

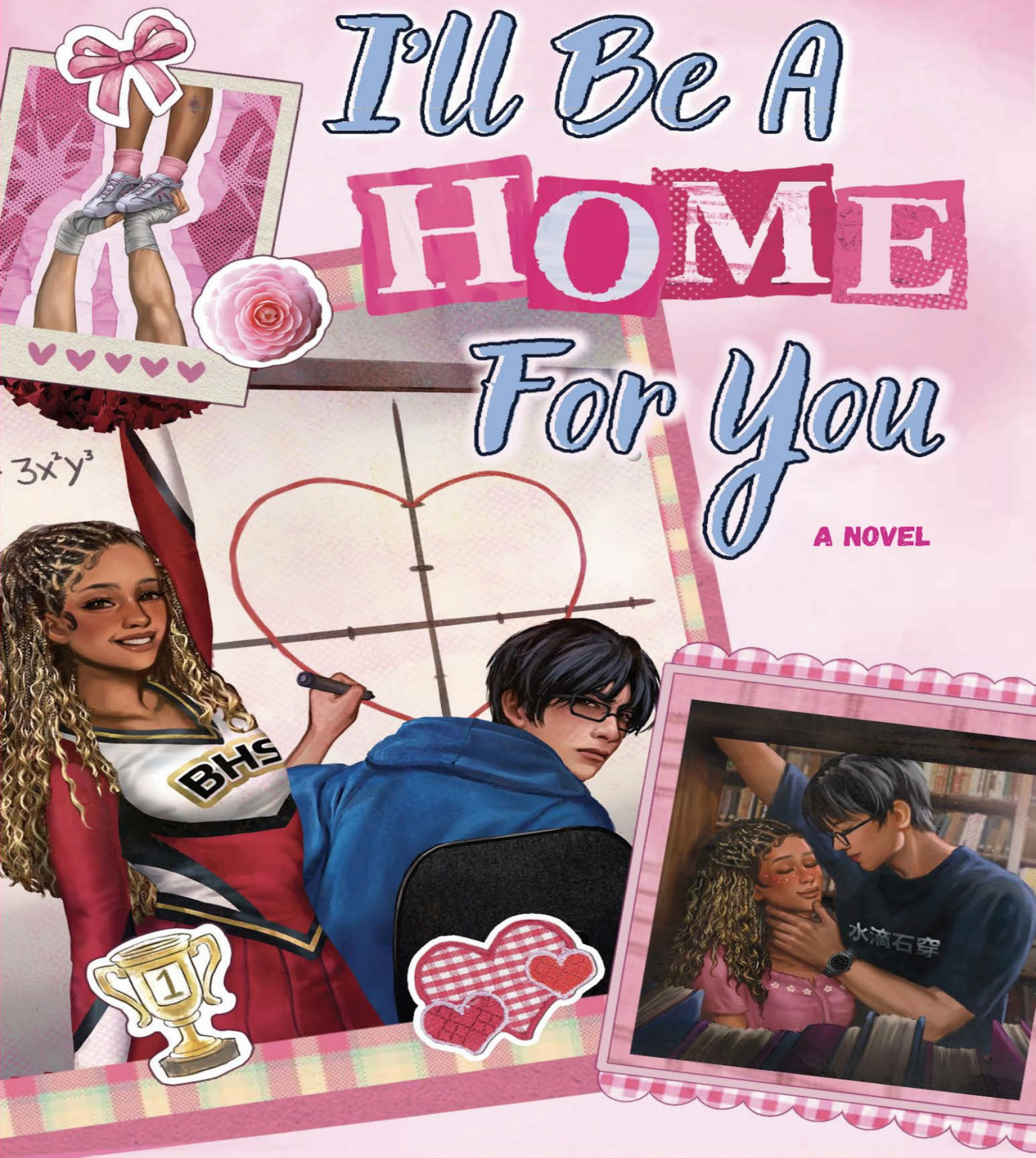
ROZALIA BOMA DAVIES

I'll Be A

HOME

For You

A NOVEL



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I'll Be a Home for You

a novel

Rozalia Boma Davies

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Rozalia Boma Davies asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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dedicated to everyone who's a foreigner in their own home

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Author's Note

There is a difference between Chinese as a nationality and Chinese as an ethnicity and cultural background. Mainland China and Hong Kong share many cultural traditions. However, Hong Kong historically has had its own distinct identity owing to its island status and 150 years of British colonization. It has its own dialect of Chinese, Cantonese, while the official dialect of Mainland China is Mandarin.

The answer to whether Hong Kong is a part of China depends on whom you ask.

Therefore, when characters in this book refer to “Chinese,” they mean the Chinese culture of Hong Kong. And sometimes, more specifically, the Chinese culture of Hong Kong that traveled all the way to the United States.

—

The name *Aang* is most famously associated with the character Aang from the Nickelodeon animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The creators of the show derived it from the Chinese characters (ān ngòhng).

Combined, they mean *peaceful soaring*. However, this combination of characters would not be used in Hong Kong as a person's name. It sounds off to a Chinese speaker.

It is, however, a name popular in Indonesia. This book's Aang just doesn't know it.

Chapter 1

*a tall, nerdy boy who looks like he's never talked to a
girl before will save me*

(i miss him)

(he can rot in hell for all i care)

JJ

He doesn't acknowledge my existence.

But that's how it's been for a year now—same old, same hurt. I'm sitting to the left of my ex best friend in our guidance counselor's office. The desk in front of me is bare except for a computer and an anatomically inaccurate heart plushie sitting on top of the monitor.

I drum my fingers against my thigh, mentally going over last year's cheerleading routine to relax. *One, three, five, seven.* Where's Ms. Foster? We've been waiting for over thirty minutes.

I glance at the clock. It's 7:05.

Oh. I tap my other thigh.

We've been waiting for five minutes.

I push off the chair and shoot Aang a look. His gaze has not left his phone since we sat down. Which was apparently only five minutes ago. I wander the office to the muted hum of a printer next door. It's probably producing schedules for the new school year. I adjust my loose pink T-shirt, tied at the back with an elastic band, so that it just barely covers my belly button. No need to get dress-coded on the first day of junior year.

I beat my open palm against my arm. *One, three, five, seven.* The first cheerleading training of the year is in four days. I have until then to ensure I'm still a flyer despite my summer growth spurt. Fine, maybe, barely two inches doesn't count as a growth spurt in a traditional sense, but it can make or break whether I get the position assigned to the shortest people on the team.

I circle the office, my wide jeans swooshing around. What are my options?

Cut off my feet. Shave off the top of my skull. Recruit a guy.

The last one seems the hardest to achieve. Over the past week, I've texted over twenty male classmates, starting with my ex-boyfriend, Brad, and not a single one was available or willing to join the cheerleading team.

I grab my blond boho braids, and it takes every bit of my self-restraint not to pull on them. They look too pretty against my brown skin. And the extensions weren't cheap.

I need a distraction until Ms. Foster gets here. Otherwise, the hair in my fists will become the first casualty of my impending breakdown.

I spin to face Aang, letting go of my braids.

I haven't talked to him in a year. Might as well start now.

I sit back down in the chair and glance at his phone. He's reading a recipe for Hong Kong style claypot rice. I didn't know he was capable of reading things other than essays on breakthrough mathematical theories.

His black hair grew out over the summer and now sweeps across his forehead and glasses. In a universe where we're still friends, I'd tell him that it frames his face nicely.

My stomach knots.

This is not that universe.

"Why's your hair so long? Math camp didn't have a hairdresser?" I ask.

His lips purse, but he doesn't look up. I shouldn't be surprised, but my stomach knots harder.

He's still so lanky, his upper body swallowed up by his loose black T-shirt.

Wait. I squint. What is that? His arm that's closest to me, curled up, holding the phone. *Is that a bicep?* The realization lodges itself in every crevice of my brain as I try to shake it away. Deeply unnecessary fact to be aware of.

Before I can come up with another question for him to ignore, Ms. Foster stumbles in, juggling a tower of papers, binders, and a coffee cup. "Sorry for being late!" she gasps, breathless. "Thank you for agreeing to have this meeting together."

The email she sent didn't make it sound like there was a choice involved. It was either a joint meeting to discuss college applications or no meeting at all.

She drops the stack of papers on the desk and plops down on her chair. The stack of papers is so tall that only half her face is visible. "Our senior guidance counselor quit yester—no—two days ago?" She rubs her temples. "Either way, I'm now in charge of every single grade."

Before the implications of this sentence fully set in, she moves the stack of papers aside and meets our eyes. "Let's get you two juniors over with. Be efficient."

And that is when Aang speaks for the first time since we entered the office. "Mathematics at Stanford is still the plan. I'm the Mathletes captain for the second year in a row, and I aim to win Mathletes Nationals in March. I want to know what else I need to do this year to boost my application."

So the plan he's talked about since the first day of high school hasn't changed. Memories of our conversations flood my brain against my will.

Ms. Foster nods at him and turns to me. "How about you?"

I sit up straighter, willing the echoes of our friendship away. I cough, focusing on making sure the correct accent leaves my mouth. "I'm applying to Columbia for pre-med. I'm still on the varsity cheerleading team and ..." I glance at Aang. His eyes are trained on Ms. Foster. "I'll have the highest GPA in our grade this year. What else should I be focusing on?" And because it's muscle memory, I add the old jab. "Being Ivy League, Columbia's standards

are probably *different* compared to schools in California. Northern California, specifically.”

Aang’s head whips toward me. The joke used to earn me a laugh. Now, fury oozes from his black eyes, his dark-rimmed glasses not softening the expression. But he’s finally looked at me, so I count it as my victory.

Ms. Foster takes a long drink from her coffee cup. “Your commitment to *routinely* seeking my opinions has been nothing but a bright spot in my career at this high school.”

English might not be my first language, but the sarcasm is hard to miss.

“The rest of the year will be hectic with the seniors, so I’m giving you advice now, and I’m asking you to be more independent this year. Okay?” She looks between us.

We nod in agreement. I bet she’ll miss my monthly emails debating the merits of biochemistry versus biomedical engineering for pre-med undergrad.

She addresses me first. “Ms. Johnson.” She uses only my dad’s Nigerian surname. She cannot pronounce my mom’s Polish one, so she always skips it.

Good.

JJ Johnson sounds more American than Józefina-Ibifubara Wyróżnicka-Johnson.

Guilt rises in me, but I push it down. Her pronunciation of Wyróżnicka would have been abysmal, so no point in bringing it up and reminding everyone I’m not from here.

“Cheerleading will make for a great personal essay. But you need to show yourself off academically outside of your GPA. You were in Mathletes freshman year. Why don’t you rejoin? Medical schools look favorably on strong mathematicians. And I heard the math club is planning on winning Nationals this year.” She smiles at Aang.

The suggestion hits like a bucket of ice water.

Rejoin Mathletes? That’s not an option. The guy next to me, clutching his phone, made sure of that.

“Ms. Foster, as much as I’d like to do that”—I force a smile—“the schedule overlapped with cheerleading last year, and I’m sure that’s

also the case this year.” If Aang can help it, that is.

“Let’s check.” She turns to her computer, and the sound of keyboard clacking fills the room. “This year, the two clubs aren’t even on the same day. Cheerleading is on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, and Mathletes is on Wednesdays and Fridays. You can do both, and it would be great for your application. Mathletes should be delighted about you rejoining. Right, Mr. Lau?”

I hold in my snort. Aang will drop dead before inviting me back to the club.

I wrap a braid around my finger. Rejoin Mathletes? I enjoyed it. I was good at it. And Ms. Foster has given me a way back in. But I don’t know how much fun it’d be with him alternating between ignoring me and pretending I don’t exist.

At the same time ... Columbia pre-med in New York has been my goal since I landed in this country two years ago, exactly a week before my freshman year.

And it would annoy Aang. Another win.

My braid slips through my fingers. “Ms. Foster, thank you so much for the brilliant idea.” I plaster on my brightest cheerleading smile. “I’m nothing but thrilled at the prospect of rejoining Mathletes.”

I bask in Aang’s shocked expression. More of those to come this year, I’m sure.

“That’s great, Ms. Johnson!” She claps. “Now, you, Mr. Lau—what are your interests outside of math? Yes, academic achievements are important, but everyone applying will have those. What will make the admission officers remember you?”

Aang shakes his head. “I don’t understand. Why do I need to do something non-math-related? Stanford should appreciate my laser focus.”

Ms. Foster sighs like she’s had this conversation many times. “At the end of the day, Stanford’s looking for unique personalities. What would make *you* stand out?”

The room goes silent as Aang visibly racks his brain for an answer. He adjusts his glasses, his bicep flexing, and I dart my gaze away. My

mind has more crucial matters to expend its energy on. Like figuring out how not to get demoted from my flyer position.

My hand travels to my hair to attempt a pull but freezes by my ear.

He's a guy.

My braids hit my face when my head flies back toward Aang. He's tall. He's disciplined and hard-working. And he's started exercising. Allegedly.

Well ...

Here goes nothing.

"You could join the cheerleading team."

He blinks at me. "What?"

"You. Could join. The cheerleading team," I repeat.

He snickers. "Why on Earth would I do that?"

"Joining the cheerleading team as a guy makes you more interesting. It shows you have a unique hobby outside of math." My voice gets high-pitched as my brain races for more arguments. "We won State last year, and we're going to win Nationals this year, so that'd be another win for your college resume." I lean forward, grabbing the armrest of his chair. "And Stanford has a co-ed cheerleading team!"

He gawks at me like I've lost my mind, but Ms. Foster beams like I'm a genius. "This is an excellent idea! And we already know the two don't clash!"

"But I'm not joining *cheerleading*!" Aang's lips press into a thin line as my hands clutch his chair harder. He leans away from me. "What a ridiculous suggestion."

Ms. Foster narrows her eyes. "Mr. Lau, cheerleading is an incredibly demanding sport that deserves more respect than it's currently receiving."

"But—"

"I told Ms. Johnson what she could do, and without hesitation, she agreed."

