybe somebody realized you don’t talk about girls’ asses like other dudes, or when we’re talking you actually look at my eyes, not my boobs.”

Rosie might have a point, but no way am I going to admit it. Not when she’s acting salty.

“Or maybe nobody’s noticed I don’t stare at your boobs ’cause your boobs aren’t as great as you think.”

Her mouth drops open. “Not cool, Agbayani.” Rosie storms off down the hall.

Okay, she didn’t deserve that, and I probably shouldn’t have pissed off my only real friend right about now. Sometimes I can be such a d-hole.

Yep, *best day ever*.

I scrub harder and wish I could erase “faggot” not only from my locker but from the vocabulary of the entire world. Not that it would do any good. Somebody somewhere would come up with another evil word to replace it.

The bell rings, and students filter out into the halls. The graffiti has slightly faded, but the words still linger, ghostlike. The stares and murmurs begin again. I open my locker, toss the cleaner and sponge inside, and dash back to class.

When I get back to algebra, the room’s filling up with the

next period. Mrs. Jennings arches her brow at me but says nothing. I probably just used up all my good-student cred with her. Can't worry about that now. I jot down tonight's homework from the board, grab my backpack, and rush to my next class.

At lunch, I hide out at a back table in the library, secluded near the stacks. The library, like most of the school's facilities, is barely functional. It boasts two archaic computers that take the better part of an hour to load, plus three stacks of bookshelves lined with outdated reference materials and moldy textbooks. The library is less a place of research and study and more a lunchtime refuge for the outcasts of Westlake High—of which I'm apparently now a member.

My name floats through the room in not-so-guarded whispers. The shade is palpable. At a table of lowly freshmen, one kid stares at me, says something to a couple of his friends, and the whole lot cracks up. Yes, even here among the Westlake High pariahs, I'm the object of scrutiny and ridicule.

Tonight's homework has piled up after four periods. But instead of tackling quadratic equations, I work on a tanaga for Rosie. Hopefully it'll get her to forgive me. After a false start in which I fail to find a word that rhymes with "douche nozzle," the four lines are complete.

*I'm sorry I was evil
Like Loki and Magneto
If you would please forgive me
I'll buy you a burrito*

Okay, so I'm no Lin-Manuel Miranda, but it'll do. I rhymed a Mexican fast-food staple with a megalomaniac mutant. That has to count for something. I punch send and break out my Algebra II textbook.

Fifteen minutes later, Rosie hasn't replied. Guess she's making me sweat it out. Ugh. Can't say I blame her.

"What kind of a burrito? And don't say no pinche Taco Bell." Rosie looms in front of me, arms folded.

"El Charro's veggie burrito with bell peppers, rice, and guac?"

"Extra guac."

"Of course."

"And my boobs?"

I can't withhold a smirk. "Oh, so spectacular. I can feel the gay slipping away just looking at them."

"Okay then." She grabs a seat beside me and pulls out her algebra book.

For the remainder of lunch, we go through the homework. Rosie isn't the best at math, so I explain a few problems to her. I've been her unofficial math tutor since we first started hanging out in junior high. I've always felt safer with Rosie, so it's more than a fair trade-off. Hanging with her is probably why people didn't mess with me before. The prettiest girl in school won't date you if you punk her best friend.

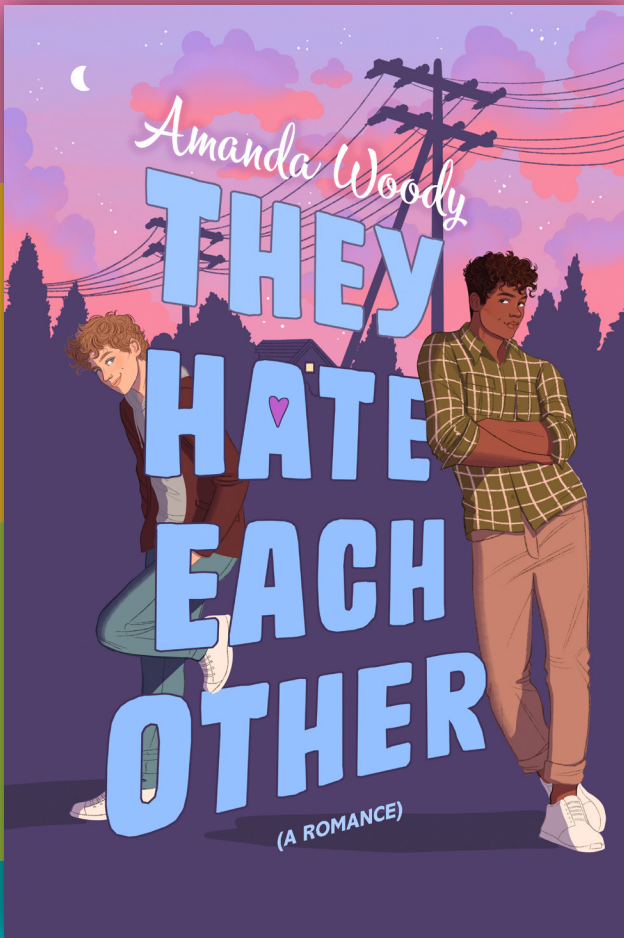
As I explain a problem, Rosie's attention wanes and she drops her pencil in between the pages of her textbook.

"What's up?" I ask.

She averts her eyes before answering. "Sorry for being my

usual loudmouth self. Do you really think it was Charlotte who outed you?”

“I don’t know. Forget about it. Shouldn’t have blamed you.” I scan the room. A couple of students eye me; their smirks make my face flush. “Anyway, knowing this school, it could’ve been anyone.”



AVAILABLE NOW

DYLAN

Jonah Collins is dancing on my kitchen table, and I think . . . yes.

I think I'm about to lose my shit.

I'm impressed I've been holding it together so well. My house has been infested with uninvited partygoers since the last homecoming song, and I've been running around, scrubbing drink stains out of the carpet and picking up after sloppy classmates. Hanna and I only invited a handful of people, so why is half the class here? A thick, bulging vein has been pulsing in my temple for two hours, dangerously close to detonating.

Then, I see him. On my furniture. Dancing to the beat of the music, surrounded by his usual crowd of cheering onlookers.

I stop in my tracks. Inhale. Exhale. Find peace, Dylan.

Jonah is spilling his drink over the rim of his Solo cup. His homecoming tie is wrapped around his forehead, and his pasty white face is flushed, probably from the amount of alcohol he's been looting from the drink table. He pulls Andre up next to him, and they start grinding, and—

No.

I storm through the living room, squirming around people who are hunched with hilarity because, *haha, Jonah Collins is making an ass of himself again, and everything he does makes us laugh, even when it's not really funny!*

I wrestle my way to the inner part of the circle and glare up at them. When Andre sees my expression, he squawks, scrambling down. "I'm sorry!" he cries out. The edges of his dark brown forehead and low drop

fade sparkle with sweat, and he's giving me puppy eyes. "Jo-Jo made me do it!"

Andre's sober. That's the power Jonah wields over people—the natural ability to make them sink to his level.

"Go find your girlfriend," I snap at him, before turning my attention back to Jonah. I wonder if she's still ushering people away from the staircase leading upstairs. Regardless, I need her, because Hanna is the only person Jonah listens to.

"Go easy on him," Andre pleads. "He's wasted out of his mind—"

I shoot him another glare that makes him gulp and sends him skittering into the throng behind us.

"Andre?" Jonah whirls around, apparently just now realizing his best friend is no longer grinding up against his back. More liquid sloshes onto the tablecloth, and it takes all my willpower not to wrench it out from under him. "Where'd you . . . ?"

His sharp gray eyes fall to mine. Just like that, his distressed expression flips, and his lip pulls into a grin.

"Oh," he draws. "It's Prissy Prince himself!"

A hush falls over the crowd. As the focus in the room shifts to me, my muscles tighten like springs. People always get quiet to watch a spectacle between Jonah Collins and Dylan Ramírez. Even if it's usually just Jonah screaming obscene things while I resist flinging him through a window.

"Come to ruin the fun?" Jonah tips his cup into his mouth. Half the drink misses his lips and spills onto his button-down. "As is required in the killjoy job description?"