"But—"

"You can think about it and take the advice or not. But please come back here next time as seniors."

And with that, we get kicked out of her office.
Aang speedwalks away from me before I even open my mouth.
Irritation bubbles up. He needs to stop acting like I'm the only
one who did something wrong last year.

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Chapter 2

my own mother blackmails me

(nothing new, really)

Aang

At the end of the school day, Remy and I get into my mom's unnecessarily large SUV. Ugh, Americans.

"First day of junior year!" She blasts the horn.

"Mom! I told you last year to stop doing that!" Like this day hasn't been painful enough after having to share breathing space with *her* in the counselor's office.

Mom flashes a smile at my best friend. "But Remy loves it."

"I really do." He nods, his blond hair even lighter after the summer. He's wearing a red polo shirt, and his jeans are stained with paint.

"How was the summer in Alabama?" Mom looks at Remy in the rearview mirror as she starts the car. The engine rumbles to life.

"It was good." His Southern drawl is stronger than before the holidays. "Nana taught me a new embroidery stitch, and Pops took me hunting."

How he manages to fit his two personalities into one person, I'll never know.

"Sounds like a perfect summer for you." Mom pulls out of the parking lot. "Aang, how was your meeting with Ms. Foster?"

"It was okay." I put on my seat belt.

"Just *okay*?" Remy elbows me. "You've been bothering Ms. Foster with emails the whole summer! And bothering us by talking about

the emails. And now you don't want to say more than *okay*? What happened in there?"

"It's not bothering her when she's literally our guidance counselor." I cross my arms. "And she told us not to annoy her until senior year. Can you imagine?"

"Us?" Remy raises his eyebrow. "Who's *us*?"

Shit.

"I meant me. She told *me* not to annoy her."

"Aang ..." Mom lowers her voice. "Tell us what happened with the guidance counselor, or no homework after dinner."

I groan, sinking into the seat. "That stopped being funny a long time ago."

"Ms. Jane, *do not* listen to him! It gets funnier every time you say it." Remy punches me in the arm. "Now, spill!"

These two nosy bastards will hold me hostage in this car until I disclose this information. I know that much.

"Ms. Foster basically forced me to have the meeting together with JJ. How is that allowed? I understand she's overworked, but—"

"JJ was there?" I catch Mom's grin, specifically reserved for *her*. I haven't seen that smile in over a year, and it better not be making a comeback.

"Unfortunately, she was. And I had legitimate concerns about my college application. But Ms. Foster goes off about how colleges want unique personalities, and JJ comes out of nowhere with how I should join cheerleading, and Ms. Foster thought it was the best idea ever?"

Remy's eyes go wide. "You're joining cheerleading?"

"Obviously not. It's a stupid American sport, and it won't help me get into Stanford."

"I don't know, Aang." Mom merges the car onto the highway. "It sounds like cheerleading would make your application more interesting. And what else will you do? Play football?"

They both giggle.

"Cheerleading and football are not the only sports in existence." I roll my eyes. "I could do dragon boat racing, for example."

"What's dragon boat racing?" Remy asks.

I cite the Wikipedia article I read. “It’s a Chinese team water sport with dragon-shaped boats, twenty paddlers, a drummer, and a steerer, invented to honor Qu Yuan, a poet who—”

“We don’t live near a body of water,” my mom interrupts. “How exactly do you plan to row a boat?”

“If we lived in Hong Kong, that wouldn’t be a problem,” I mutter. Instead, I’m in this hellhole of an American suburb where the closest I get to Chinese culture is eating at Panda Express.

Mom brakes too aggressively, and my chest digs into the seat belt. “Sorry, noticed the red light too late.” She forces a chuckle and looks at me in the mirror. “Unfortunately, you’re not in Hong Kong, Aang. So maybe consider cheerleading? You never know, it might become your favorite thing.”

I scoff.

“I agree with Ms. Jane. You need more hobbies than learning Cantonese and doing math equations,” Remy says.

I sink further into the seat without responding. Silence fills the car.

Remy takes out a notebook and starts working on a new embroidery pattern. My mom switches on the radio and squeals when the station plays her favorite song, “Lucky.” She belts out the chorus. She’s as excellent a singer as she is a comedian. I put my headphones on.

Let’s assume I have lost my mind and want to do cheerleading. I have Chinese school on Monday and Thursday evenings. There’s no way I can do both in the same day.

But I still unlock my phone, angling it so Remy can’t see it, and google *Stanford cheerleading team*. A photo app notification appears before I click on the first result. *A memory from two years ago!*

The world has been made to laugh in my face.

My thumb hovers over the notification. I know which photo will appear if I tap it. I tear my eyes away from the screen and look out the window as Mom turns onto a smaller street.

My pulse jumps.

We’re passing her favorite bakery. At least, what used to be her favorite, due to their provision of “proper bread.” She never

explained what that meant.

A vanilla scent fills my nose, even though there's no way I can actually be smelling the bakery from inside the car. I turn back to my phone and frown. My thumb must have twitched, because instead of the notification, three faces stare at me.

Freshman Remy, laughing at the camera, pointing to my red T-shirt with the beginning of a joke visible: *Parallel lines have so much in common ...*

Freshman me. My hair is shorter, my glasses bigger. I'm frowning, but there's an upward curve to my lips that I'm fighting. I'm looking at her.

Freshman JJ, taking the selfie of us, but smiling at freshman me. Before she snapped the picture, she told me I looked good in the T-shirt. I told her the T-shirt was abominable.

You didn't have to buy it.

I knew I didn't have to. But she had asked, and the next thing I knew, I was walking to the register.

The car door opens, snapping me out in time to say bye to Remy. He strolls across his lawn and sits in a rocking chair on the wraparound porch. He goes back to sketching without even attempting to enter his house. Mom waits for a couple with a stroller to cross the road to Admaston Park, which separates our neighborhood from Remy's, before driving away.

Since everyone seems hell-bent on torturing me today (myself included), I scroll through the photos that we took together freshman year. At the mall. At the library. At my house. At Remy's house. My knuckles slowly turn white around my phone.

I should have deleted all of them after the fight.

When we get home, Mom goes to her study. I run up to my room, but halt midway through the staircase. *I almost forgot.*

I tiptoe down to the study and peek through the partially closed door, where I can see the altar: a red shelf holding a bowl of water, a vase of fresh daffodils, a candle, a wooden racehorse, and an old, yellowing photograph of my grandmother. Mom bows three times in front of it and says something in Cantonese. It's the only time I hear her freely speak her mother tongue. I can't call it *ours*. She puts

a pack of cigarettes in front of the photo. She puts a new pack there once every couple of months. And always on my first day of school. I tried to add incense sticks to make it look like a proper altar, but she says she doesn't like the smell. I wonder if the ancestors weep when they hear her say that.

I move away from the door. And like every day, the Hong Kong-shaped hole in my heart gets a little bigger.

In my room, I grab my laptop from the desk and flop onto my bed. My tacked-on Bruce Lee poster watches me from the opposite wall as the screen lights up and the Stanford Mathematics department website greets me. Once I'm near San Francisco, everything will be straightforward. Effortless. Over 62,000 people born in Hong Kong live there, and even more descendants. Cantonese is spoken in the streets. Restaurants make actual Cantonese food.

But to join a cheerleading team to get there?

Preposterous.

I try to run through all the reasons JJ gave this morning for why this is such a terrific idea. But I remember less the reasons and more how she sounded. *American*.

Freshman year, she pronounced *said* like *set*, *job* like *jop*, and *think* like *fink*, along with hundreds of other differences that made up her accent. Now, that sound is gone.

But when she started talking about Stanford and cheerleading in the guidance counselor's office, she became more frantic, more desperate. *And* became *ant*, and she rolled the "R" in *cheerleading*. She sounded like she did before. Before she joined the cheerleading team at the beginning of sophomore year and lied about it for weeks. Before she started showing up late to Mathletes and forgetting our plans. Before *the fight* happened.

Before I made her choose.

When she asked me to join cheerleading, she sounded like she had before all that.

I open a new tab to check the timetable for the bus to the next town over where Chinese school is. To confirm that it would be logistically impossible for me to do cheerleading and Chinese school

on the same day. Sure, cheerleading would be a few hours earlier, but the bus schedule in this part of central Massachusetts was created specifically to get people *not* to use the bus. I scroll down to the afternoon service.

My hand tightens around the laptop.

Well, fuck.

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Chapter 3

*you're in his dms, i'm praying to bookmarks that he
joins cheerleading*

JJ

“You’re rejoining Mathletes?” Monique groans, finishing her deadlift set, the plates slamming against the lifting platform. The sweat glitters on her black skin, darker after a summer in Cape Cod. She readjusts her relaxed-hair ponytail and grabs her water bottle from the floor.

“Ms. Foster said it would improve my chances of getting into Columbia.” I change from a front to a middle split.

“I thought ... Mathletes ... at the same time?” Bryn huffs from the treadmill.

Still in the split, I put my arms on the floor. “The schedule changed this year.”

Monique drops her water bottle. “*Do not* mention this to my mother. Last year, I was spared the torture of participating when the Mathletes schedule changed last minute.”

I ram my elbows into the floor. *Last minute, courtesy of Aang.*

“But so cool ... you’re rejoining!” Bryn’s short ginger hair is stuck to her sweaty forehead. Her usually pale skin is redder than the time she did a keg stand at Brad’s party.

If only everyone thought it was so cool. I stand up to do heel stretches. I kick up my leg in front of me and catch my foot above my head.

Bryn switches off the treadmill and struts over to me. She compares our foreheads. “You *did* get taller over the summer!”

I drop the stretch, and my foot hits the ground with a loud thud.
“Don’t remind me! Do you think if I crouch, Coach will notice?”

They nod.

“What if I walk around with bent knees?”

Nod.

“If I crawl everywhere?”

Nod.

I plop down on the ground. The cold floor of Monique’s home gym doesn’t help me calm down. They sit next to me.

“It’s not that bad ...” Bryn rubs my shoulder.

“Yes, it is,” Monique says. “There’s no one on the team Coach would consider tall enough to be JJ’s backspot.”

“Well then, she’ll have to recruit someone from the girls’ basketball team,” Bryn says. “Or a guy.”

They burst out laughing. There has never been a guy on the team in the history of cheerleading at Blackstock High School.

“Well, actually ...” I say quietly.

Their laughter dies off.

“Who did you try to recruit?” Bryn asks.

I play with the scrunchie on my wrist. I haven’t said his name out loud in a year. It comes out scratchy. “Aang.”

Monique winces. “You asked *him*? Why would he agree? Why would you ask?”

“I was desperate, and he was there?”

“Never a good combination.” Bryn stands up. “My sister learned that the hard way in college.” She goes over to the mini fridge.

“Quieter!” Monique hisses. “My mother might hear you.”

Bryn opens the fridge, throws two Gatorades at us, and keeps searching. “Where are the sugar-free ones? Monique, you’re my best friend, and yet you consistently forget my diabet—”

“Just check the other fridge, you dummy.”

Bryn strolls over to the other side of the gym and looks through the smaller fridge. “Found it!” She takes a gulp and sits back down with us. “For how many yoga retreats your mom does, she really has no chill.”

“Tell her that. I dare you.”

Bryn shakes her head. “She’ll kick me out, and what gym will I go to then? One that I have to pay for?”

Our laughter cuts off at the sharp click of heels outside the gym.

The door opens. “Hello, girls! Enjoying the workout?” Monique’s mom towers over us in her cream power suit. She spots the barbell and frowns, but doesn’t comment on it. Yet. “How was your treadmill time, Brynleigh?”

Bryn grimaces at the use of her full name. “Faster than last week.”

“Good.” Mrs. Washington looks at me, and horror flashes across her face. “JJ, you’ve got taller over the summer! Will Coach let you fly?”

My fingernails dig into the Gatorade bottle. “I’ll do what I can to make it happen.” I’ll sell my soul to a nondenominational devil if I have to.

“Please do. An opportunity like that is not given to *us* very often.” She glances at Monique, who avoids her gaze and plays with one of many gold necklaces she’s wearing. “Either way, girls, would you like to stay for dinner?”

Bryn and I scramble to our feet.

“Unfortunately, my parents already have dinner planned tonight,” I lie.

“I gotta go to work.” Bryn tells the truth.

I lean down and squeeze Monique’s hand as Bryn whispers that we’ll do a group call before bedtime. Monique sends us a resigned expression as we shout goodbye to Mrs. Washington and run through the door.

“Monique, why do you insist on lifting weights? You should come with me to Pilates ...” is the last thing I hear before the gym door shuts.

Bryn and I get into my car, and a short ride later, I drop her off at the hair salon on the town’s main street. I wave at her mom, who shows her new Marley twists off to me from the sidewalk. She kisses her daughter on the cheek, and they walk into the salon, disappearing behind a black fist flag attached to the door.

It’s a twenty-minute drive until I reach my home. I turn into the cul-de-sac, where trees line the street at perfect intervals from each

other. I park in our driveway and walk the cobbled path to the front door, each side of the lawn overgrown with grass, which makes us enemy number one of the neighborhood's homeowners association. I should convince Dad to cut the grass, but no matter how much this lawn marks our house as *not from here*, I cannot bring myself to decimate the pink and purple wildflowers sprouting from the ground. They should stop running their nature like the military over here.

I open the door.

"Józia!" my mom shouts, as always, using the shorthand of my Polish name.

She's home already? That's out of the ordinary, especially since she performed a surgery all the way in Boston today. Huh. I didn't actually lie to Monique's mom.

I take off my shoes and walk past the cabinets in the corridor overflowing with Nollywood DVDs, Polish ceramics, and medical textbooks signed either with Mom's name, Małgorzata Wyróżnicka, or Dad's name, Ibinabo Johnson.

I squeeze through the half-open kitchen door. You can't push it all the way out because Stachu, the anatomically accurate skeleton, is hanging around in the corner. The light-yellow cabinets appear orange, owing to the sunset light streaming through the windows.