An "ooh" echoes around the crowd.

"Get down," I mutter through my teeth.

“Two more minutes. Just two more, okay?” Jonah asks, swaying and giggling.

My heart beats against my throat, pumping blood into my head until I’m seeing red. Why? Why does this egotistical jerk cause a scene everywhere he goes? Always running around, leeching attention without a care for anyone but himself. Trying to pick fights with me, as if he’d last five seconds.

“Get off my table,” I say, seething, “before I drag you off.”

“But you would *never*,” he says in mock sternness. “Everyone keeps saying you’re this amazing, fan-fucking-tastic guy. Like, a real stand-up gentleman.”

Rage is swelling in my chest. The audience is already cheering him on. Because everyone loves Jonah. He says everything with such confidence, you can’t help but believe him. Root for him. Unless you’re me, and you have to deal with his personality on a daily basis.

I don’t know what I’m going to do next—the number of eyes burning into my face makes me want to slink under the table and hide. Suddenly, though, a voice draws our attention.

“Jonah.”

Hanna Katsuki is standing at the edge of the table. She looks exactly like she did before the dance, her long black hair curled against the rosy undertones of her shoulders like a princess’s, her royal blue dress smooth and unruffled. She’s swirling a glass of vodka and Sprite, her weary gaze focused on Jonah, looking like she wishes she was drunker than this. Andre peeks around her shoulder, eyes flicking between us.

Just like that, because he holds no respect for anyone other than imposing women, Jonah concedes. “Yes, ma’am,” he says, and my heart drops when he goes to step off the table.

“*Collins!*” I shout, lunging in front of him.

It happens how I expect. Jonah steps forward and realizes the ground isn’t under him. He falls with a gasp, but before he can slam his head against the floor, I catch his weight in my chest. His cup smashes between us, pouring sticky pop and alcohol down our shirts.

He looks up at me in bewilderment. People laugh, like he didn’t almost just concuss himself. I swallow a scream of loathing frustration as his drink seeps through my clothes.

“Ramírez?” Jonah flutters his eyelashes at me. “You *do* care about me!”

I am going to concuss him myself.

I seize his shirt and drag him behind me, beelining for the door. Jonah doesn’t struggle until I swing it open. “Wait, *wait!*” he shouts as I thrust him onto my porch. “What the hell?”

I fish a water bottle out of the cooler next to me and toss it at his feet. “Sober up,” I snap, and I slam the door in his face, locking it. When I turn, fuming, I find Andre and Hanna behind me, him nervously adjusting his royal blue tie, her staring at me with one raised brow, clearly about to accuse me of something.

“Do you ever wonder what it might be like?” she asks.

Here we freaking go. “No,” I say immediately.

“Joining him? Dancing with friends? Making a ruckus? Having fun?” Hanna takes a sip of her Sprite. “I’m never the loudest person in the room, either, but at least I know how to enjoy myself at a party. Unlike some people who only care about what Jonah Collins is getting himself into.”

Ah. I can’t go a day without someone insisting Jonah and I should get

along. “My version of having fun doesn’t involve stomping on people’s furniture and twerking for the masses,” I grumble.

Hanna looks pointedly at Andre. “Aren’t you going to give him company?”

Andre laughs. “Who, the white guy that just got drop-kicked out of the party? Nah.”

Hanna stares, unblinking, overwhelming him with her formidable energy until his lanky shoulders buckle, and he shuffles to the door. When Andre swings it open, Jonah’s belligerent voice surges into the living room like a tornado gust.

“Hey!” Andre says soothingly, battering him backward. “Jo-Jo, come on, we don’t need to go inside right now, shh . . .”

“LET ME PUNCH HIM IN THE SACK—!”

Andre closes the door, cutting him away.

“Menace,” I mutter, storming to the staircase. I glance back at Hanna. “I’m changing. Mind making sure nobody burns this place down?”

I hurl myself up the stairs and into my bedroom without waiting for an answer. I slouch onto my bed, prying my dress shirt off. I don’t realize how scalding hot I am until the cool air tingles against my skin.

I sit there. For . . . I don’t know how long. All I know is I’ve exhausted my social stamina, and I want this night to be over. I can’t say for certain, but I’m 90 percent sure the reason half these people showed up in the first place is because of *him*. Everyone flocks to him and follows him around like he’s the most interesting person in the world. I guess most of them only get his personality in short, entertaining spurts. Lucky them.

I must space out pretty good, because when a text brings me back into focus, music is no longer thrumming through my house. Things are

eerily quiet, aside from idle chatter out on my driveway and street.

I take no less than one minute to gather my senses before fumbling for my phone. It's from Hanna.

Managed to get everyone out. Trying to leave
but Andre and Jonah are arguing in the
driveway. Lock your doors.

A relieved smile touches my lips. She's technically the one who made me host so I couldn't ditch, but maybe I can forgive her for clearing this place out. The promise of sleep coaxes me to my feet, and I start to the door. But then I hear something. This thudding noise, steadily getting louder. The sound of someone mumbling.

My door swings open so viciously that it slams against the wall stop. It's Jonah Collins.

My jaw snaps shut. His pale face, twisted with rage, is pink under the glow of my bedside lamp. His nose is scrunched with his scowl.

"Leave," I order, because it's way too late to deal with his nasty disposition.

"You threw me out!" Jonah yells. "Into the cold dark night! *What if I died from hypothermia? What if someone kidnapped me because I'm so hot and sexy?*"

As if it isn't a balmy sixty-eight degrees outside. As if any criminals would want his screechy ass. "Why are you still here?" I demand. "What do you want?"

"A fight! *Fight me!*" He drives himself into my bare chest, clearly hoping I'll lose my balance. But I could bench-press two of him, so he doesn't even break my stance.

“Doesn’t this get exhausting?” I snarl, prying him off of me. “Being this annoying. Like, don’t you ever get tired?”

I figure he’s going to hurl another insult, but he staggers back with a groan. For a moment, I’m afraid he’s about to puke all over my beige carpet. But he merely moves toward my bed, eyes drooping. “What the hell is with your house? It’s so warm.” His voice is so slurred I can barely understand it. I watch in bewilderment as he flops onto my mattress and hugs my pillow. “Hey, Prissy Prince. D’you know the valley on Mars . . . it’s ten times longer than the Grand Canyon . . . ?”

He passes out.

What?

What the fuck?

I don’t know what just happened. Why did he say . . . *any* of that? I realize quickly that I don’t care. I’m tired, and anxious, and so angry that it’s shortening my breath to frustrated spurts. I storm to the bed, prepared to shake him awake. As I reach out, though, a message from Hanna glows up at me from my phone screen.

Jonah wants to fight you and Andre can’t get
him into the car. Sorry. Maybe let him crash
on your couch? :)

I’m seeing red again.

Jonah Collins is going to regret waking up tomorrow.

JONAH

I'd sell my soul for the chance to wake up like those cheery assbags in a Disney Channel movie.

Seriously. Is stirring awake to chirping birds so much to ask for? Is it so impossible that I, too, could greet the morning sun, then twirl to my walk-in closet and choose between my cutest outfits? Can't *I* be the one to snag some toast and sprint past my quirky parents because, oh dicks and fiddlesticks, I'm late for school!

Of course not. Because I'm Jonah Collins, and I could never be so lucky.

I can barely pry my face from my soggy, saliva-laden pillow. A throbbing headache expands through my temples and jaw. I squint through my crusty eyes, making out scattered posters on deep burgundy walls. *The Great British Baking Show, Chopped, Hell's Kitchen, Pesadilla en la Cocina, Cake Boss*. The dressers are scattered with tourist trinkets—snow globes, figurines, key chains.

Okay, I'm in someone's bedroom. That's one question answered.

But I'm . . . in my . . .

Underwear?

Oh *shit*.

A curled fist of realization punches me back into last night. Sensations from the after-party nip at my eyes, unraveling and disappearing. Shouting over music. Howling laughter. The sting of alcohol. Sparkles fluttering away from dresses. The glare of my phone screen as I check my texts again.

There's a slight incline in the bed, like there's something weighing

down the other side. Half hoping I'm lying beside a gargantuan teddy bear, I flip over, my heart hammering.