"*Patrz, co kupiłam dzisiaj!*"¹ Mom points to the pan, pushing her brown hair off her face. Her green eyes are exhausted, but there's a sparkle fighting its way through. "*Pierogi w polskim sklepie w Bostonie!*"²

I regard the pan suspiciously. I'm not in the mood for dumplings straight from the Polish shop in Boston. "Is there any other food?"

Mom narrows her eyes. "Why are you speaking English?"

"Because we should keep practicing. We're getting better at the accent."

She sighs, mindlessly wiping her buttery hands on her navy blazer. "Okay, but just for a bit. My brain's killing me more than usual. I can't speak English for too long."

I squeeze her arm. "Go shower and put on pajamas."

When my dad comes back from his hospital, already in a tracksuit, we sit down for dinner, with him choosing the music. The dining room—which has a wooden table surrounded by several shipping boxes we *still* haven't unpacked—fills with the baritone of Burna Boy singing in a mix of English, Yoruba, and Nigerian Pidgin.

I understand only the English parts, and my dad speaks Kalabari, not Yoruba, so most of the lyrics are a mystery to us. But my dad hears his home in the music, and the pressure that his nursing patients put on him releases from his shoulders.

I wait as they say their prayers, one in Polish, one in Kalabari, more out of a habit their parents instilled in them than belief in a higher power.

Pierogi are exceptional. They're golden, pan-seared, coated in butter, topped with bacon and caramelized onions. When I bite into one and the salty cooked pork melts in my mouth, it's like a Sunday dinner at my grandma's. They could not taste more like being back in Poland.

I push my plate away after eating one. I've lost my appetite.

"Ibi, have you talked to any of your old friends in Poland recently?" My dad shoves an entire dumpling into his mouth. As always, he uses a nickname of my Nigerian name.

I shake my head—my usual response when he asks this question. I didn't have any friends. I had classmates, gymnastics teammates, and kids whose parents were friends with my mom.

"I talked to Karolina's mom two days ago. Turns out Karolina's also planning to do medicine. You should reach out to her." My mom cuts a *pieroga* in half before bringing it to her mouth.

On my last day in Polish school, Karolina asked if I was going back to Africa. She knew for a fact that I had never set foot on the continent. "Sure, I'll do it soon," I lie. I look down at my knee bouncing under the table. "Right now, I'm focusing on holding on to the flyer's position on the team."

"Oh, cheerleading! That reminds me ... can you check if Nationals aren't on the same day as *Niedziela Palmowa*?" Mom asks.

My head whips up. "Why?"

"I want us to bless *palmę* this year."

Ugh. Since she came back from visiting Poland last month, she's gotten into cultural things she never used to do there. It's the end of August, and she's already planning Palm Sunday. That's in March. And a Christian holiday. She hasn't been to church by choice since graduating from medical school.

Unfortunately, I already know the two events won't overlap because Nationals are on a Friday. I clench my jaw. "Sure, I'll check the dates soon."

"I also have your painkillers in my bag. I got you a prescription for the stronger ones."

My jaw relaxes, and the irritation goes away. "Thanks, Mom."

"Are you sure you don't want to go to a gynecologist again? Especially after your last period?"

I shake my head. They'll repeat the same unhelpful things that make me want to cry. I change the topic. "How was work today?"

"Oh, there's something you'll like!" Mom perks up. "We removed a tumor near Broca's area, and you know what that means."

"Awake craniotomy!" My knee finally stops bouncing. "The patient was conscious and had to talk during the operation. That's so cool!"

"That is not the best part! He was a former gymnast and was explaining all the tumbling moves." She chews on her dumpling. "And I was constantly saying, yes, my daughter can do this, yes, my daughter can do that." She laughs. "I *fink* he was very impressed with your skills."

"Thanks, Mom." I giggle. "But remember it's *think*. You said *fink*. Like Polish *f* with your tongue at the back of your mouth." I exaggerate the tongue movement. "But it should be the *th* sound with your tongue between your front teeth. *Think*."

"*Fink*," she repeats after me, but she still sounds Polish. She didn't try as hard as I did when we moved here two years ago. Until she realized that softening her accent made people listen to her more at the hospital.

"That sounds like a much better day than I had." My dad steals my leftover pierogi. "They made us give a patient the more expensive antibiotic, which I *think*"—he winks at me—"was

unnecessary, but what will you do?” He switches to Polish to complain about the hospital management in America while my mom steals his stolen pierogi.

Antibiotics are the topic of the conversation for the rest of dinner, with Polish sometimes interrupted by an English medical word. The rest of my pierogi disappear into my parents’ mouths.

After dinner, we move to the kitchen. My mom scrapes the plates, I wash them, and my dad dries them with a towel. Burna Boy is replaced by Seal singing about a rose.

“Why do we have to wash the dishes by hand? The dishwasher is right there.” We don’t get to eat dinner together often, so I take any chance I can get to bring up the banned appliance.

“The dishwasher is for special occasions.” Mom hands me the last plate.

I scrub. “What’s a special occasion?” I hand Dad the wet plate.

“When we have guests.” He dries the plate.

“Two years in this country, and we’ve never had any guests.”
Thankfully.

“Exactly. If guests appeared, it’d be a special occasion.” My dad puts the last plate in the cupboard and yawns. “Time for sleep.”

It’s eight o’clock, but my parents are early sleepers and even earlier risers. Being a neurosurgeon and a critical care nurse will do that to you.

I make myself a PB&J sandwich with proper bread and go upstairs to my room, where the walls are covered in photos, American high school movie posters, and the best pop album covers. I flop down in my pink swivel chair and kick my feet up onto my desk.

My phone pings. I check my messages, but it’s not Monique and Bryn.

It’s my grandma.

*Przyjeżdżasz na następne wakacje?*³

My stomach churns.

I skipped Poland this summer. I skipped Poland last summer. But now she’s already asking about next year. She’ll be devastated when I say I won’t come again. But twelve months is plenty of time to produce valid excuses.

I wonder what excuses my dad uses. He left Nigeria thirty years ago and has never gone back. I've never actually asked why. It can't be the same reason I don't want to go to Poland. He wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb in Nigeria.

Chewing on my sandwich, I stare at the NYC collage above my desk. The Empire State Building. The Statue of Liberty. A subway entrance. And in the middle of it all ... the Columbia cheerleading team, doing a pyramid. I glued my photo on top of the formation.

My hand squashes the bread.

Everything has to go according to the plan.

High school cheerleader. Ivy League acceptance. New York, the cultural melting pot to disappear into.

I would have done medicine anyway, but there's something so distinctly American about saying, "I'm on the pre-med track," and that's a bonus. And it all starts with being a flyer—the pinnacle of the American high school experience.

I turn my swivel chair toward my closet. I stand up and go rummaging through all my worn-out cheerleading shoes and Nike Pro shorts. I catch sight of my dusty *Felix*, *Net i Nika* book collection. I purse my lips and ignore the Polish books.

I finally spot what I'm looking for.

Two bookmarks I made with Remy's help, each made from a dried pink flower glued to a piece of cardboard. It was the last thing we did together, at the beginning of sophomore year, before I forced him to let me go. He didn't want to, and he didn't understand why he had to. But what was I supposed to tell him? That his best friend shifted the Mathletes schedule by an hour to conflict with cheerleading? That he didn't tell me about it, leaving me to stare at an empty classroom in confusion? That when I went to his house to confront him about it, he told me I was a vapid girl desperate for popularity?

I sit back at my desk. I don't particularly see how we can survive this year without killing each other if we're in *two* extracurriculars together. On the other hand, I don't see how I can endure a whole year without being a flyer.

I clutch the bookmarks and do my own version of a prayer. *Aang, if by any chance you have lost your mind, please join cheerleading.*

¹Look what I bought today!

²Pierogi at a Polish shop in Boston!

³Will you come next summer?

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Chapter 5⁴

confessions of a teenage drama queen

(aang's version)

JJ

The next day, before my first class starts, I search my locker for my lip gloss.

"I'll join the team."

I squeal, spinning around, my hand flying to my chest. *Ja pierdolę.*⁵ Is this what a heart attack feels like? I focus on the navy T-shirt in front of me to slow down my racing heart. Chinese characters. I've seen this T-shirt before. It's a proverb. Stone, dripping water, doing something.

A cough snaps me out of it. My gaze travels upward and meets a set of black eyes. *He's* standing in front of me. And ... "You said something? To me?"

Aang pinches the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses up. "I'll join the cheerleading team." He grits his teeth.

"You will?" The prayer worked. He's lost his mind.

His expression is so pained, I check behind him to make sure no one is holding a gun to his head.

"Do you want me to change my mind? I'm already halfway there," he says.

"No, no." I shake my head. I might not hunt like Remy does, but I recognize a deer about to be spooked.

"But I will join under one condition."

Of course he will. "If I sell my soul to a devil?"

"That already happened."

A sharp sting burns my eyes. He used to be so nice. I turn away from him to close my locker and blink the sting away.

“What is it, then?” I lean against my locker, looking up at him. I might have gotten taller, but he got *taller*. I don’t know what to do with that fact.

“What’s the real reason you want me on the team? You’re not doing it to help me get into Stanford.”

He’s not wrong. But he wouldn’t get it. Even worse, telling him might make him not join just to spite me.

“You won’t understand,” I say.

He shoves his hands into his pockets until only his black watch is visible. “Try me.” His eyes lock on mine.

The words spill out before I can reconsider. “I got too tall over the summer to fly.”

He tilts his head. “There’s no height limit for passengers on domestic or international flights.”

Seconds pass with neither of us blinking.

I force a deep breath. “A flyer is the person at the top of a cheerleading stunt. *I’m flying*”—I make air quotes—“means being the flyer. They’re usually really short.”

He doesn’t comment this time, which motivates me to keep going. “I don’t believe there’s a girl on the team tall enough for Coach to choose to be my backspot. But if I bring in a boy, that changes the rules. I’ve worked hard over the summer, stretching and working on motions, and being chosen as a flyer last year was a huge thing. It’s not easy when you’re not”—I point to my face—“you know ...” I search for understanding in his face.

He nods slowly, and I exhale.

“So, what will this nightmare entail for me?” He runs a hand through his hair, but the strands don’t stay back. They spring to the front, the ends falling over his glasses.

My stomach flips. From irritation. “It’s not a nightmare! It’s an amazing sport, requiring strength, flexibility, stamina, and showmanship. And it’s a privilege to represent the school. Stop rolling your eyes at me!”

He rolls his eyes at me.

I can't believe I used to have a crush on you.

I force a displeased smile that shows all my teeth. If he's joining the team, I'll have to show some civility. "Practices are Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays in the gym, starting at three p.m., and they last for two hours. The first practice is this Thursday. The tryouts were a week ago, but I'll talk to Coach. She'll definitely let a guy in. You're lucky."

"That's exactly how I feel right now."

I swallow my annoyance. "It'd be good to meet up tomorrow? I can explain the basics, so you're not completely lost. You could come over to my house and—"

"Come over?" His eyebrows shoot up. "To your house?"

I wince. What on Earth possessed me to say that? I've never invited him over. At my house, wherever he turned, he would find something Polish or Nigerian to ask about.

"I ... um ... I meant the gym. Yeah, the gym. Basically, my house now." My voice is an octave higher than normal. "Loads of space. I'll show you stuff!"

"Okay ..." he says slowly.

"Okay!" I jump from one leg to another. "I can text you the time for tomorrow?"

"I'm surprised you still have my number. Did that not lose you popularity points?"

"I decided to keep it. What if I ever needed to bully you into doing my homework?" I pick my backpack up off the floor. "Now, excuse me, I need to find my lip gloss."

He scoffs and turns away from me. "... always ... left pocket ..." He walks away.

"What was that?" I shout after him. But he keeps on walking.

Did he say something about a left pocket? I open the side pocket of my backpack.

My lips curl up at the sight of my lip gloss.



The next day after school, we meet in the gym. We have an hour before the volleyball team shows up.

“Good news! I talked to Coach. She could not be happier you’re joining!” With Aang on the team, we move from a thirty-team all-girl division to a ten-team co-ed division. Coach’s eyes lit up with glee when I told her I found a boy who wants to join.

I sit on the bleachers with my laptop, and the smell of sweat and rubber puts me in a good mood. On the other side of the gym, three state championship banners hang in a row—proof of our cheerleading team’s winning streak. We’re getting that Nationals title this year.

Aang moves to sit next to me but freezes. After a moment of deliberation, he sits one row above me.

Okay then. Good mood dampened, I open my laptop.

“Let’s start with what we actually do.” I strain my neck to look at him. “We do sideline cheerleading for another sport, usually American football, once every week or two. We don’t spend much time preparing for that.” I half-turn toward him, showing him a photo on my laptop. “Now, this is the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas. This is where cheerleading Nationals are. This is the goal. Any cheerleader would kill to perform there. We start working on the routine from the first training session until the last. It consists of stunting, tumbling, jumps, and dance. Any questions?”

“I need definitions for all those words.”

“That’s what videos are for.” I show him the first one. “This is stunting. One backspot holding the ankles and two bases holding the feet, lifting a flyer into the air.” I point at him. “You’ll be a backspot. You’re mainly in charge of ensuring the flyer doesn’t fall.” I change the video. “This is a prep. When the flyer’s feet are held at the level of the bases’ shoulders. And this is an extension, where the flyer is held in the bases’ extended hands.”

Blood drains from his face. “You expect me to lift a human being above my head like that? How do they even stay there?”

“Good grip from the bases, strong core from the flyers, mild disregard for injury-related death.”

He shakes his head. "I don't understand why you think I'd be a good fit for this."

I glance at his arms. Definitely more defined than they used to be. His brow furrows.

Shit. I tear my gaze away from his biceps. "Well ... I thought ..."

He leans toward me, hovering over my shoulder. "What are you mumbling over there?"

"I thought ... I thought if you put even five percent of your math obsession into cheerleading ... no lack of muscles could stop you."

"I'll put in one percent."

"Fine by me." I shrug, and my shoulder brushes his chin.