Instead, there's a real human lying next to me. Loose black curls tickle his brows, and he's sleeping, one dark brown arm extended under his head, his shirtlessness burning into my retinas. It's . . . It's . . .

Dylan. Fucking. Ramírez.

My jaw unhinges. White, numbing panic burns behind my eyes. I'm fever dreaming, right? No way I'm lying half naked in bed beside my ultimate archenemy without some logical explanation. I have to think . . . *remember* . . .

Okay. I have to go back to square one.

First, my friends and I head to Buffalo Wild Wings for dinner. I order cheese curds, then promptly regret it when I end up in the bathroom, producing curds of my own.

Second, the dance. Music pounds through the cinder block walls of the cafeteria. The DJ pops on a slow song, and my friends break off in pairs, leaving me to dance dramatically by myself, pretending to hold the imaginary waist of a beautiful exchange student. People giggle, fueling my confidence, and then I notice Dylan Ramírez standing away from the crowd, his arms folded grumpily.

The night is suddenly swell.

Third, the after-party. Dylan rarely hosts, so this is the perfect time to cause chaos. Maybe I could "accidentally" bump into one of his thousand-dollar vases or, better yet, steal one. Before I can step through the door, though, he's pulling me aside with his Goliath palm.

"Hey!" I yell. "*Unhand me, foul bitch!*"

He smiles coolly. "Break something," he says in a honey-sweet voice, "and you'll regret it. Understand, Collins?"

Oh my God. Is he *threatening my well-being*? I whip my trembling, rage-induced fists out in front of me, prepared to spill blood on his fancy rich-people porch.

His eye roll nearly makes me swing prematurely. “Cute stance,” he says, and then he turns to join the party, leaving me flushed and ready to swing at the wall.

Fourth, I’m chugging spiked lemonade, trying to distract myself. From the embarrassment of my wretched singleness. From thoughts of my sisters. From Dylan’s presence. He’s zigzagging around the party, scowling at everyone within his radius and steering people away from the staircase.

Fifth, I’m checking my phone again, because I can’t help it, and—

“Relax, Jo-Jo.” Andre’s skinny arm slinks around my shoulders, and he gives me a reassuring squeeze that delivers the message. *They’re fine.* “Start paying attention to me or I’ll cry.”

He drags me away from my anxieties, so we’re flaunting ourselves in the middle of the party, spreading foolhardiness and laughter.

Sixth . . . ? Oh, yeah. I’m showcasing my sexiest dance moves on a table. At least until I’m on the ground again, courtesy of Dylan, and being shoved into the cold dark night.

Seventh . . .

“Get in the car.” Andre’s hand steadies me while I teeter, my shirt buttons half-undone. “Mom’s pissed that I missed curfew. If you go back, you’ll just challenge Ramírez to a death brawl, and he’ll kick your ass.”

I choke on my horror. Does he really have that little faith in my ability to body a bitch? *My own best friend for all of eternity*? I have to prove him wrong now, so I swivel, wandering up the neatly trimmed lawn to

Dylan's front door and flinging a middle finger up behind me.

"Okay," he calls. "Hanna and I are leaving. Remember to ice your black eyes."

I'm sure I say something witty, but the memory folds away.

Eighth . . . hmm. Eighth was . . . ?

I'm stumbling up a staircase, my steps echoing around his massive, empty house. "Where are you, Ramírez?" I slur, shoving into his bedroom. "I'm gonna challenge . . ."

Ninth. Downturned, deep brown eyes are glaring at me. It's him. The bane of my existence. The rotten core to my apple of life.

Tenth . . . I don't remember. Everything beyond that is a blur, so I blink back into focus, zeroing in on Dylan again. He's still there, a mere foot away. The image hasn't dissolved. Which means . . . we . . . ?

"No!" I roar, planting my palm on Dylan's face and thrusting it away. I scramble off of his mattress, struggling to conceal my very irresistible, very unclothed body. "*Absolutely not!*"

"Huh?" Dylan squints through his bleariness, then sits upright, his nose crinkling. "Why did you *strip*?"

I'm too far gone in my horror to fully comprehend his words. Instead, I seize the pillow plagued with my spit and reel it forward like a baseball bat, zipper slapping him with the rage of ten thousand gods of virtue.

"*Ay! Collins!*"

He lurches out of bed, and I brace for the fight I've been prepared to start with him over the last several years. Dylan has always been bigger and better than me. He's got the higher grades, because he apparently has all the time in the world to study and has zero obligations to anything but himself. He's got the brawnier build, confirmed by Andre, who

repeatedly has the gall to tell me I look like a yipping Chihuahua next to him. He has the superior luck—the proof being the house that currently surrounds us.

Basically, all of this is to say that if I can beat him unconscious with this pillow, he can beat me *more* unconscious with it.

I have to knock him out before he counters.

First, I'll aim for his face. As miserable tears of pain blind him, I'll go for the throat. I'll continue this pillow torment until his writhing dissolves into twitching, and then, I'll make my escape.

Good. Good plan. I just have to . . .

I hurl the pillow forward, and he tears it out of my grip.

Bad plan.

I'm about to be maimed. Not only does he have my weapon, but there's nobody around to see him lose the perfect pompous persona he's always wearing like a costume. In a last, desperate attempt to flee, I sprint for the closed door—until his foot hooks around mine, nearly ripping me into the splits. “Ow,” I croak. “You little . . .”

Dylan snaps the pillow into my nose, sending me sprawling. “*You* got into *my* bed,” he snarls, poised to strike again. “In case you forgot.”

There aren't enough words in my brain for me to describe how incredibly impossible that is. Nonetheless, I'm aching too much to tell him how wrong he is, so I maneuver onto my knees, fumbling for my pile of clothes beside the bed. I shove my legs into slacks and hoist my sticky button-down over my shoulders. Hopefully that massive stain down the front will come out in the wash. My “nice” shirts are few and far between.

“Unbelievable.” Dylan drags sweatpants to his waist. “I should've thrown you out on the lawn . . .”

I clamber to my feet. My body feels like it weighs triple what it normally does, and my headache is bad enough to blur my vision, but I can't show weakness, so I hold my chin high and say, "I require water."

He stares at me in this "only if I can drown you in it" kind of way. "Okay? And?"

"I'm your esteemed guest!" I snap, marching to the door. "You should take responsibility for—"

Dylan trips me a second time, and I crash against the wood with a thud. I groan, sliding onto my back.

"Of course." He glares down at me with an unpleasant smile. "Anything for my *guest*."

Homecoming. The one night I can go out, have fun, get shamelessly wasted, and forget about my woes.

Like everything in my life, Dylan Ramírez ruined it.

Dylan and I have been archenemies since we were eleven, back when he moved here from Detroit and wrestled into my friend group. Back when Mom was still alive, and I had time to compete with him.

The thing is, he wins. Always. It's been like that since the start, when he slapped me with that +4 in Uno. In our sixth grade band concert, he stole my recorder solo. In eighth grade, everyone went to his Christmas party instead of my birthday bash because he had a chocolate fountain. Freshman year, he nudged me aside to win homecoming prince. Dylan steals *everything*.

And why? He has everything he could ever want. A gigantic, cozy house in a safe neighborhood. The ability to buy overpriced food from the lunch lines without a bead of sweat. Sparkling fresh clothes that

make him look pristine and proper and *ugh*. I swear the guy doesn't know how to operate a washing machine, considering how often he's wearing new clothes.

My point? I hate him.

He hates me, too. He says I'm whiny, annoying, too loud, and I over-exaggerate, which I have never done in the history of *ever*. But Hanna is his best friend, and Andre is mine, and their romantic relationship is stable, so we're forced to tolerate each other.

For some sadistic reason (hint: we're bisexual singles within driving distance of each other), our friends have been trying to set us up. Because, *oh, the tension!* Sure, we have that, but it's mostly in a "see how far you can stretch this rubber band before it snaps" kind of way. Regardless, I've wanted to drop-kick him back to Detroit for years.

As I run around Dylan's house, searching for my phone, I pause at the bathroom. I intently examine my neck to make sure he didn't express his innate desire for me in the form of hickeys.

Dylan, who's trudging by with dirty paper plates, scoffs. "Do you really think," he says flatly, "I would ever suck on your crusty skin."

"Um, I am baby-ass smooth, thank you?"

"Please. I've seen your cracked elbows." He crushes the plates into his kitchen trash can, ignoring my squawk of protest, then pulls a glass from an overhead cabinet, filling it with water and holding it out.

"You remember more than me," I mutter.

"Obviously. I wasn't drinking. Though, maybe I should've been." He grimaces. "I wish I could delete last night from my brain."

Reluctantly, I take the glass from him and mutter a thanks. My lack of memory is causing anxiety to tingle under my skin. "So we didn't . . . *do anything*," I say, hesitant. "Right?"

“Of course not,” he snaps. “You barged into my room, challenged me to a fight, told me the valley on Mars is longer than the Grand Canyon, and passed out. I didn’t feel like sleeping on the couch, so I shoved you over and got in next to you.”

My face rises to boiling temperature. I shared a *fun fact* with him? What’s wrong with me? I don’t disclose my space information to just anyone, let alone Dylan “Who Gave You Permission to Speak to Me” Ramírez. How dare my drunken mouth betray me?

I glug the water, then stride into the living room, still seeking my phone. The pastel furniture and brick fireplace look as fancy as they did when his family first moved here. His TV is the size of my backyard. The windows are expansive and inviting. Everything about this house screams “unnecessarily wealthy.”

I head to Dylan’s room, hands tingling. It has to be there. Otherwise . . .

The Goddess of Luck blesses me with one spare moment of her time, because as soon as I walk through his door, I hear my “Saturn’s Rings” chime beneath his bed. Sighing with relief, I crawl between his nightstand and bed frame, snagging it, then open my conversation with Mik.

Dad home yet? Mrs. Greene is
leaving at 9.

BRAT

Yep, he’s here. Have fun loser!!!

Nothing else, so that’s relieving. I do have a text from the betrayer of my heart (I must’ve changed his contact name last night).

ASSHOLE BASTARD WHORE

How was the death brawl? Did it turn
into something . . . sexier? heheh

He's included a GIF of two cats licking each other. Grinding my teeth, I swipe to call.

"Good morning, babe." I can almost hear Andre's leering, treasonous smile.

"Don't call me babe." My growl comes more like a squeak. "You were my DD. Why did you leave me with this asshat?"

"You wouldn't get in my car, remember? I thought Mom was going to squeeze through my damn phone and drag me home herself if I didn't get on the road." A beat. Then, "So, how was it? Is his package as big as it looked in the locker room—?"

"Oh no, oh God, no, shut up immediately." I rub my temple. Andre's superpower is riling me up within the first twelve seconds of our conversation. "We didn't do anything weird, okay? It was a mistake."

Andre is quiet. Just when I think the line is dead, "What was a mistake?"

Shit. "What?" I clear my throat. "Nothing. Anyway—"

"So you did *something* with him?"

"No, I—"

"No way." Andre is basically guffawing, now. "I have to tell Hanna, oh my God—"

"Don't say anything!" I reel my head up, slamming it into the corner of Dylan's nightstand and sending a fresh wave of pain rippling through my temples. As I groan and reach for my skull, something drops onto

the carpet in front of me. “We didn’t do anything, so don’t be weird! I have to go.”

“No, wait, tell me more, I’m too emotionally invested—!”

I disconnect, cussing and massaging my head. The fallen object before me is a picture frame. As I pick it up, my insides boil with nausea—because of my kiss with the dresser, or because I’m looking at Dylan’s child face, I’m not sure. Dylan is probably nine or so and flanked by three people. His mother, a gorgeous Latina woman with soft curls, a tailored suit, and a rusted smile, like it’s not often used. His father, a hefty Afro-Latino man with cropped hair and a beaming grin. Dylan, who’s peeking shyly at the camera, his hands bunched up in front of him. Then . . .

A teenager slightly older than us now, clutching Dylan’s shoulders, wearing a smile similar to Mr. Ramírez’s. Warm, wide, and glittering with energy.

I frown. I don’t know much about the Ramírez family—only that Dylan’s mom is Mexican and grew up in Texas, and that his dad moved to the U.S. from Brazil when he was a child. Beyond that, I don’t have any other information. Talking about our families in the friend group is a rare occurrence, and something I actively avoid, unless it’s about my sisters.

But it feels like I should’ve known Dylan has a brother.

I set the picture on the nightstand and return to the kitchen, where Dylan’s wiping a stain off a book stuffed with colorful tabs titled *Recetas*. “So I . . . uh.” I clear my throat. “Andre thinks we got nasty last night.”

Dylan scowls. “Messed up already? Feels like a record.”

Whatever brilliant insult I’m about to generate fizzles when I see the

clock above the living room mantle. My chest twinges with unease, and I shuffle around again, looking for my jacket.

“Have a ride home?” he asks, following me.

“My legs.”

“But it’s raining. Your dad can’t pick you up?”

I find my jacket on the coat rack and secure the black buttons, ignoring him.

Dylan watches as sheets of rain douse the street and pummel the windows, then says, “I’ll drive you.”

My hand is already around the doorknob, but I hesitate. There’s nobody around to see his gentlemanly act, so why keep up the image? Why offer something that would force him to spend more time with me?

I decide not to contemplate it. Instead, I salute him and say, “Looks like you’ve got some cleaning up to do, so no thanks. Deuces!”

I swing it open, but Dylan’s hand slams the door before I can squirm through. “How about,” he says, voice dangerously calm, “you stop bitching for once, and you thank me?”

My jaw tightens. If I turn around, my face is going to be right in his neck, so I stay still, hating the oppressive heat from his chest mere inches from my back. He doesn’t move, either—maybe he’s waiting for me to offer my immeasurable gratitude, but I’m not going to give it to him. He probably has some diabolical motivation for wanting to take me home, like to put me in his debt.

Besides, I don’t need anyone’s help. For *anything*. Especially not his.

“Ridiculous,” he mutters. He snags a windbreaker off the coatrack, then pulls me into the rain. He’s got a newly leased metallic gray car that makes me grumble with envy.

He stuffs me into the leather passenger seat like a hostage, and then we're off.

Delridge is a small, busy city in the middle of Absolutely Nowhere. In the center, it's any forgettable place, with bars, restaurants, department stores, the occasional neighborhood, and two schools—one for K-8 and one high school. But in the outskirts, it's little more than expansive, twisting country roads, one Amish house, and infinite golden fields.

The ride is quiet. As we encroach on the other side of town, sidewalks begin to fracture. Potholes cut deeper into the asphalt. Weeds reach for the autumn sky, and two-story houses collapse into one-story houses. Jagged wire springs to life in the form of spiraling fences. I don't realize I'm chewing my nail until I taste blood.

"Stop here." We're in the middle of a street, but I pull the door handle anyway.

Dylan sighs. "Just point me in the right direction so I can get back to my life."

Right. His perfect, stress-free life. "Sorry for taking up so much of your precious day," I drawl. "What, do you need to go polish your yacht? Feed your Persian cat? Meet your brother at some thousand-dollar steakhouse—?"

It's like I pulled a trigger. Suddenly, Dylan swerves into a run-down ice cream parlor lot and screeches to a stop.

I stare at him, alarmed. He's unblinking. Deadpan.

"Get out," he whispers.

His seething tone sends a warning tingle up my spine. I fumble for

the handle and push the door open, allowing the sound of gushing rain to surge into the car. I'm not sure what conjured this menacing air—it's not like I've never poked at the fact that he's well-off. What's different?

I mentioned his brother.

I've known Dylan a long time (tragically), but I've never interacted with his family. Hanna said his mom is a traveling businesswoman, and his dad is the owner and head chef of a local churrascaria, which I've heard is this ridiculously delicious Brazilian restaurant. Nobody's ever mentioned siblings.

I step onto the asphalt. Rain explodes against my shoes, dampening my slacks. This tension feels worse than before, like I crossed a line and didn't realize it. Maybe I should say something. Like, thank him for the ride after all, or mumble an apology for . . . whatever I did.