He springs back, as if just realizing how far he had leaned toward me. My cheeks heat up. He's acting like I have a contagious disease transmitted by skin-to-skin contact.

There's a beat of silence before he clears his throat. "Also, I have muscles. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to move. Wouldn't a future doctor know that?"

And just like that, my face goes back to its normal temperature. "You're lucky I take the Hippocratic oath seriously. I'll be the bigger person and reset your nose when someone finally punches you in the face for being a jerk."

"You won't be getting anywhere near me."

I change the topic before I'm the one resorting to physical violence. "Backspot and lifting. Three people lift. Two of them will be more physically capable than you, so you're there for show, really."

"And the dancing?"

"Coach will probably stick you at the back. Unless you want to be the center of the dance. I've heard it's one of your dreams."

He fixes me with a hard stare. Were his eyes this dark two years ago?

Nope, wrong thought.

"Okay!" I put the laptop aside and jump up, shaking out my arms. "I'll show you some of the basics now. The counts, motions, and backspot technique."

"Do we have to?" He looks around the empty gym.

“No, we can go home. Where I can draft an email to Stanford telling them that personality’s chasing you, but you’re faster.”

He murmurs something about being punished enough but stands up.

“As a flyer, I’m between the bases, and you’re behind me.” I stand in front of him and hope he doesn’t take this as an opportunity to stab me in the back. Again.

“I put my hands on the bases’ shoulders and push off to jump into their hands.” I jump and half-squat on the ground. “Your job is to grab my waist when I put my hands on their shoulders and then help me jump. That’s called a smoosh, and it’s usually how a stunt starts.” I straighten up and stand behind him. “I’ll show you how to lift. I’ll put my hands on your waist, okay?”

“What?” He shivers and spins around. “No! Why do you need to touch me?”

I gape at him. “You think you signed up for chess? This whole sport is built around people touching each other!”

His eyes widen in horror as it dawns on him that he will indeed have to touch me.

“Oh, this is a nightmare.” I pull on my braids. “How is this going to work if you’re scared to touch girls?”

His ears flush red. “I’m not scared to touch girls!”

“Sure, you’re a real player.” I roll my eyes.

He scoffs. “Because you love your players, don’t you? How’s Chad, by the way?”

“His name’s Brad. And we broke up six months ago.”

“Forgive me for not knowing all the details about cheerleading dating escapades. I know I should aim to find any scrap of information about such important figures like you and—”

“But you knew about my relationship with Brad?” I cross my arms. “And that relationship lasted barely four months?”

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. His ears get redder, though.

I cock my eyebrow. “Well?”

“I have to go.” He makes a beeline for the door.

“What?” I run after him. “We haven’t gone over anything! Are you coming tomorrow? Coach thinks you are, and she was so excited when I told her. If I have to tell her you changed your mind ...” I wince at how my voice breaks.

Aang stills without turning around. I stop behind him, my back taut like a spring.

“I’ll come tomorrow.”

My shoulders relax, the tension leaving my body. “I understand it must be overwhelming joining a new sport, and I thank you for—”

“There’s no need to thank me.” His voice is cold. “Because there’s not a single part of me that’s doing this for you.”

He storms off.

He’s such a drama queen.

He’ll fit right in.

⁴In Cantonese, *four* (sei, 四) sounds similar to the word for *death* (séi, 死), and it is considered unlucky. Some Hong Kongers will go to great lengths to avoid the number four.

⁵Fucking hell.

Chapter 6

how is this level of bodily contact allowed in high school?

Aang

There's still time to bail out.

I tie my new sneakers in the locker room. White exterior, white soles, no markings, according to JJ. She didn't text me to buy them. She went straight to calling my mother.

I glance in the mirror on my way out. My Stanford T-shirt provides enough motivation for me to push the door open.

The gymnasium looks different from how it does during PE class. There's a forty-by-six-foot red mat on the floor that looks like a really thick carpet. On it is a group of thirty girls shouting, jumping, and doing flips.

What would my grandmother think about this? Moving from Hong Kong to America with a newborn daughter so that her grandson could join cheerleading. I doubt that's what she had in mind. I doubt they even do cheerleading in Hong Kong.

I turn around.

The door is twenty feet away—2.5 feet per step, eight steps. I can be out of here in eight steps.

"Aang!"

I turn back.

"You have no idea how excited I am that you're here!" Ms. Rosario, or as JJ calls her, Coach, shakes my hand. "The first co-ed squad in the history of the school! And it's thanks to you and JJ!" She searches for JJ in the crowd. She's standing near two other girls but

isn't paying attention to their conversation. She's doing a jump where her legs extend outward, followed by a backflip. Try-hard.

"JJ's very hardworking. I'm not surprised she was the one to recruit you."

Teacher's pet.

"And I hear she brought you up to speed yesterday."

I don't feel particularly brought up to speed, but how hard can this activity be?

"Let me introduce you to the rest of the team." Ms. Rosario signals for me to follow her.

I sneak a look at the door. Eight steps.

"Aang?"

I trudge behind Ms. Rosario, who starts explaining the importance of having boys on cheerleading teams. As we reach the mat, the noise drowns out her words. How does she manage this group of girls? My eyes find JJ, who clearly got bored with acrobatics and is now adding to the noise by laughing with the two girls. I frown. They look familiar ...

A sharp, piercing sound cuts through the air, and I flinch, covering my ears. How does Ms. Rosario whistle so loudly with only her mouth?

The chatter vanishes like someone hit mute on a TV. Every head turns, and in the blink of an eye, they're all in a semicircle around her.

"Girls, give a warm welcome to Aang Lau, whose joining marks our transition to a co-ed team!"

The screech that follows is so earsplitting it leaves me temporarily deaf.

Ms. Rosario puts one hand up, and the noise ceases instantly. "Line up, please."

The girls mill around, switching positions. JJ chews on her braid, walking around hunched over. Oh. They're ordering themselves from shortest to tallest.

"Aang, join the line, okay?"

I walk to the end where the tall people are. From the corner of my eye, I see that JJ's the sixth person from the short end. That's

hardly being a team giant. Why am I here?

I stand at the end of the line, awaiting further instructions.

“Thank you, girls!” Ms. Rosario’s gaze darts to me. “Sorry! I meant thank you, *everyone*!”

A couple of giggles.

“Today’s stunt groups are preliminary. Don’t get attached to your group. Don’t get attached to your position.” She starts shouting an onslaught of names, each greeted with a squeal.

All this excitement over being assigned to a group. I won’t get half this enthusiasm tomorrow for the first Mathletes meeting, and a fraction of the people will show up. Last year, we didn’t have the right skill mix to be competitive and barely placed in the top twenty. This year, I need someone good at logic questions to win Nationals. My jaw clenches when I recall whose area of expertise that used to be.

“... and Aang!”

My head snaps up. Separate groups are standing around the mat, staring at me. Which one am I supposed to join?

“You’re in the group with me.”

Instant relief gives way to annoyance. I turn to JJ. “How unfortunate.”

She narrows her eyes. Her braids are in a high ponytail held up with a pink scrunchie. They hit me in the face when she spins and walks away. I drag my feet but follow her.

Besides JJ, there are three other girls in the group. They wave at me, their smiles showing every single tooth. Terrifying.

They introduce themselves. Addy. Emmy. Paige.

“Welcome to the team!”

“So fun to have you in our group!”

“Have you done cheerleading before?”

Ms. Rosario’s appearance saves me from the barrage of questions. “Addy and JJ, you’re both flyers for today. Exchange places every couple of stunts. No decisions have been made yet.” She focuses on another group.

Addy is a pale girl with a blond ponytail tied with a red bow. Where JJ somewhat reaches my nose, this girl is barely at my

shoulder. When they stand next to each other, JJ looks like she's towering over her.

She can't be happy about that. My lips quirk up.

"Let's start with a smoosh!" Ms. Rosario shouts. "Clean one, clap three, turn five, jump in seven, stay one, three, down five, clean seven."

Wait. What?

"I'll go first." JJ throws herself between Emmy and Paige, beating Addy to it.

I stand behind her, like she showed me yesterday. "What do I do?"

She shivers. Jesus, I whispered that into her ear. This is way too close.

"On five, you grab my waist. On seven, you help me up. On five, you help me down."

"But ... I don't ..."

"Shouldn't have bailed yesterday," she spits out. "Do not screw this up."

"And five, six, seven, eight!" Ms. Rosario shouts.

The rest of my group hits their sides with their arms in some weird military-like motion. Just with much more deranged smiling. Paige and Emmy face each other, bend their knees, and put their hands out in front of them. JJ puts her hands on the girls' shoulders and raises her heels.

And then they dip.

Shit. Grab the waist.

But it's too late. JJ's halfway up. By the time my hands are on her waist, she's landed with her feet on Paige and Emmy's palms. Her core muscles shift under my hands, and my fingers twitch. Thankfully, the bases let go of her feet quickly, and she lands on the ground.

She turns to me, seething. "What do you think you're doing?"

I'm not about to admit I made a mistake. "You didn't even need me."

"For a smoosh! This is about to get infinitely harder without a backspot."

"Well, no one explained anything to me—"

“Well, I would have if you didn’t just leave yesterday—”

“I can just leave now—”

“Okay, go again!” Ms. Rosario shouts.

JJ steps aside, glaring, and Addy takes her place.

Five grab the waist, seven help up, five help down.

I don’t bother with the weird salute. But sure as hell, I’m grabbing the waist on five, helping up on seven, and helping down on five.

“Well done, Addy’s group. Aang, that was great backspotting!”

Ms. Rosario gives us a thumbs-up.

JJ stands in front of me, her nostrils flaring. “Did you do that on purpose?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Let’s go to prep now! Dip one, stay three, high V five, clean seven, down one.”

I remember prep from yesterday’s lecture. It’s when the flyer stands up from the crouching position, and the bases hold her at their chin level.

JJ shoots me a desperate look. Her mouth quivers, but she presses her lips together to stop it. She takes her position in front of me.

The pang in my chest from yesterday returns. My body needs to follow my brain’s orders to stop reacting to her sadness.

They all do the weird salute again. I grab her ankles as the bases dip. I use all my force to propel her up. Which might have been too much, since she wobbles at the top. I instinctively grab higher around her knees to stabilize her. Her skin is soft. Silk-soft.

The gym air is poisoning my brain.

She does the high V thing, which involves extending her arms up to form a V. What an original name. We go down.

“Thank you,” she whispers and makes space for Addy.

We spend the next thirty minutes making sure the preps are perfect. And that seems to be impossible, based on Ms. Rosario’s feedback.

“Paige and Emmy, you need to stand closer together on the smoosh!

“Group four, why aren’t your flyer’s ankles touching?

“Alexis, your arms are too wide on the high V!

“Aang, I didn’t give you permission to skip the motions!”

My arms are tired. They’re flailing strings of noodles, doing the *motions*.

“Break! Five minutes!” Ms. Rosario orders.

The clock catches my eye as I grab my water bottle. It’s only been forty minutes. Eighty left of this ordeal. Around me, the team’s back to screaming like we haven’t been doing heavy lifting for more than half an hour.

JJ’s next to the same girls as before.

A chill runs down my spine.

That’s them.

The ginger one has a bob now, and the tall one’s hair used to be curly, but that’s them. They’re the ones who were there that day. It was a week after the fight with JJ. I’d finally swallowed my pride and was going to beg her to come back to Mathletes. I was waiting in front of her locker with a flower, rehearsing my apology, when she appeared around the corner. She didn’t notice me because her attention was on those two girls.

And she was talking about me.

The flower ended up in the trash.

My heart’s thudding, the vibrations rising into my throat, making me feel sick.

The tall one catches me staring and says something to JJ. Are they going to laugh about that day?

They don’t laugh, but JJ breezes over in my direction, and I don’t know which is worse.

“How’s it going?” she asks.

My arms hurt. I don’t understand the motions thing. I forgot I’d be on the team with the girls who witnessed the most humiliating moment of my life.

I wait for my heart to settle. “Worse now that you showed up.”

She huffs but stays where she is.

We stand in silence. Being around her used to feel easy. In the car, at the library, on the floor of my room, shoulder to shoulder without saying a word. Now it’s fucking unbearable.

Especially since she used the break to shed her T-shirt and is now wearing only a white sports bra and pink bike shorts. I try not to glance at her, but my eyes ignore my brain's orders.

There's a definition in her shoulders that I never noticed before. If it were physically possible, she would probably bypass me and lift herself. There are muscle lines running through her legs that look carved in. She looks like an athlete. Like a ballet dancer. Or an ice skater. Or, I guess, a cheerleader.

Stop staring.

I will my eyes away. Did she catch me staring? I should just quickly look back and check. All her attention is on Ms. Rosario and Addy chatting on the other side of the gym. She's pinching her left arm, her posture stiff.

"I know Addy's shorter than you, but you're easier to lift," I say.

Her hand stills, and she looks at me. If she's surprised that I opened my mouth, she doesn't show it. "That's because I tense more. It helps the bases lift me." Her gaze travels back to Addy.

"What is that weird salute thing you all do at the start of every stunt?"

She turns back to me. "Weird salute thing?"

I slap my arms against my sides. "This thing." I look ridiculous.

I expect her to laugh at me, but she only says, "Motions add points for creativity and help break up the routine."

"I see."

"Yeah."

Ms. Rosario saves us from returning to silence. "Let's do single-leg preps! Group one, please demonstrate the correct technique."

The chatting stops immediately, and everyone returns to their positions. The tall girl I saw with JJ and three others stand in front of everyone else. The bases squat and grab the flyer's right foot. The backspot squats even lower and puts her hand under the flyer's butt.

I blink.

I'm supposed to do what?

My gaze wanders to JJ's pink bike shorts.

Nope. I'm not doing *that*.

The demonstration finishes, and JJ turns to me. The look on my face must be comical.

She bites her lip. "Don't overthink this. It's just cheerleading."
Just cheerleading?

"Let's do this!" Paige shouts.

I squat down. JJ's so close to my face I can count the stitches on her shorts. I lean away. I put one hand on the back of her knee.

"Higher," she hisses at me.

I move my hand an inch higher.

"Higher!"

I move my hand half an inch higher, and she stops fighting me.

My hands are drenched in sweat.

Which turns out to be a problem.

When the bases lift her, I don't have enough of a grip on her thigh. My hand slips as I push. And all the momentum generated to send her up ... makes her go forward.

She catapults out of the stunt and lands on her face with a loud thump.

My stomach drops, and I push through Paige and Emmy to kneel next to JJ. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She jumps to her feet and looks down at me, her nose reddish from hitting the mat. "Don't make a scene."

"Make a scene?" I stand up. "Your head rebounded off the mat! It looked like a basketball."

"And I'm fine. Let's go again before Coach gets to us." She glances toward Ms. Rosario and takes her position between the bases.

I look at Ms. Rosario. She's moving toward our group.

JJ's acting like the fall was no big deal, but she was barely off the ground, and it already looked dangerous. If we put her above our heads in extension, she'll be at least eight feet in the air. A fall from that height can mean a concussion and broken bones.

The realization hits me like a brick.

It's my job to make sure that doesn't happen.

This girl has lost her mind. Out of every single person in this school, she's ready to put her life in *my* hands?

For what? *Flying?*

Aang, JJ mouths. *Move*.

I purse my lips. *Have it your way, then*. I walk behind her, get into the correct position, and focus on doing the stunt properly.

I'm not going to be responsible for anyone's ER visit. Especially not hers. If I land her in a hospital, that might make us even for what she did last year. And then I'd have to stop being angry and forgive her. Nope. Not happening.

"And five, six, seven, eight!" Paige shouts.

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Chapter 7

i'm elderly

(spiritually, i've always been in my sixties, but the physical aspect is new to me)

Aang

Every stroke of my pen is torture. As usual, I woke up early to practice Chinese characters. But today the lines are wobbly, and my *sky*⁶ character looks suspiciously similar to *husband*.⁷ If Michael or any other kid in Chinese school committed a mistake like that, Ms. Leung would tear them to shreds. But I'll get a smile that screams *Well done for trying!* because my Cantonese is so bad.

But the midyear exam is in February, and I *am* getting a higher score than Michael. I don't care that he's a heritage speaker and I started learning Cantonese two years ago. I'm going to be better.

I make attempt number fourteen at writing *sky*.

Still looks wrong.

Attempt fifteen.

Wrong.

Sixteen.

Wrong.

I turn to a new page.

Seventeen.

Wrong.

At attempt forty-three, my mom bangs on the door, making me drop my pen. "What are you still doing in there? We're going to be late!"

I grab my backpack and try to run to the door, but it comes out like a limp. My legs hurt from yesterday's practice. Is this what it feels like to be elderly? I hobble downstairs and throw out a goodbye to my dad.

"Aang, wait!" He steps out of the kitchen, holding a coffee mug. "Just wanted to ask ... how was your first cheerleading practice? Did you enjoy it? When's the first football game? I'll get off work early to be there."

Really? He never asks me about Chinese school. I clench my teeth. "Practice went how it went."

His hand twitches around the mug handle, and I fight the urge to ask him a question *he* won't respond to. Like how he'd pronounce *sky* in Cantonese. But he'd get that hazy look on his face and retreat to a space in his mind that I'm not invited to. I used to wonder if he just didn't know Cantonese. But he spent the first seven years of his life in Hong Kong before being adopted by Americans from Ohio whom I have never met. Which means if he doesn't speak Cantonese, it has to be by choice. And I don't understand that choice.

"See you later." I slam the front door on my way out and jump into my mom's car.

"What were you doing in your room for so long?" She starts the engine.

I grab my seat belt. "Practicing *Gwóng Dūng wá*."

She frowns. "Is that a new video game?"

I sigh. "I meant practicing Cantonese."

"Oh, sorry, you mean ... !" she says with perfect pronunciation, and I try not to strangle myself with the seat belt.

Sometimes her English slips. *She* becomes *shu*, she adds *lah* when asking for something, and she always does that double *bai bai* when leaving the house. It's clear she thinks in Cantonese. But she moved to the US before she turned one. She might not have been born here like me, but we were both raised here. So how does her accent surface like it's been there all along, but learning Cantonese is

impossible for me? Why do the sounds that are clearly in my DNA not come out right?

I'm going to get a headache from clenching my jaw so tight. I separate my upper and lower teeth and stare at my phone. Remy has texted me twenty times, asking for a report about yesterday's practice.

At lunch, I reply. We don't have any morning classes together, so I hope to avoid the questioning for as long as possible.

The ride goes on for far too long.

"So you're a backspot?" Mom asks.

"Yes ... how do you know what that is?"

"I did my research."

"Of course you did."

"Are you JJ's backspot?"

"Unfortunately."

"But now you're on a team together, I thought—"

"No."

She doesn't press. She had a hard time accepting that JJ stopped coming around. But eventually she did. And so did I. It gave me a chance to focus on more important things. Like catching up on everything I need to know about real Chinese culture. My parents might have doomed me to only look Asian when I could have been a Hong Konger, but between Chinese school, reading books, watching movies, and googling everything I can about Hong Kong, I'm working to be right.

Stanford and San Francisco will make me right.



At school, I wince every time I raise my hand. Cursed cheerleading. And at noon, another kind of pain awaits me at the entrance to the cafeteria.

"Tell me *everything*!" Remy shouts. His flannel shirt is unbuttoned, and the white T-shirt underneath is covered in fresh marker scribbles.

“Can it wait until we sit down?” I ask.

“Absolutely not! I’ve waited long enough.” We weave through the crowd, and I relay the events of yesterday’s training. Brief. Bland. Boring. But questions keep coming in.

“You’re in the same group as JJ?”

“For now.”

“Why?”

“The positions won’t be finalized for weeks.”

We’re approaching our favorite table. And like every day when I walk through this cafeteria, my willpower isn’t enough to keep me from glancing at where she sits.

Today, for the first time since our fight a year ago, she’s staring back at me.

I break eye contact and sit down opposite Remy, who’s unwrapping his pulled pork sandwich. “Okay, tell me more! Was it hard to lift girls? Did you have to do the chants? Are you going to learn how to tumble?”

Taking the Tupperware out of my backpack and opening it causes more pain for my poor arms.

Remy opens his mouth to ask yet another question, but he gets interrupted.

“Hi.”

The air turns solid. That voice hasn’t come anywhere near this table since last September.

“JJ, hi!” Remy flashes her a massive smile.

Why is she here?

“Just wanted to check on the newest cheerleader. Your arms okay after yesterday?”

I turn around and look up at her face. There haven’t been many instances where she’s managed to look down at me. Literally. I’m sure she’s done it plenty metaphorically over the past year. “Unless there’s some legal requirement for all the members of the cheerleading team to engage in meaningless chitchat”—my mouth tastes like acid, but I keep going—“maybe just go back to your table.”

Her face contorts. “See you at Mathletes,” she says like it’s a threat and marches away.

My gaze follows her until she sits down again. To make sure she’s really gone.

Remy throws his hands up. “I’ve respected you not telling me what happened last year, because honestly, I thought you’d be over it by now. You’re staring at her constantly during lunch. I know you went to the first football game last year to see her—you’re terrible at being sneaky, by the way—and for god’s sake, I can guess that the one time you got a C on a math test was the same day you found out she was dating Brad. So why are you still being such a massive dick to her?”

I lock down the tide of emotions before they drown me, grab a spoon, and shove rice into my mouth.

I grimace when the food hits my taste buds. My attempt at making claypot rice didn’t work. Perhaps I should consider buying a claypot. Perhaps my parents should have taught me how to do it properly.

“Please, let’s talk about this,” Remy pleads.

I try another spoonful. Nope. I push the container away. I don’t think it’s supposed to taste soggy and burnt at the same time. JJ’s appearance wasn’t helpful for my appetite either.

“Aang?”

“How about you show me some of your new designs?”

He huffs in exasperation but takes out his sketchbook like I knew he would. “Why am I friends with a straight boy with no emotional intelligence?”

“Because I let you spend hours showing me your drawings.”

He drops the book on the table with a loud thud. “We’re going to come back to this conversation.”

“Sure we are.”

He huffs again. “I’m thinking an autumn theme.” He shows me the pages.

Scattered acorns, orange leaves, and a yellow bird caught in mid-flight leap from the paper. But it’s the pink flower that holds my attention. It’s the same flower I tried giving her after the fight.

My vision gets blurry.

"It's the nature of Alabama. This is a camellia, the state flower," Remy says.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

But it's too late. What she said to Monique and Bryn in the corridor is coming back.

Just some guy I got stuck sitting with last year during math. Massive nerd. He literally would not shut up about geometry. Trust me, he's not my type.

When she turned around and realized I was standing there, she looked like she had seen a ghost.

I'm on the verge of bringing up the two spoons of rice I ate.

"Aang?" Remy tilts his head. "You're spacing out."

I force a painful smile. "The design looks so good, I got distracted." The words scrape out of my throat. "I can't wait to see it embroidered."

"Aww, thank you!" He puts the sketchbook away with a satisfied smile.

The flower disappears, and the rice retreats back into my stomach.

"By the way ... I told my mama about your newfound interest in cooking. She's sewing you an apron."

My shoulders slump. Knowing Mrs. Smith, it will have a Southern saying on it, and it will be pie-related.

Remy points to my Tupperware. "Everyone in the South knows that wearing an apron makes you a better cook. And god, do you need it. Whatever you made does not smell good."

It doesn't taste good either.

Remy takes a bite of his sandwich. The aroma of barbecued pork makes my mouth water against my will.

"Do you want some?" He extends what's left of his sandwich toward me. "I'm just so full already."

Gratitude spreads through me. I bite into the sandwich and slowly close my eyes. *Damn it. I owe him now.* I sigh. "Would you like to hear more about practice?"

He beams. "Give me every single detail!"

And I do.

6 (tīn)

7 (fū)

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Chapter 8

i 3.14159265358979323-ed it

JJ

I walk into the empty math classroom, immediately being stared down by old White men. Pictures of Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Archimedes, and the rest of their gang are hanging at the front of the room above the whiteboard. There used to be more of them, but Aang replaced them with our crew—Maryam Mirzakhani, Srinivasa Ramanujan, Terry Tao, and more.

My annoyance with him almost disappears, but then the cafeteria scene flashes in my head.

I tried to be nice because he stepped up at training yesterday. But why did he have to be such a jerk? Acting like I'm the only one who did something wrong last year. Okay, I shouldn't have pretended I didn't know him in front of Monique and Bryn. I shouldn't have said that he's not my type. But they'd noticed me staring at him in the corridor earlier that day and were insinuating I had a crush on him. And since a week before that, he'd called me "a vapid girl desperate for popularity," admitting that I even knew him was the last thing on my mind.

The desk creaks when I throw my backpack onto it. A reminder on my phone goes off: *Time to stretch!*

I assess my loose, ripped jeans and pink crop top. It's not ideal stretching attire, but I'm too lazy to change, and I have forty-five minutes until Mathletes. I do a quick warm-up in front of the whiteboard, set my timer to go off every thirty seconds, and put the phone on the floor. After some basic stretches, I move on to a left front split. Thirty seconds, and I turn into the right front one.

The door opens, and my back stiffens. Aang walks into the classroom with a stack of papers in his arms and stops dead in his tracks when he sees me on the floor. We stare each other down.

The timer goes off. He jumps and almost drops the papers. A scoff escapes me. He glares but walks around me to the teacher's desk and starts shuffling the papers.

I move into a middle split and breathe deeply, attempting to lie down on my stomach. I have better stretches than Addy, and it has to stay that way.

The timer goes off again. I stand up and sneak a peek at the desk. The papers don't look any more organized than they were before. What is he doing?

Focus on the stretches.

I kick my foot up and catch it above my head. I do thirty seconds of a heel stretch on both sides before moving on to a bow-and-arrow. I grab my right foot above my head with my left hand and thread my right arm across my leg. I smile and imagine being held in extension, the lights on me, loud music in my ears, the crowd shouting ...

"What are you doing here?" He's sitting at the desk, staring at me.

I drop my leg. "I'm stretching."

"Why are you doing it here?"

"I had time before Mathletes started." I shrug. "Since I got here on time, forty-five minutes early." *Early enough to make sure you didn't change the schedule again.* "However, you're pretty late. I thought you were taking this math thing seriously."

His nostrils flare. "You are so—"

The timer cuts him off.

I pick up the phone to switch off the timer. "I'm so what? I'm so smart? I'm so funny? I'm so pretty?"

He shuffles the papers with too much force.

"Do you need help with that? You seem to be struggling with putting the sheets in order."

He slams the stack onto the desk. "Why are you *actually* joining Mathletes?"

"To get into Columbia."

“Why? Do they have the best sororities?”

My phone digs into my hand. “You’re such a conde ... condense ... code ...” My tongue tangles and my skin prickles. I should have used *patronizing*.

The worst possible thing happens. His eyes soften.

I turn on my heel and leave the classroom. I spend the next ten minutes in the bathroom, making sure the tears stay in my eyes and practicing *condescending* out loud in the mirror. The way it’s supposed to be pronounced, to avoid raising any questions.

Cursed Poland. If it wasn’t for the kids in my old class ... if it wasn’t for the way they’d looked at me during English lessons ... twenty pairs of ears and eyes, tracking my every syllable, like I was finally speaking *my* language, even though I was learning English just like them. So, I refused to speak out loud in class. If not for them, I wouldn’t have this problem now.

I blink away tears and refocus on Mathletes. It’s time for a vapid girl desperate for popularity and sororities to humiliate Aang at math.

When I come back to the classroom, the stack of papers is organized and everyone else is already there, sitting at the desks. All nine pairs of eyes shift to me.

“Hello, everyone!” I use my cheerleading smile and wave. “I’m JJ.”

They whisper to each other, looking at me.

Bile rises in my throat, and I’m transported back to Poland. To the murmurs, the raised eyebrows, the *What is this Black girl doing here?* stares. My pulse hammers against my wrists, and my vision gets spottier every second, until I hear the word *cheerleader*.