Instead, I slam the door and turn away, hugging my sleeves. The tires squeal against the pavement as Dylan swings the car around, kicking it onto the street. My shoulders slump. My pinched eyebrows melt apart.

“My bad,” I whisper.

I swivel to the sidewalk and continue the trek home.

HER GOOD SIDE



Practice
(dating) makes
perfect!

REBEKAH WEATHERSPOON

AVAILABLE NOW

BETHANY

(takes a very risky, yet brave, chance)

The way I see it, everyone has a type, and if you like thick Black girls of slightly above-average height with very clear, medium brown skin, dimples, and boobs just big enough to consider a reduction in the future, then I'm the girl for you. My type? Oliver Gutierrez, hands down. Problem is, I haven't figured out if I'm the kind of person he'd go for. He's had a few girlfriends in his sixteen years and there's been no pattern among them that I've been able to surmise. But today I am determined to find out if I fit into that randomness. Today, I'm gonna ask Oliver Gutierrez to homecoming.

"You want me to come with?" my best friend Tatum asks as we step out of Ms. Robinson's fourth period English class. We both have lunch next, with our other besties Glory and Saylor, and Tatum's girlfriend, Emily. I need to stop by my locker to grab my lunch. Oliver's locker is next to mine. He has fifth period lunch too. This is my moment to catch him and pop the big question. I'll push all my anxiety to the side. That weird, fast-talking mumbly thing I do when I get nervous will absolutely not happen. I'll flash Oliver a sweet,

confident smile and ask him if he wants to join me on one of the biggest nights of the year.

It just sucks I have to do the asking in a crowded hallway and not on a quiet, starlit night on Venice Beach like I'd envisioned a million times.

"No. I have to do this on my own," I say as we stop at Tatum's locker. I wait as they swap out their books and grab their lunch. Then Tatum turns to face me. They put their hands on my shoulders and I hone in on the blue-and-silver glitter artfully streaked all over their beautiful honey-brown face. There's a football game tonight. Tatum has some very intense cheerleading to do.

"Bethany Greene, you are an irresistible goddess."

"She's right!" some random freshman agrees as she pushes by us.

"Thanks?" I say to the random freshman's back before I refocus on Tatum's glitter.

"You walk right up to that boy and you let him know that taking you to homecoming will be the best decision of his life. You can do this."

"I can do this."

"You're beautiful and I love you. Go get 'em, champ," Tatum says. Nothing uplifts you like a cheerleader telling you you're beautiful. I can do this. I'm gonna do this. Right now. I let out a deep breath and march down the hall. I turn the corner into the west wing and spot Oliver, head and shoulders over our classmates. He's wearing his royal-blue home jersey, with the number 87 ironed onto the shoulders. He looks good.

I'm what my moms call a *late bloomer*. I've always been more interested in other things that had nothing to do with boys, but sometime over the summer that changed. Actually, I'm lying. I know the exact moment things changed. I had my friends over to swim in my pool. Glory's boyfriend and the other juniors on the football team came by after they'd finished one of their preseason workouts. It was all fun and games until a splash fight devolved into something else. I was laughing, trying not to think about how long it was going to take me to blow-dry my knotless braids, when suddenly Oliver picked me up and effortlessly lifted me over his shoulder.

The air left my lungs, water flying all around us. Over the sound of my high-pitched screech, I could hear Glory telling Landon to put her down. I think their plan was some sort of backward chicken fight. I grabbed Oliver's thick waist and held on for dear life until he put me down. I couldn't find my breath, between the water running down my face and the odd laughter bubbling out of my lungs. He playfully pushed me out of the way, wrestling Landon into the deep end. The moment between us was over and so was my late bloomer status. Boys had officially entered the chat.

That night after my three-part skincare routine, I brushed my teeth, kissed the moms good night, exchanged the last few sisterly insults with Jocelyn and Trinity before they were due back to college in a couple days. I climbed into bed and instead of watching my favorite chef on YouTube, all I could think about was Oliver. How strong he was, his tan skin, the tiny pimples on the small of his back, and the few

hairs on his upper lip laying the foundation for what would hopefully be a full mustache one day.

That moment in the pool changed everything. My eyes had been opened to how truly hot boys can be and I'm a little embarrassed to say this crush on Oliver has occupied too much of my mind since. I only have one choice. I have to ask him to the dance.

I walk a little faster and catch up with him just as he closes his locker door. He steps back a bit, his eyes flashing wide the second he sees me, and I know I've made my first mistake. I've come in a little too hot, but I can still fix it.

"Hey, Greene. What's up?"

"Hey," I breathe. "How's it going?"

"Good. You coming to the game tonight?" he asks. It's something so little, but he hikes his backpack over his broad shoulder and all I can think about is that afternoon in my pool. How he's built enough to support all *this*, all of me.

"Oh yeah. I'll be there. I gotta emotionally support Glory while she emotionally supports Landon. Cheer on Tatum while they cheer for you."

"Nice." He smiles, flashing his slightly crooked incisor, and I quickly wonder what we'll name our first child. "You heading to lunch?"

"Um, yeah. There was something I wanted to ask you first."

"Sure, what's up?"

"Well. I was thinking—I was wondering if you wanted to be my date to homecoming. To the dance. Landon and Glory are going together of course. So we could all be together."

Stupid, my brain immediately shouts at me. This is not a group thing. It's you and Oliver. Pure romance. "Not that it would be a double date thing. I mean, half the school will be there, so technically it's like a huge group date. But you and I would be there together."

I finally close my mouth and give him a chance to answer. As I look up at him, I already know what he's going to say. It takes about two seconds for all the stages of yikes to jump across his face. Shock, fear, a desperate need for an escape, bargaining, then finally acceptance. I'm holding out hope as he winces and starts scratching the back of his neck, but my body is already working on its own physiological reactions to the blow that my mind still hopes isn't coming. My face feels all hot and my throat feels like it's closing.

"Oh man, B. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh?" I choke out.

"Yeah, I was actually going to ask Poppy Carlisle after lunch." See, I can't blame him for that. Poppy Carlisle just transferred to our school last month, and beyond still having that new-car smell, she's like dumb hot. I mean, I'm cute, but if I weren't painfully straight, I would also have the hots for Poppy Carlisle. She's also newly single, having just kicked Jacob Yeun to the curb. I'm shocked she doesn't already have a date for the dance. But apparently she will. After lunch, when Oliver asks her.

"Oh" is all I can say.

"And I mean—aren't you scared of this?" he asks, motioning between us. "Lan said you'd rather chew off your own arm than let a boy touch you. Homecoming won't be much

fun if you don't even want me to hold your hand." And there it is. Right there, my past just came back to beat my ass right in the middle of the hallway.

So yeah, fine, part of my being a "late bloomer" involved somewhat of a revulsion when it came to boys, but more importantly the concept of doing it with a boy. But that wasn't because I was scared, exactly. I just didn't understand it. And yes, maybe at the end of freshman year when Glory told us she and Landon had done it I burst into tears in the middle of the crowded lunch quad.

Unfortunately, a few people overheard my overacting and the news that the mere thought of someone else having sex was enough to make me cry spread through Culver City High School, and I'm sure the greater Los Angeles County, like an uncontained brush fire. So yeah, I'm a late bloomer as far as my family is concerned. But I'm paranoid and a bit prudish to the rest of my school.

"That's not what I said at all." Yes, it is, it's exactly what I said. "Plus, that was two years ago."

"Okay, but, like, I wanna have fun at homecoming and I think it's just a lot of pressure on me to be your first *everything*. And yeah, we can go as friends, but I don't really wanna spend the night after the big game with a *friend*." I let out a slow breath, trying to process the levels of this humiliation, but Oliver keeps talking. "And you know I'm trying to make it to the league. What if I don't live up to your expectations and you have a horrible time, and run back to tell your moms?"

Both my moms played in the WNBA. Now my mom Teresa

is an assistant coach for the Lakers and my other mom, Melissa, has her own show on the National Sports Network. You can catch *Before the Buzzer* weekday afternoons at two p.m. “Yeah, they have connections, but neither of them are the vengeful type. Besides, even if you make it to the league, you won’t be draft ready for a while. I don’t think our date will factor in.”

It really hits me then that he’s already said no, and I’m still standing here, trying to haggle with him.