The tension bleeds out of me, and I can see clearly again. I’m not in Poland anymore. I’m in Massachusetts. They’re talking about me being a cheerleader. That’s good. That’s what I want.

“JJ! Welcome back!” Drew, now a senior, points to the free chair next to him.

“Hi, Drew.” I sit down, looking at his buzz cut. “What happened to your hair?”

“Lost a bet. Turns out 997 is a prime number. What happened to *your* hair?”

I shudder at the memory of my freshman-year curls. Or my frizzy, tangled bird’s nest, as I remember it. With the move, Dad didn’t have time to braid my hair anymore, and I was left to my own devices for the first time in my life. It was not pretty.

“Found a good hairdresser.” I toss my braids over my shoulder. “Do you like it?”

Drew leans in. “You look very good as a blond.”

I bat my eyelashes. “I know.”

“Okay, let’s start!” Aang shouts way too loudly, considering everyone fits in the first two rows of desks. “Welcome to the first Mathletes meeting of the year. We have four freshmen joining us. Everyone else, introduce yourself.”

A round of introductions begins. Besides Drew, there are two seniors and one junior I remember from my freshman year.

I smile at two sophomore girls. I’ll talk to them later. Tell them not to befriend cute Asian Americans who will spend most of their time monologuing about geometry and making you cry in a bathroom stall.

Speaking of which, Aang’s deep into explaining the intricacies of the Mathletes competitions.

“We send two teams, A and B, each consisting of four players, chosen based on the abilities demonstrated during the meetings, so please attend every week. Per regulations, each team must include one freshman and one senior, plus two sophomores or juniors. Since we won the state championship last year, we get a free pass to go to Nationals in March.”

Okay, so I win both Mathletes and cheerleading Nationals in March, and I’ll arrive at Columbia with a perfect American high school success story. Should be easy enough.

“Our first friendly competition is the Invitationals at Highbury High in a month.” Aang hands out exercise sheets. “Today’s topic is geometry.”

I smirk. I knew it. And I know what the first question will be.

“Before we do the exercises, let’s start with who’s Zu—”

“Zu Chongzhi?”⁸

“Yes!” Aang’s enthusiasm disappears when he realizes I’m the one who said it.

“Who’s Zu ... Cho ... Chu ...” a baby-faced freshman with short locs stammers, trying to say it after me.

“Zu Chongzhi,” I repeat. “He was a Chinese mathematician. He held the record for the closest approximation of pi for over nine hundred years.”

A murmur of appreciation sweeps through the classroom. I look at Aang, and a gloating smile fills my face. “Do you want to continue?”

He narrows his eyes but doesn’t comment. Instead, he writes the mathematician’s name—using the Latin alphabet—and the symbol for pi on the board, and it’s aligned perfectly, like it was written with an invisible ruler.

He turns to us. “How about we play a fun game? Who remembers pi to the most decimal places?”

The younger students shout over each other, managing six decimal places between them. The upperclassmen push it to ten.

“Any more digits?”

“Eight,” I say.

His lips press into a thin line, but he writes the number down.

“Next one?”

“Nine.”

He writes it down. “Next?”

“Seven.”

He misaligns *seven* from the rest of the numbers. “Next?”

“Nine.”

“Next?” His knuckles go white around the marker.

“Oh, I think you should do the next one. As the captain, you know.”

“Oh yeah!” Drew says. “Show the cheerleader how it’s done!”

I wink at Aang, and he clenches his jaw so hard that he’s definitely going to get a headache.

He makes no move to write anything down.

I stand up and walk up to the board, my smile spreading. I take the marker out of his hand and fill in the next three numbers. “It’s three-two-three,” I say loudly before whispering so only he can hear me, “I memorized them earlier today. Figured you still only knew the first fourteen.”

There’s an interesting artery pulsing in his forehead.

“What’s next, *Captain*?” I push the marker back into his palm.

His fingers tighten, and for a second, he’s holding my hand.

I freeze. Aang’s hand goes slack, and the pen hits the ground. He quickly picks it up and turns to the class. “So ... exercises.” His voice is hoarse.

I return to my seat at rapid speed and bury my face in the exercise sheet. This is what I should be focusing on. I answer the questions one by one. A-team, here I come.

Once everyone is ready to discuss the questions, Aang gets the freshmen to explain their answers. He gets more excited than they do when they get something right. He asks them for the reasoning behind the answers they got wrong. His tone falls into that effortless authority that made it impossible not to hang on to his every word when we were fourteen and chatting about math.

With every question, the freshmen grow more confident, and the hollowness in my chest grows larger as memories force their way into my consciousness. Sitting on the library floor, hidden between bookcases, textbooks spread around us. The moments I would catch him smiling at me, and he would avert his gaze and adjust his glasses.

That supportive smile was once given to me. The arguments made me laugh, not cry.

We’re on the last exercise.

“This one is extremely hard. It’s from Stanford’s Geometry 101 class,” Aang says. “I thought we could solve it together. Unless someone has an answer already?”

It’s a hybrid of geometry and logic questions. Since childhood, my parents have given me logic puzzles to solve. *Good for medical thinking*. So I have an answer, and I’m pretty sure it’s correct. But my hand doesn’t itch to go up.

Drew points at me. “JJ has an answer.”

“No, I don’t,” I say quickly.

He taps my exercise sheet. “I can see it.”

“I don’t think it’s correct, so we should go through it together.”

Aang stares at me. I avoid his gaze.

“Okay ...” He frowns. “Let’s do it on the board together.”

It turns out my answer is correct. The hollowness consumes any satisfaction I would have felt just thirty minutes ago.

The bell rings, and everyone hurries out of the classroom. I try to pack up as fast as possible, but I drop my pencil case, and my stationery flies everywhere. One of my pink pens travels to the teacher’s desk, where Aang is grabbing his backpack. He spots the pen next to his foot and picks it up, turning it in his fingers. He walks past me and leans over my exercise sheet.

His eyes drill a hole in my paper. “Even I didn’t get it right on the first try.”

“Seems like you’re getting stuck on the A-team with me this year.”

“Unfortunately.” He grits his teeth like saying it has caused him great physical pain. “Welcome back.” He drops my pen on the desk and leaves the classroom.

8 (Jóu Chūng Jī)

Chapter 9

*you'd think after grabbing my ass regularly, aang
wouldn't be so weird about me touching his face*

JJ

Coach whistles to gather us around her, beginning training. “We’re moving on to practicing the actual routine today!”

Everyone cheers. Over the past two weeks, we’ve been drilling the basics and proper techniques. Especially for the freshmen. And Aang.

“Our first stunt is similar to what we did last year. We’ll just one-up the difficulty. Get into your stunt groups.”

My group takes our space on the first panel off-center. Coach scans the groups and double-checks her paper. “Naomi, please move to front spotting group four.”

My heart sinks to the floor.

The tiny sophomore, who’s been flying in the center group for the past two weeks, has just been demoted to a front spot. The position for people who aren’t good enough to be bases, backspots, or flyers. Everyone looks on in silence as Naomi moves to the other stunt group, her face carefully neutral, but I know she’ll be bawling her eyes out to her friends after training. Her old stunt group is now left with only Alexis, a senior flyer, who’s trying not to look too happy.

Coach turns a page in her notebook, and I hold my breath. *Nie ja. Nie ja. Nie ja.*²

She closes the notebook. “Do a couple of extension libs for warm-up.”

I exhale, my gaze finding Addy. I live to fight another day.

The worst part about this sport is that your teammates are your first and most important competition.

We warm up our libs, meaning the bases hold one of my feet while I tuck the other under me in extension. Then we gather around Coach again for the explanation of the competition stunt.

“Dip one, full-up to extension three, heel stretch five, stay seven, dip one, tick-tock to heel stretch three, tick-tock to heel stretch five, stay seven, bow-and-arrow one, dip three, double down five.”

A murmur travels through the crowd. Last year, we did a full-up to extension, waited for two counts, and then threw a heel stretch. This year, there seem to be no breaks whatsoever. Full-up immediately into a heel stretch, switch legs in the extension to immediately do another heel stretch, bow and arrow to an immediate double down. The bases will be catching my leg at the same time that they’re dipping to throw it again. No time for hesitation or wobbles.

My muscles buzz with anticipation. This is what I went to the summer cheerleading camp for. What I bailed out of summer in Poland with *Babcia* for.

Coach motions for Monique’s stunt group to show the whole sequence together. They’re the center group, made up of the best people on the team. Bryn and I screamed so loud when Monique made it in as a junior.

I catch movement in my peripheral vision and do a double-take to make sure I’m seeing correctly. Aang’s eyes are fixed on the demo, his lips mouthing the counts, his hands changing into different grips, mirroring Monique. Huh.

Coach claps, and I peel my eyes away from Aang. “Try the second part for now, the tick-tock heel stretch!” she orders.

I launch myself in between Paige and Emmy milliseconds before Addy. I put out my right foot for my bases to grab it. Aang squats, and I internally snicker at the idea of this guy, whom I barely talk to, grabbing my butt multiple times three days a week. He must be getting used to it, because his hands are no longer dangerously sweaty anytime they come close to me. Or maybe he’s started putting deodorant on his palms.

They throw me up, and I grab my foot at the top for a heel stretch. When they dip, I let go of my foot and switch legs in midair. As Paige and Emmy grip my other foot, they immediately squat and throw, and I switch feet again. I do a heel stretch with my left leg.

Perfect. I go down. I check on Coach, but she's busy with a sophomore base in group five. I push my disappointment down. Plenty more time before training ends for her to look at me.

I make space for Addy. I want her to do well, I really do. Just not as well as me.

She goes up. She isn't bad—she's a senior, after all—but she hasn't improved since last year, either. Her feet don't land in the exact same spot when she switches legs, which throws off the bases when they try to grab her other foot. They cannot do the tick-tocks and have to bring her down. We practice for the next ten minutes, and Addy ends up failing twice as often as I do. Triumph and shame slosh together in my stomach, trying to overpower each other.

Coach assesses each group's performance, and when she's satisfied, she tells us to move on to what will be the first part of the stunt, full-up to extension. Addy beats me to being the first one. She jumps into a smooch, and they dip, throwing her up. I hold my breath during the split second when they let go of her completely, letting her spin the full 360. The most likely place for something to go wrong. I breathe again when they catch her foot after she hits the highest point in the air. She kicks her other foot up for a heel stretch. But she does it too late and too aggressively. She loses her balance, and they have to catch her.

The triumph–shame combo stirs dangerously inside me.

I go next. Aang's hands rest on my hips, and I need to bite my lip.

I don't care about having his hands on my butt, but apparently, the waist is where I draw the line. I guess it's hard to imagine a non-cheerleading scenario where his hand would grab my butt in the exact same position that it does during stunts. It's not exactly romantic.

But his hands on my waist ...

Brad used to get my attention in the hallways by putting his hands on my hips. But besides the feeling of satisfaction at having a

quarterback boyfriend, his touch didn't elicit anything. I didn't need to bite my lip to stop a shiver.

Aang's hand pushes my right hip down, and my gasp of surprise is drowned out by Emmy shouting, "Five, six, seven, eight!"

They dip, twisting me, and when I clear Aang's head, I kick my right foot up and catch it. An alarm blares at the back of my head. My hips aren't level, and I'm tilting to the left.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

But before I can fully lose my balance, Aang's hand is on the outside of my left thigh, stopping me from tipping any further.

If my cheerleading smile wasn't permanently etched into my skin, my jaw would have dropped.

They let me down, and I step away in a trance. He knew my hips weren't square before we went up. He predicted I'd tilt to the left. He knew something was wrong before I did. *What on Earth ...*

When Addy goes up, for the first time in two weeks, I don't stare at her, evaluating her against me. I focus on him.

His eyes narrow into pinpoints. He bites his bottom lip, and my breath hitches. He looks like he's cataloguing every tremor, every micro-adjustment, every breath, ready to catch Addy before she even falls.

Is that how he looks at me?

The idea jolts through my body like I'm being electrocuted, and there's nothing else to do but stare at the executioner.

Does he study me with the intensity I've only ever seen reserved for math and Cantonese?

That's ...

That's so hot.

A ball of fire explodes inside me. *Nie. Nie, nie, nie.*

I fix all my attention on Addy, who yet again kicks up her leg too late. She lands on the ground, stomping her foot.

"Would you like to go again?" I ask her weakly. I need a minute to stop being feverish.

"Oh, yes, please! Thanks." She moves back into position.

"Kick your foot earlier. It'll help," I say.

She gives me a small smile. The triumph–shame mixture retreats from my stomach. I smile back. I’m a good teammate. I help my competition get better.

The stunt group dips, and Addy does the worst thing she can—she kicks early.

And hits Aang straight in the face.

“Fuck!” He stumbles back, clutching his nose.

Fear runs down my spine. I push past Addy and kneel in front of him. “Let me see!”

He clutches it even harder. I wrestle his hands away and grab his chin. He goes rigid, and I can finally scan his nose. He’s not bleeding, and nothing seems swollen. “Are you having trouble breathing?”

He shakes his head.

“Okay, I know it probably hurts like shit, but you’re fine. You’re fine. You’re fine.” My muscles loosen up.

“Okay, I’m fine,” he says quietly. His chin gets heavier in my hand. For a second, I can’t figure out why. And then it hits. He just rested his chin in my hand.

A cough from above. I look up to find Coach and the whole team frowning at me. I scramble away from Aang, my cheeks heating up. “His nose isn’t broken.”

“Thank you for the medical assessment, JJ.” Coach turns her gaze to Aang. “You okay?”

He nods, his hand traveling to his chin.

“Okay, everyone, take a break. Aang, let’s talk.” Coach helps him stand up and checks over his face.

The team, including me, runs to the other side of the gym. Bryn bumps my hip, a water bottle in her hand. “The last time I got kicked in the face, you and Monique laughed at me. If only I could have gotten half of the concern Aang got.”