“Still, it’s the Lakers, Beth.”

“Yeah, okay.” I muster up a hint of a smile. “Well, I hope Poppy says yes. She seems pretty cool.”

“Hey, thanks. We good?” He smiles back and I can just see it: Tonight when I’m in bed wiping the world’s most pathetic tears from my eyes, I won’t be thinking of that afternoon in my pool and the way the water dripped down his face. I’ll be thinking of this pity smile. I’ll be thinking of the first time I ever got up the courage to ask someone out and how they said no.

And then it happens, the true kiss of death. He lightly nudges my shoulder. The bro nudge. I will never get a chance to make out with Oliver Gutierrez. We are officially just friends.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Cool. See ya at the game.”

“Yeah, I’ll see ya.”

Oliver turns and walks toward the quad. In the distance I hear the bell ring. My feet carry me a few yards to my own locker. My whole body numb, I grab my three-tiered

isolated lunch box with the watercolor strawberry print. The highlight of my day. I put a lot of effort into my sandwiches. And I think that might be part of my problem. I need to focus a little bit more on showing boys, specifically Oliver, that I'm a new woman, capable of some really intense hand-holding and some quality end-of-the-night smooching. A new woman afraid of nothing. Kinda.

BETHANY

(inspired anew)

The homies are already at our table when I finally make it out to the quad. Like they can sense me, Tatum's head pops up and they flash me this sweet *Well????* grin. I shake my head and cross the patchy grass back onto the concrete patio. It's hot as heck outside, but at least there's shade over the lunch tables. Shade to hide my misery and pain. Saylor is midsentence, but she moves so I can take my usual seat beside her.

"It just doesn't need to be today. Like, chill," she finishes, before she turns to me and presses her lips to my cheek. "Hey, Bets."

"Hey," I say, sounding a little more pathetic than I mean to.

"What happened?" Tatum asks me. Their girlfriend Emily gives me a hopeful nod, her blonde ponytail bouncing around, encouraging me to spill the beans.

"He said no."

"Why?" Glory asks. The look on her face almost makes me laugh. It's pure disgust, like saying no to me is not only ridiculous, but a truly bad business decision.

"Apparently Crybaby Bethany left a lasting impression."

“Oh, come on,” Saylor nearly shouts. A few people look over at us, but she ignores them.

“Who’s Crybaby Bethany?” Emily asks. She’s only been dating Tatum for a few months, so she’s not caught up on all our personal problems, but that was my nickname for like a year straight, so I’m kinda shocked she never heard about it.

“It’s nothing. I embarrassed myself and I paid for my crimes, but clearly Oliver hasn’t forgotten about it. Also, there was some other nonsense about him trying to impress the moms at some point in the future. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I have a better chance of making the Lakers than he does.” Oliver and I play the same position in basketball. He’s good. I’m better. We’ve played against each other. It’s just facts. Doesn’t change how cute I think he is.

“I feel like he could have just said no,” Glory replies. That look of disgust is still on her face. I do appreciate the support, true Black girl solidarity. “Don’t worry, Bets. We’ll find you a date.”

“I hope so. I just wanted that date to be Oliver,” I admit. My friends know my crush is pretty hefty, but it’s just now that I realize how much I actually liked him and how much thought I put into picturing us together. Rookie mistake, I guess. Maybe I do need more experience with all this.

“Well, now I feel bad for my news,” Saylor says, her bottom lip jutting out.

“I mean, if it’s good news I definitely wanna hear it. If it’s bad news, sorry in advance, but I will use your pain to distract me from mine,” I say. I open my lunch box and pull out the over-the-top sandwich I made. My friends don’t

say anything, but I see Glory's gaze immediately dart to the parchment paper holding the shaven chicken breast club sandwich that I've leveled up with mozzarella, pesto spread, crushed pecans, and a honey drizzle on a toasted ciabatta bun. I brought some Salsitas, the best chips ever made, and some green grapes the size of golf balls. Oliver's rejection was almost enough to make me lose my appetite, but not quite.

"That's true friendship." Saylor laughs. "No, it's good news."

"Let's hear it."

"Jake Yeun and I are a thing. Like a *thing* thing. He's my new boo."

"Oh, you did it!" Tatum squeals.

"Yup. Caught him after Spanish. I think after a week of flirting in the DMs it was time to put him out of his misery." Saylor sucks her teeth and does a shimmy with her shoulders. "Dats my man now."

"Nice," Glory says with a smile.

Just hearing Jacob Yeun's name reminds me I'm not the only person who changed over the summer. I used to sit across from Jacob in second grade. He was this teeny, really quiet kid I used to try to make laugh, but he never really said much. I do remember his favorite dinosaur was a triceratops. In middle school he went full goth skater, which seems to make sense since both of his parents are tattoo artists. He still doesn't talk much, but he makes up for it with how good he is with a camera, like a legit camera, and with a phone. He has the most TikTok followers in the whole

school, thanks to the skating videos he posts. He's also on yearbook and whatever footage the school refuses to post on the official socials, he edits together and makes something five hundred times better for his own account. Smart, if you ask me.

Oh, and over the summer he grew like a foot and just got insanely hot. Long skater hair, sun-kissed skin, the black-on-black wardrobe that always seems to work for him instead of making him look like the drama club's stage crew. All of that is probably why Poppy Carlisle laser locked on him the first week of school. They dated for a bit, but the rumor is she dumped him because he wouldn't have sex with her. That sounds fake. Like, what boy wouldn't do it with Poppy Carlisle, but whatever the real reason they broke up is, they aren't together anymore. And now newly hot Jacob is with Saylor.

"What? What's that look?" Saylor asks.

My brain short-circuits and I realize I'm definitely making a face. I'm picturing Jacob, so my brow is all tucked up from concentration and my mouth is hanging open because I'm in shock. It's not that Saylor and Jacob are a thing now. If you think Poppy Carlisle is a ten, Saylor is a firm twelve. She's gotten "Most Photogenic" every year since sixth grade and we all know that's just code for certified hottie.

She's biracial; Black dad, white mom. She has her mom's hazel eyes and dark blonde hair, but unlike her mom, she and her twin sisters have these amazing big, long curls. She's tall and thin. People do fetishize her looks sometimes, but that doesn't change how beautiful she is. She plays two

varsity sports, and is very personable and a friend to creatures big and small. Of course Jacob would say yes to being Saylor's boyfriend.

That isn't the thing tripping me up. I'm in very real shock because my bestie supreme, Saylor, already has a date to homecoming. Rhys Hayes, this white boy who plays the tuba and always has this wave of blond hair flopping in his face, asked her last Friday with a little help from the rest of the marching band's bass section in the upperclassmen parking lot. I knew she'd been talking to Jacob, but this new development is, well, new. I close my mouth. I should probably say something.

"No, I just—you inspire me. Not even the end of the week and you've locked down a boy for business and one for pleasure."

"I do like to cover my bases." Saylor laughs.

"Yeah, what are you going to do about Rhys?" Emily asks.

"Nothing. I told him straight up we were going as friends when he asked me. And Jacob has to be there for yearbook. He's not going as a dance participant, so if I wanna slow dance with Jacob once or twice, I think I can squeeze that in."

"Wow," I whisper. I think of Oliver's many reasons for rejecting me and how I'm the only one of my friends who doesn't have a date for homecoming now or a boo to call my own. This isn't gonna work. "I need a date for the dance."

"We'll get you one," Glory says before she takes a bite of her simple turkey sandwich. She deserves better lunch meats, but I don't say anything about that.

“Is it that easy though?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s a date to the dance. It’s not a kidney. So Oliver was your top choice, but there are a lot of people at this school.”

“She’s right,” Tatum adds.

“Neither of the Gupta twins have dates. I heard them talking about it earlier,” Emily adds.

“And B, I know this might be a lot for you to process, but . . .” Saylor turns to me and purses her lips together like she’s about to tell me I do need a kidney. “Kayden Smith doesn’t have a date either.”

“No—”

“Just hear me out!”

“No, ma’am. Nev. Er. No. No way. No how.”

“Why not?”

“Because I almost puked talking to Oliver, and he and I are, like, decent friends. I’m afraid to look directly at Kayden’s face. He is . . . everything. All of it. I would actually die if Kayden spoke to me. I would leave this earthly plane.”

If my crush on Oliver is something real and true, based on my knowledge of the softness of his back skin, my crush on Kayden Smith is the reason I get out of bed in the morning. The only reason he knows I’m alive is because I made a half-court shot that went viral freshman year. He wasn’t at the game. Why would he be? But he saw a TikTok—a TikTok Jacob Yeun made, now that I think of it—and made a point to come up to me in the hall the next day and tell me how

sick he thought it was. I just stared at him and made a bird noise that was supposed to be a thanks. He seemed to take it that way and went on with his day. He hasn't even looked at me since.

I don't consider that my true boy-crazy awakening only because Kayden isn't a boy; he's a sex god. Tall, actually dark, extremely handsome. Perfect teeth, just perfect. He smells like the ocean after a storm. His shape-up is always so crisp, he must have his barber on call. And the thing that really matters to me: His sneakers are always clean. It's weird, but it's hot. But he's too hot for mere mortals like me. Plus, he's a senior! Basketball season starts in a few weeks. We share the gym with the boys and if Kayden makes varsity again, which I'm sure he will, I'll have to figure out how to deal with the amount of drool I'll be producing with him just a few yards away.

"You do not ask someone like Kayden Smith to home-coming," I go on. "You build a marble pedestal and set him upon it. You don't touch it! You just look. From a safe distance where you have absolutely no risk of embarrassing yourself."

"I don't think he's *that* fine." Glory shrugs.

"Because you have Landon vision. You don't think anyone is as fine as him," I say, letting my eyes roll extra hard. Landon is actually the freaking cutest, but he's no Kayden.

"I vote AJ Gupta. He's shy, but he's super sweet. I like that he always holds doors for people," Tatum declares.

"You do have a point. Okay." I shake myself and push the

lingering sting from Oliver's no down with all the rest of my repressed feelings. "AJ Gupta. I'm gonna do it. I need like twenty-four hours to recover, but I'm gonna do it."

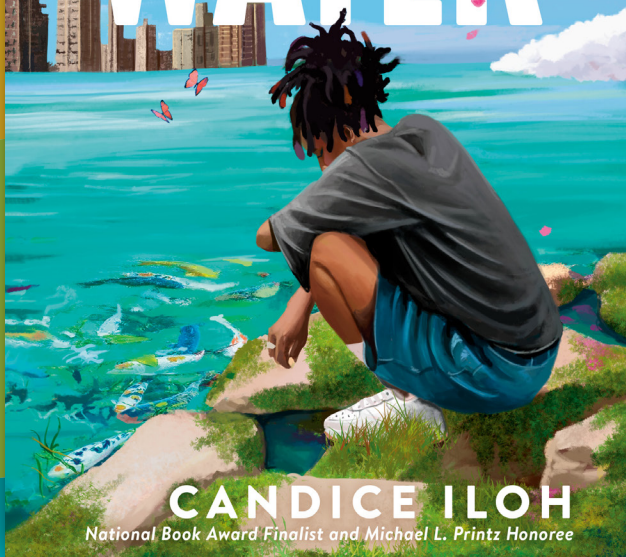
"We believe in you," Tatum says. Emily nods enthusiastically. Glory adds her old-church-lady nod. I'm glad we're all in agreement. All hope for my pathetic love life is not lost.

"Perfect. Can we talk some more about Jacob?" Saylor asks.

"Yes. Please," I reply. I unwrap my sandwich and pop one of the loose honey-drizzled pecans into my mouth. I might have zero skills when it comes to boys, but at least I know how to make myself a delicious sandwich.

"Iloh is a writer to watch." —JASON REYNOLDS

SALT THE WATER



CANDICE ILOH

National Book Award Finalist and Michael L. Printz Honoree

ON SALE 10/3/2023

l.

the problem with Mr. Schlauss

is that he ain't got lips
so he stays mad at us
for what the universe wouldn't give him
in a classroom full of

plump-lipped kids who always have
something smart to say
 that's what the principal keeps
 calling it during our visits: *smart*
 like it's some type of surprise or insult

when i thought
that's what everybody says
this place is for

school is me doing the same thing every day

sitting face forward
at a gum-crusted desk
that's covered in penis sketches
in a packed class

staring down the dry throat
of a person who's been given
the right to tell me
what to do cause they went to college

stuck under the spell of
chalkboard screams or
a promethean board light or
dry-erase marker fumes

until the bell rings to interrupt
it all again
for the next
study in adulthood

i study his face wondering

if this is what he thought he'd be doing with his life in his early twenties
his unironed T.J. Maxx button up half tucked into his too-long khakis
his dusty blond shag a hopeful cover-up to the patchy stubble washing
over his blotchy puffed face

Iya taught me that a swollen face is a sign somebody drinks too much
beer
drinks so much the alcohol don't even move past your neck anymore
it just sits there for everybody to know what you spend most of your
time doing
trying to cope

with the fact that you're stuck teaching in the Bronx postpandemic
when it really isn't postpandemic but the teacher shortage
is so bad your bare minimum gets overlooked
while you stay flying under the radar

doing more harm than good

he gulps & goes on some more about

process of elimination

cause & effect

main idea

critical lens

my eyes scan

the prep packet

ingesting words like

knack

hoopla

burgeoning

valid interpretation

appropriate literary elements

Mr. Schlauss's words

become a lowered hum

in my mind's movie score

as it starts bursting questions

thoughts like how

don't nobody i know

use these words & how

i wonder who decides what is

valid

appropriate

my desk jerks from the side

Zaria motions to the space under me
as usual there lies a crumpled piece of paper
full of analog text waiting for me to unravel

since this year the school's got a new system
locking up our phones in fabric pouches
that we can't open til we leave

i reach for it like clockwork
with my eyes focused on her legs
the only person i know who wears

fishnets & patent leather combat boots year-round
uncrinkling a note without looking away from her thighs
is our everyday romance

you really into this shit? lol

i let my smirk answer her question

pushing the note under the test prep packet
as Schlauss's dry monotone lecture comes back
into focus & reminds us how much of this test
makes up our total grade
& how much college acceptance
rides on our grades
& how college acceptance
determines the direction of our lives

*indicate whether you agree or disagree
with the statement as you have interpreted it
choose two works you have read
that you believe best support your opinion*

*use specific references
to appropriate literary elements
to develop
your analysis*

tell them what they
want to hear to prove
you've got some sense
to prove

you can achieveachieveachieve success

my hand shoots up without thinking to stop myself

& Mr. Schlauss rolls his eyes
letting out another miserable sigh
before stopping in the middle
of his instructions

yes . . . what is it, Sara—

—it's Cerulean.

*yes, sure, Ms. Gene
what is it now?*

*—it's CERULEAN & i was wondering
What they mean by "appropriate"—*

*Cerulean Gene we don't have time
for this today, i'm sure you know
what "appropriate" means*

*—yes, i know the definition, but that's why i'm asking
we never read the kind of books we like in here
so how will we know if our examples from the references are*

appropriate?

*who decides whose interpretation is right?
maybe you
should specify?*

he laughs to himself

as if to say:

if i don't know what the test

means by

appropriate

how is it that i know

what it means

to *specify*?