Sweat drips down my back at her raised eyebrow. “Well, I brought him here, so it’s only natural—”

“Uh-huh, sure.” She sips her water. “I just realized that I know so little about our new teammate. That’s very rude of me.”

My arm hair stands up in alarm. “Bryn, do not talk to him. The last time you were near him, you witnessed him getting humiliated

and—”

“It was a year ago and not that bad.”

“I assure you, he still remembers, and he’s still mad about it. Do not disturb whatever coping strategy he’s using.”

“Why do you think he’s using a coping strategy?”

I look at him. Addy’s in front of him, waving her arms around, probably apologizing profusely. “Because he’s still here.”

Before Bryn can respond, Coach shouts, “End of break!”

For the rest of the training, no one kicks anyone in the face. Addy improves, I think, but it’s much harder to monitor her now that I know what Aang looks like while stunting. At the end of the session, Coach gives us instructions for tomorrow’s football game and sends us away.

I run after Aang. “Wait!”

He stops in front of the boys’ changing room door.

“How are you feeling? No headache? Your nose is fine?” I reach toward his face.

He jerks away from me like I was about to punch him and eyes my hands suspiciously. “Do me a favor and control your medical savior complex near me.” He goes into the changing room and shuts the door in my face.

My body goes hot all at once, and any concern I had evaporates. How unethical would it be to steal drugs from my mom’s hospital and poison him?

You’d have no chance of flying if he suffered a painful demise.

I kick the door and walk away.

⁹Not me. Not me. Not me.

Chapter 10

*bryn tries to make a new friend, and to no one's shock,
it goes obscenely badly*

JJ

The next day, I'm in the cafeteria, scanning it for Bryn and Monique, but they're nowhere to be seen.

I spot Emmy and Paige with the footballers. Brad has an arm draped over Paige's chair and the other is on Emmy's. I roll my eyes. He's such a flirt. With everyone. The fact that it never bothered me when we were dating should have been my sign to break up with him sooner.

I could join them. Squeeze in next to Paige and eat my lunch, and no one would bat an eye at me sitting there. But the whole football team is there. I might technically know English, but there's a world of difference between being in a small group and at a large table of overlapping chats and overcrowded screams. When I was with Brad, I used to spend the whole lunch period nodding and smiling, hoping no one asked me anything directly, praying they didn't notice how hard my head was spinning as I tried to understand them.

My skin prickles at the mere idea of being there again. I sit down at the empty table.

*You're not eating lunch alone; you're waiting for Bryn and Monique.
You don't eat lunch alone here.*

I take my makeup and headphones out of my backpack. Two coats of my lip gloss work like medicine, reducing the prickling of my skin. I shove my headphones on and watch a recording of the last cheerleading practice.

And by that, I mean I hate-watch Aang. Every hurtful thing he's said to me so far flashes in my head like the end credits of a depressing film. And yet, I cannot help but be impressed. He's doing a much better job backspotting than I thought he would. His manic obsession with the tiniest details has translated well into cheerleading.

He looks like he's calculating angles and weight distributions every time he's involved in a stunt. I see how he changes the depth of his squat, whether he holds my calf or knee, and even the adjustments he makes to the way my foot is pointed in the air.

I zoom in on his stupid face.

That little piece of shit is making me a better flyer.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing!" I slam my phone, screen down, on the table. "Where's Bryn?" I screech at frowning Monique.

She dusts off her cashmere sweater even though there's not a speck of dirt on it. "I have no idea."

I survey the cafeteria again, and when I spot Bryn's ginger bob and her favorite green overalls, nausea spreads over me. A terribly familiar face with a scowl is sitting in front of her.

"We have to go over there." I shoot to my feet, grab my stuff, and sprint to their table.

"JJ, Monique!" Bryn waves when we come closer. "Our new teammate isn't very chatty yet, but his friend is delightful."

"Hi!" Remy greets us. "Sit down!"

I shake my head. "That's not necessa—"

Bryn snatches my backpack off my shoulder. She opens the bag and drops my lunchbox onto the table. "Eat! You need energy, or the wind will blow you away while you're in extension."

Monique sits next to Bryn. The stack of gold bracelets clangs on her wrist as she puts in her earphones.

Which leaves me with the chair next to Aang. Great. Just great. I pray quickly that they won't talk over each other or involve Aang in the conversation, and then sit down.

"So we were just talking about Remy's parents! Did you know they met at a football game?" Bryn clasps her fork between her

hands. “How romantic! That is exactly the type of thing that should happen to me.” She giggles, her cherry earrings dangling back and forth. “Speaking of football ...” She turns her gaze to Aang. “Are you excited for your first time cheerleading at a game?”

He shifts in his seat. No words come out. I tap my nails on my Tupperware, the noise filling the silence. *One, three, five, seven.*

“Of course he’s excited! It’s been his dream to be a cheerleader since he was a little boy!” Remy pinches Aang’s cheek. Aang swats Remy’s hand away.

“As it should have been!” Bryn beams. “Cheerleading at football games is so fun.”

Aang makes a sound somewhere between a grunt and a huff, his eyes fixed on his lunch.

I open my Tupperware with shaky hands, and the smell of garlic overwhelms even the baked tomatoes. Oh no. Dad put too much garlic in my jollof rice. He claims it’s anti-inflammatory and will help with my period cramps. But at what stinking cost? And why do I have to eat it even when I’m not on my period?

Monique surveys Aang, who’s moving his chopsticks robotically from the plate to his mouth. She mouths at me, *Him, really?*

Heat flares through my cheeks, and the garlic debacle takes a back seat. I glare back at her. *Not anymore! Stop judging me!*

Remy drops his fork into his mashed potatoes, turning to Aang. “You need to be more excited! My dad moved our hunting trip a whole week to make sure we’re at the game!”

Bryn’s jaw drops, a piece of tofu falling out of her mouth. “You hunt?”

“I do technically have a hunting license.” Remy attempts to fish the fork out of his food. “But mostly I walk behind my dad with an unloaded gun while he hunts.”

Monique takes one of her earphones out.

Remy shrugs. “It’s a guys’ trip.” He manages to rescue his fork. Aang hands him a napkin to clean the handle. “And he lets me push the boundaries of camo makeup. Last trip, I used a highlighter to bring out his cheeks. He did not like it.” He waves his now-clean

fork around. “Said it scared off the wildlife, and I should have stuck to the bronzer.”

Bryn opens and closes her mouth. Monique takes out her second earphone. I grab my water bottle to relieve my dry throat.

“Either way, enough about hunting!” Remy puts down his fork, and it almost lands in the mashed potatoes again. “How’s Aang at cheerleading practices? Is he really popular?”

Bryn claps. “Yes, all the girls are obsessed with the fact that he’s on the team!”

Aang tries to disguise his snort as a cough, but no one is fooled.

“It’s true! The freshman said we’re so lucky to have a hot guy on the team.”

I choke on my water. “Which ones?” I croak out.

“Doesn’t matter. I told them to focus on boys their age.”

My metal bottle lands on the table with a loud thud, but Bryn is fully focused on Aang. “You’re on Mathletes with JJ?”

“Yeah, Aang’s the captain,” Remy says.

“Captain as a junior? You must be really good at math!”

“Not good enough to solve a logic question without my help,” I mumble.

Aang grips his chopsticks harder.

“Soon he’s going to be the best backspot at the school!” Remy says.

“He has an excellent flyer.” Bryn winks at me. “Makes stuff easier.”

Aang’s grimace transforms into a sweet smile. “You mean Addy?”

My foot twitches. “Addy kicked you in the face yesterday.”

“An honest mistake.” He shrugs. “But you wouldn’t know anything about honest mistakes, would you?” he hisses under his breath.

I kick him under the table. Or rather, attempt to. He moves his leg out of the way.

“Really, *Józefina-Ibifubara*?” He glares at me.

Bryn looks between us. “What did he call you?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly.

“Nothing?” Aang scoffs. “Let me tell you—”

I attempt to kick him again. He catches my leg with his, trapping it against my chair. “You tried to kick me *twice*?”

“Sorry.” I try to rip my leg out of his hold, but he’s not budging. “An honest mistake.”

His eyes blaze behind his glasses.

“So ...” Remy coughs. “Does anyone want to see my embroidery?”

“Yes, please.” Bryn nods frantically. “I don’t know what it is, but I do.”

Aang lets go of my leg, and the absence of his grip makes my skin ten degrees cooler.

“Don’t judge too hard. I’m only halfway done.” Remy pulls out a square of white cotton stretched tight in a wooden hoop, tiny stitches blooming across its surface.

“That’s so pretty!” Bryn focuses on every detail of the work: the autumn trees, the seasonal harvest, the migratory birds. My shoulders relax. This is a safe conversation topic—no involving Aang, no disclosing my real name.

“These pink flowers!” Bryn follows the lines of the needlework, her finger hovering above the fabric. Recognition sparks on her face, and my heart stops as she points at Aang. “They look like what you brought JJ last ye—”

“Bryn.” Monique slices through her sentence.

Bryn clasps her hand over her mouth, and only the threat of losing my visa by murdering a US citizen stops me from strangling her.

“Huh?” Remy looks between Aang and me. “You brought her camellias last year?”

Aang closes his eyes and puts his chopsticks down. The table is deathly silent for five seconds until he opens them again. “I tried.” His voice is steel. “Too bad she denied knowing me and said I’m not her type to those two.”

“What?” Remy’s eyes snap to me, cracking with betrayal.

Shame settles on me like dust. “He kicked me out of Mathletes a week before that! He said our friendship was a waste of his time!”

Aang stands up, his chair scraping the floor. He looks at Remy. "Well, you wanted to know, so there you go. What a lovely lunch that was. Can't wait to see you all at the game." He marches away.

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Chapter 11

*i'll be the last person to ever promote the
supernatural, but the floodlights of this football field
have to be investigated for their sorcery*

Aang

My first home game experience from the field is far worse than it was from the stands. From the bleachers, I didn't understand the sheer scale of everything. But now, the floodlights are too bright and the drums too loud. The seats cover only the two sides of the field, but it feels like people are enveloping me from everywhere, shouting impatiently and waiting for the kickoff.

It doesn't help that this is that one evening in September when it gets hot and humid for no reason, and my polyester uniform isn't conducive to perspiration. Stanford better appreciate what I'm putting myself through here.

"Go, Aang, go!" Remy's in the first row, holding a sign with words on it decorated in red glitter.

I walk up to him slowly. He's been ignoring me since lunch, and the fact that he's acting normal now is highly concerning. "Hello ... is the sign necessary?" It spells out my name as *Adolescent, Approachable, Not-Stupid, Graceful*.

"You cheerlead for the team, I cheerlead for you." He checks out my uniform: dark-red trousers and a long-sleeved top of the same color with the school's initials, *BHS*, in black and white. "You look very handsome."

I lose my patience. "Why are you acting like nothing happened during lunch?"

"I'm sorry?" Remy lowers the sign. "I thought we repress our emotions and avoid discussing important events in our lives. Was I mistaken?"

I throw my hands up.

"You should have told me what happened," he says. "I would have ordered you to apologize and move on."

I must be having a stroke, because there's no way that's what I just heard. "Whose side are you on?"

"No one's! Because both of you were complete assholes, so it evens out!" He raises the sign. "Now, go lead our team to victory and be friends with JJ again!"

"Oh my god." I spin on my heel and walk away.

I don't want to be friends with JJ. It doesn't make sense to be friends with JJ. It didn't make sense when she walked up to me during the first math class of freshman year, and it makes even less sense now.

I'm not her type, after all.

Movement near the sidelines captures my attention. JJ's waving her pom-poms around, her uniform the same as mine except with a skirt and a shiny red bow. I stop in my tracks. She's talking to Brad. A cheerleader and a quarterback, what a perfect American couple.

The fact that she must love that is one of the many reasons why me being friends with her doesn't make any sense.

Brad spots me staring before I can divert my gaze. He says something to JJ, who hides her face in the pom-poms and shakes her head furiously. Is she denying knowing me? That would be on-brand for her. Brad waves at someone behind me. I sneak a look. There's no one there. He shrugs and walks in my direction.

Sweat runs down my spine.

He was waving at *me*.

Is he going to beat me up for staring at his girlfriend? Ex-girlfriend? Again-girlfriend? JJ trails behind him, her pom-poms by her sides like they're trying to drag her down. If only she showed this lack of enthusiasm in the counselor's office. We wouldn't have this problem on our hands.

Brad stops in front of me and raises a hand. I flinch.

“Hey! It’s Aang, right?” He tries to high-five me, but my arms don’t move. He chuckles and taps me on the shoulder instead.

“Hello?”

“I’m Brad. I’m on the football team. Just wanted to say hi to the first guy cheerleader.”

So that’s why he came over. I brace for the incoming gay joke.

“It’s just so cool, man! Cheerleading is a great sport. You’re gonna have so much fun!”

What?

“You’re JJ’s backspot?”

I nod slowly. What is going on?

“Don’t let her convince you to do a stunt without a spotter. She always tries to do the craziest things.” He puts an arm around her. She hits him in the face with a pom-pom. “What? Remember when you got me to do a partner stunt with you? You almost broke your neck when you fell!”

My stomach drops. She did? Why does she need to fly *so* desperately? It’s just cheerleading.

Someone calls Brad over from the field. My eyes follow his arm as it leaves JJ’s shoulder. “Gotta go!” He waves, jogging away. “Don’t be stupid like me! Don’t let her fall!”

JJ waves back. “Win the game!” She walks away from me.

The words come out before I can shove them back down my throat. “What a beautiful couple you make.”

She halts. “We’re not dating anymore. He’s just nice. A radical idea, right?” She faces me, planting her hands on her hips. “Being nice to your friends?”

“The irony of you saying that.”

Her fists tighten around her pom-poms.

“Aang! JJ!” My mom’s voice cuts through the noise of the bleachers. She waves at us with her sign while my dad sips a soda. Remy’s parents are holding their own signs, chatting with Remy. “Come here!”