Cerulean i don't need to specify

*anything here
you need to be paying
closer attention
to what we read
& what i say
in this class
& if you're too busy reading
The Hate U Give
to pay enough
attention to
an actual
great American classic
like, say, Huck Finn
maybe
you should get your
priorities
straight*

lya taught me

that it's good
to take deep breaths
or walks
or to drink water to make sure
i've taken time
before i speak out in anger
that way i'm clear when i finally
say what i gotta say
so i take the hall pass
to do all three

outside the classroom
with the door closed
behind me
Mr. Schlauss's squeaky voice
becomes an even more
distant hum
in the empty hallway

i walk, counting the tiles
taking in the ugly burgundies, yellows
& creams—a color scheme that i've been
staring at within these walls
for the past three years now

thinking about
what it means
for my priorities
to be straight

after a few laps around

the junior class floor
i pause standing
in front of the GSA office

a club the school was probably mandated to have
think more
about Mr. Schlauss's suggestion
that i be anything that i am not
straight
uniform
binary
that there is only his right
& our wrong
how i should
read something
he deems *real* or fail

i stare at the out-of-date GSA poster

for five more minutes

call it a guided meditation

for queer Black kids who considered

snapping on their problematic white teacher

when the rainbow wasn't enough

next to the poster & rainbow-lined door

stretch large windows
a darkened chemistry lab
housed on the other side
that ain't been used in years

never seeing anybody
go in or out between classes
everybody's been convinced
it must be the scene of a crime

that nobody thinks is worth
cleaning up so we the phone-deprived
use these windows like mirrors
to see ourselves in its reflection

trying to avoid spending
too much time in rarely cleaned
bathrooms reserved for students
i stare at myself taking in another breath

then exhale thinking about Iya
& how i'll tell her all about this tonight
pull my locs into a knot
to give my neck some air

take another deep breath
& go
back

good to see you back with a new hairstyle

Mr. Schlauss curves me
as i return the pass
just in time for the bell to ring
signaling that we're now allowed
to leave for lunch

hang out for a bit Cerulean

Zaria grazes the hairs of my forearm
gently reminding me to meet her outside
at our spot after i find out
whatever Mr. Schlauss's problem is

i hold her scent waiting for the class to clear

i just wanted to remind you

—Mr. Schla—

—no no no no no
i'm talking now
you're in my class
& these are my rules
& the next time
you want to leave my classroom
you need to ask me first
you can't just go around
doing whatever it is
that you want

i had to use the bathroom

a lie pressed through my clenched teeth
but that don't matter

*i need to ask
for permission to piss?*

*Cerulean
the next time you need*

*to urinate?
you need to raise your hand*

*& if it's at
the appropriate time*

he pauses, feeling himself

i might let you go he says

his back already turning to me

there's no point

in me talking to the back of Mr. Schlauss's head
when he's already made up his mind about me
but i still stand there steps behind him staring into
the sad crease of his freckled neck smiling into it
Iya says we should smile at our enemies smile
that we got joy even when it's clear they struggling

i pull in air & let it out slowly, quiet looking at
his trashed desk piled with old papers i doubt
he actually reads test packets & textbooks
older than both my parents' ages combined wonder
why he believes in any of this stuff when it seems
like he ain't believe in himself enough to do
something he actually cares about for money

his Teach for America manual so faithfully kept
at the corner of his desk to remind him
he's only got to survive one more year teaching
inner-city youth one more year of service
so the government can pay him back everything
he's losing as he works

to become a master

Zaria has mastered the art

of seducing me out of my midday misery

now far away from arbitrary school rules
& Schlauss's orders i exhale
then press my lips against hers
standing below the Pop Smoke mural
freshly painted on the side of the corner deli
just one block down from school
she takes my hand

what that stuffy white boy want this time

our check-ins always full with questions
to each other about how we're surviving
failed corporate executives turned teachers
who were once paid more to work in an office
i kiss her hand & shrug

he wanted me to raise my hand next time i need to pee

we laugh at the idea

& she pulls the jingling door to the bodega open for me / the smell
of bacon egg & cheese / up our noses walking to the back where she /
orders her tuna melt / my falafel wrap / her arm curved tight around
my waist / it still feels like summer even though October creeps up
on us / like lonely uncles catcalling from lawn chairs outside project
housing at all hours of the day / i reach for my wallet to pay just before
Zaria stops me / *i got you babe*

hands hover methodically above the blazing grills

that so many things have touched

while the cooks' eyes
bounce back & forth between
this surge of lunch orders &
two obnoxiously large tv screens
mounted above chopped cheese
overstuffed deli sandwiches
& buttered toasting rolls

a dramatic voice-over actor
gives us all the backstory of Christina Wright
youngest known contestant of *Dystopia Tank Race*
an outlaw among a cast of old heads who
think she's too idealistic finding
her motives for being on the show to be

'cute'

*for Christina Wright, the stakes are high
& the tension is even higher!
while veteran contestants play the game to
plot and scheme for the American dream
Christina says her dream includes
a different America!*
& the camera pans

to a sentimental montage of how hard
Christina had it growing up

how hard Christina has worked
in her communities
how hard Christina seemed
to work every day of her life
for a future the other contestants

have never even had to imagine

Zaria lifts herself up

onto her tiptoes to hand
Mike the bodega guy her cash
across the too-high counter
that used to be split by plexiglass
& stocked with hand sanitizer
now returned to open air
jars of soft mints
Twix Minis
incense
knockoff phone chargers

drops back down to her heels
waiting for the change
while grazing her platinum buzz cut
the way she always does
when she's hungry
anxious to go
Mike hands her back the change
clinging seconds too long
suddenly offended by her
snatching her hand back
in disgust

*be nice, baby
i'm good guy
why you being
so mean today*

today we're caught

in the lunch crowd we usually dodge
beating everybody else to the spot
most of us upperclassmen go to now
that we got open lunch & can go
anywhere we want as long
as we're back before the sixth-period bell

usually Mike doesn't try shit with either of us
feeling bold enough to squeeze a hand
that doesn't want his attention my eyes unglue
from the television and i push up
to the counter ready to tell him to fuck off
but Zaria beats me to it her voice so quick piercing

that the incoming crowd parts as we leave

most days

we get back in time enough
for us to eat & find Irvin selling
snacks he's got stocked in his locker
Blow Pops Takis whatever else
gullible underclassmen want
to make it through to ninth period
& back to life beyond these walls

but this time not finding
the usual crowd flooded
around his locker
we know we'll be eating lunch
outside

we see red vapor floating

from behind the back walls of the school
& find Irvin & Jai hovered over Jai's
Creation of the Week
Zaria coughs to announce our presence
i wave fumes, slapping hands with each
of my best friends

*awww shit! we got an audience!
you sure you ready for the world
to see this, sib? Irv asks Jai
i don't know, it might be too early
you know we can't rush beauty*

Jai lifts their head revealing
a bandana tied tight across
nose & mouth & sits back
on their heels capping the spray can
to then rest their hands on their knees

*i guess we can let these inner city youth
get a lil sneak peek you know we
always gotta give back to the community
& they cuttin art programs left & right
go on and let these poor kids get a closer look*

Zaria rolls her eyes

at Irv & Jai's daily
art dealer & artist
role-play

pulls Irv into a hug
like she hadn't
seen him in weeks

though this
is a version of our scene
almost every day

*you just did all this
today? i ask Jai,
impressed*

*yeah, sib
Ms. Lorna walked into class
basically in clown drag*

*she already be lookin
mad crazy & the fact
that she tried to cover it up with that mess?*

i was inspired

*i call this one
"Goddess Doth Not Like Ugly"
you like?*

the three of us bust out laughing

til we realize Jai is serious
never having been good at naming their work

removing their bandana now completely
Jai reveals a freshly bleached mustache & goatee

to match their eyebrows, vibe & mood
their new look for this week only

*y'all laughin now but don't come askin me
for nothin when i sell this baby on fifth ave*

they right though, that's where all the rich types be
Zaria chimes in, in support of our tender friend

*could probably get a solid rack for this
i ain't laugh that hard, Jai don't forget about me*

yo, i got five hundred once selling a piece over there
Jai starts, eyes glazing over looking out at nothing

*Ms. Lorna always talkin about fine art this & that
but them rich folks love them some street graffiti*

we all stop talking for a second like we
were all thinking the same thing

*but for real though, Irv says breaking the silence
how much all y'all got so far? for our plan*

how we doin on money?

last summer we'd come up with The Pact: realizing P.S. 5000 would never send us somewhere worth the trip we'd pool our money to book tickets to sunny California for a summer / we always been just a bunch of Bronx babies knowing nothing much but bodegas, superspreader house parties & subway horror stories / but we knew something else might be on the other side / we all knew we needed to find something different than the go-to-college or bad-reality-show conveyor belt so our hustle became dreaming about what it might be like to live a different life / one filled with art / love / sunshine on our faces / not all of us were artists but we knew we wanted to create some other kind of world / somewhere / that'd allow all of us to be ourselves / something like the world Iya & Baba had made for my brother & me

but something we'd never seen

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