JJ sprints in her direction. And it hits me that, with how much her parents work, this is probably the first time someone has come to see

her perform that she's aware of. The annoyance at having my parents here decreases by one percent. Fine. Two percent. But no more.

"I love your hair!" My mom hugs JJ through the barrier, *the smile coming back in full swing. Something between I want you to be my daughter and I can't believe you'd grace my son with your presence.*

"Hi, Mrs. Lau. Hi, Mr. Anderson. Hi, Mrs. Smith and Mr. Smith! I love the signs." Her face breaks into a wide beam. "Aang must be so thankful you've made them."

The signs say, in order:

Mom of the guy who lifts your daughter.

Go Blackstock High Cheerleading Squad!

Lift girls, not weights.

Go Cardinals! Go Aang!

My dad puffs up in pride, since it was his idea to make them. He went to his accounting job today with his hands stained by red paint. *That* he'll put effort into, but talking about Hong Kong is a no-no? What would Grandmother say if she saw her family at a football game? She would have rolled over in her grave if she hadn't been cremated.

What would I do if she were here? From the stories, I know she was a tobacco addict and a horse-racing gambler, so I'd probably be secondhand smoking and equine betting. Is that what people in Hong Kong do on a Friday evening?

Pressure builds in my temples, and I turn around. "We have to go," I say. JJ says goodbye and follows me.

"I didn't even ask her about Thanksgiving," Mrs. Smith says as I'm walking away.

"It's okay, I'll ask her later," Remy responds.

Ask whom what? Since Remy and I became friends in middle school, our families have always spent Saturday after Thanksgiving together. Will something finally change this year? Like me not having to celebrate it?

But I don't have time to ponder it, because Ms. Rosario is on us the second we're back at the cheerleading base. "JJ, join Alexis for the tumbling series. Aang, I need you on the stunts."

I walk to my group while JJ and Alexis tumble. Two back handsprings and a backflip. They wave at the crowd after finishing. Where are all the tumblers where they spin around their own axis? Single, double, whatever they call them. The second and third rows of tumblers go. None of them do anything harder than a back tuck.

I stand behind Addy, and she grins at me. "Hi, Aang! Are you enjoying the evening?"

"Yes, it's the best day of my life."

Ms. Rosario counts. "And five, six, seven, eight!"

We're third from the left, and the stunts are supposed to look like a ripple, so we wait five counts to lift Addy into extension. When we haul her up for one count, my mom and Remy start shouting.

I lower Addy to the ground. When she lands safely, she points to Remy. "Is that your boyfriend?"

My ears warm. "No. We're friends."

We do the ripple again. Addy lands on the ground. "Are you gay?"

"Addy! You can't just ask people if they're gay." Paige shakes her head, but still leans forward, waiting for my response.

My ears are now burning. "I'm not gay."

This time, the ripple is on one leg. We put Addy down. "Do you like JJ? Is that why you joined the team?" she asks.

The burning spreads from my ears to my whole face. I check if JJ's anywhere near to hear this conversation. Thankfully, she's doing another tumbling series.

"So ..." Addy follows my line of sight. "Is that a yes?"

"I ... what? No ... definitely not." I shake my head, and my glasses slide down my nose. I push them up.

"Okay. I have a friend who's doing bio with you. Do you want her number?"

"I ... do ... I ..."

We do another ripple, but we stay on top for four counts with Addy holding a heel stretch.

She lands. "So ... the number?"

"I ..."

"Give him some time to think," Paige says.

"And show him a photo," Emmy adds.

“That’s so true! Mina is adorable. I’ll show you her photo during halftime.”

I smile flatly. Of course. Of course she’s talking about the only Asian girl in my biology class. Who’s Korean. And if Addy must practice her Asian matchmaking skills, she at least could have chosen someone from Hong Kong.

Instead of a ripple, we now put Addy in a prep with a sign. While she’s chanting about a touchdown, Emmy asks, “Aang’s a cool name. What does it mean?”

My fingers tighten around Addy’s ankles. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Really? I thought all Chinese names had cool meanings.”

I stop myself from squashing our flyer’s legs. “It’s not a Chinese name.”

I cannot *wait* for Mathletes Invitationals. I need to be in an environment where the only questions people ask me are math-related.

We set Addy back on the ground, and this time, I ask a question before they can interrogate me further. “Why are the stunts and tumbling so easy? We do harder stuff for warm-ups at training.”

“I know. It’s so embarrassing.” Paige looks at the other team. “We look like amateurs compared to Kensington High. And we beat them at State last year!”

“It’s Coach. She refuses to let us do more complicated stuff outside.” Addy stomps on the running truck. “Tumbling here is bad for the joints, and stunting carries a higher risk of concussion than football, or whatever.”

I shiver as the image of JJ’s head hitting the mat flashes in my mind. “Well ... that’s good, then?”

“Safer for us.” Addy rolls her eyes. “But we look so dull! The football team says we bore the crowd and always tries to get Coach to do more interesting stunts. But she tells them we don’t even have to be here, and they shut up.”

I look around the team, and I get the feeling that not a single one of these girls is scared of getting hurt. It’s like there’s a protective blanket around us.

“Quick break!” Ms. Rosario shouts.

We jog to where she’s handing out orange juice. I grab a cup from her. “Thank you.”

“No problem. After the break, you’re gonna backspot JJ, okay?”

“Okay ... Coach.”

She smiles at me and turns to one of the girls. I walk toward our bags, draining the juice. I can practice a few characters now. Every stroke I do before the February exam will bring me closer to being better than Michael.

My sneakers screech on the track when I see who’s in my way. Bryn and Monique are standing next to the bags. No way am I getting anywhere near them after lunch. I spin around and head to the stunting spot, throwing the cup into the trash along the way. I stare at the ground, pretending I can’t hear the shouts of my five fans.

A white shoe enters my field of vision. JJ’s warming up for the next part, doing a split. I check behind me. Paige and Emmy are still drinking and chatting.

What a world I live in, where focusing on the game is my best option. We’re winning 14–7, but it beats me whether that’s a good score or not. And that’s despite years of being forced to watch the Alabama Thanksgiving game. A guy in a helmet—and I just know it’s *Brad*—is talking to the team huddled around him.

I wonder who broke up with whom. Why would she break up with him when he’s clearly her type? That doesn’t make any sense. But then I can’t think of a single reason why anyone would want to break up with her.

I don’t notice when JJ stands up and spins around. But I do notice when her face hits my chest. She yelps and stumbles back.

I automatically extend my hand, but she regains her balance on her own. I pull my hand back, frowning at it. *What was that?*

JJ also stares at it, blinking. But she shakes herself off and shouts for Paige and Emmy to join us already.

As we start the stunt, two other groups mirror us on either side. The rest of the team chants in front of us. We hold JJ’s right leg above us in extension while she kicks her left foot behind her,

catching the ankle. She extends her leg up, arching her back, until there's a straight line from her standing leg to her raised leg.

She's doing a split standing up.

The image carves out its own space in my brain, and I already hate how often I will think about the floodlights illuminating her dark skin, her ponytail swaying, and her smile—

I miss the count.

Paige and Emmy bend their elbows to bring JJ down, but my arms stay locked. JJ bends her leg, expecting the usual timing, but I'm off count, and she's falling forward toward the track. I move, but Paige and Emmy are faster. They let go of her leg and catch her before she hits the ground. The impact makes them all grunt.

JJ's heaving, her eyes wide with panic. My heart slams against my rib cage. That was the closest she's come to hitting the ground since the first practice, but this time, the mats weren't waiting for her. The avalanche of possibilities of what I almost let happen crashes into me, knocking the breath out of me.

"Is everyone okay?" Emmy asks.

JJ's not listening, instead pointing at me. "You." She pushes herself up, her legs wobbly. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I didn't mean ... I was ..." The words tangle on my tongue. She looks horrified. I've caused many expressions on her face, but never complete terror.

"Listen." She tightens the bow on her ponytail with shaky hands. "I know lunch wasn't ideal—"

"This isn't about lunch." I stand up straighter.

"—but you cannot use that to ruin my chances of being a flyer."

The accusation hits harder than getting kicked in the face yesterday. My hands ball into fists. "Are you serious? You think I'd ever let you get hurt as revenge?"

"Like you haven't done other things for revenge."

"You're equating changing a schedule with letting you fall? What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? I fell and Coach would never—" Her voice cracks. "What happened? You were making me better! You

were making me fly!” The despair in her voice tugs at my anger, reminding me that this is indeed my fault.

Shouts from the crowd draw our attention to the field. Brad’s running.

“*Oh no.*” JJ grabs her pom-poms and sprints to the other already-cheering girls. I didn’t even notice Paige and Emmy disappearing. I spot Coach observing me as Brad runs into the end zone. The referee whistles to indicate halftime.

Coach’s gaze shifts from me to JJ.

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Chapter 12

*for the second time in his bleak life, aang tries to kick
me off mathletes*

(he's running a strict program out here)

JJ

On Monday, I head to Coach's office for the check-in she requested. She's probably made her decision about Addy and me. *It's going to be okay.* So what if I fell at the game on Friday? I have better stretches, better motions, better timings. And I need it more.

I poke my head through the open door. "Hi, Coach!"

"Hey, JJ! Thanks for coming." She waves me in. The wall behind her is a mountain of gold and silver trophies. "Take a seat."

"I can't stay long." I hover by the chair. "The bus for Mathletes Invationals leaves in ten minutes."

"I didn't know that was today. In that case ..." She shuffles papers on her desk. "Maybe we should have this chat another day."

I frown. "No, it's okay, we can have it now. You said it wouldn't take long?"

"I did say that."

"Then can we just do it now?" I sit down, a bad feeling stirring in my stomach.

"Okay." Coach takes a deep breath. "You've impressed me over the recent weeks. You look great in the air—clean lines, sharp motions, impressive stretches—and you work very hard. However ..."

No. No *however*.

“I think Addy should fly during Regionals. She’s a better flyer for Aang right now.”

I’m in hell. And not a nondenominational hell. Polish Roman Catholic *Hell*. My skin’s melting off in the flames.

“But why?” I blink to stop the tears forming.

“I cannot have a flyer and a backspot out of sync. It’s too dangerous. And might affect the rest of the team.”

I blink more aggressively, the flames raging around me.

Coach stands up and puts a hand on my shoulder. I fight not to recoil from her. “This is a done decision for now. But who knows, maybe you’ll be able to convince me to let you fly during State. You just need to be teammates with *everyone*.” She smiles. “Now go win the Invitationals. You’ve got this.”

I don’t remember getting on the bus. But I guess I did because I sit down and lean my face against the dirty window. I scream internally, the noise ping-ponging around in my head. Tears run down my cheeks, cooling my flaming skin. I fought for this. I convinced my parents to let me go to cheer camp instead of spending the summer with *Babcia* in Poland.

I dig my nails into my skin. This isn’t the plan.

When the bus stops, I follow everyone into Highbury High. I’m drying my cheeks with the sleeve of my hoodie when I bump into someone.

Aang’s eyes lock with mine, his brows creasing. “Why are you crying?”

I hide my face behind my braids. “I’m not crying.”

He sighs like I’m greatly inconveniencing him with my tears. He takes off his backpack and rummages through it until he finds dry tissues and wet wipes. He holds them out to me.

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“You have snot coming out of your nose, and it’s unhygienic.” He forces the packets into my hand. “I need my team to look at least slightly presentable.”

“*To, jak ty mi podnosisz ciśnienie, to jest szok.*”¹⁰ I blow my nose with a dry tissue, then use a wet wipe to clean my face. Is that vanilla? I bury my face in the wet wipe, inhaling my favorite smell.

So basic, it can never be disappointing. It's like someone put aloe vera on my imaginary third-degree burns.

I hand him back the packets. Instead of putting them in his backpack, he stores them inside his navy blazer. I study his ironed white shirt and burgundy tie. It's good to know he hasn't changed his self-imposed dress code for math events.

I scan the corridor for a trash can and walk to the nearest one. He follows me without a word. The muffled voices from the competition registration table aren't enough to fill the silence.

"Congratulations, by the way. Addy's going to be your flyer for Regionals." I throw the tissues in the garbage with more force than necessary.

"Addy's flying during Regionals? How do you know?"

"Coach told me just before I got on the bus." My foot twitches next to the bin.

"No one's looking. Just kick the trash."

I start kicking the bin, the garbage inside rattling.

"You know ... you don't have to compete today if you don't want to," he whispers. "It's just Invitationals."

My foot stops dead. I've never heard him use the word *just* in relation to a Mathletes event. I stare at him, my mouth slightly parted.

He looks down, playing with his sleeves. "I mean, if you're not in the right headspace, you might make stupid mistakes, and that wouldn't be good for the team or our score, which is what I'm most concerned about right now."

"But without me, you'll get so many answers wrong. You don't exactly excel at logic questions."

"There she is," he grumbles. "The bane of my existence."

I give him a smile so light, I hope he can't see it. There's a twinge at the back of my head, trying to remind me I was upset, but it's fading.

Georgie, the A-team freshman, runs up to us, her short black locs bouncing up and down. "Hurry up! The round is starting soon!" She motions for us to join her.

We start walking toward the group, with Georgie skipping next to us. “I’m so excited! There will be so many people watching us!”

Aang and I exchange a look. The only people watching us will be teachers and unlucky students whose teachers are in charge of the event.

He shrugs. *Let her be excited.*

I give him a small nod. *It’s a rite of passage.*

Georgie’s gaze darts between us. “Did you use to date?”

“What?” I shriek, missing a step. I barrel toward the ground.

Aang grabs my arm and yanks me up. He lets go as soon as I’m upright. Then he shakes his head at Georgie so hard his neck cracks. “No, no, no. No, we didn’t. No. No.”

“Wow, six nos.” I massage the place where his fingers gripped my arm. “All that after I allow you to grab my ass three times a week?”

Georgie’s mouth falls open.

Aang stands between her and me. “Do not listen to JJ. She’s mentally unstable.”

I cackle. “*Mentally unstable* sounds like your typ—”

“Okay!” He pushes Georgie away lightly. “Make sure to sharpen your pencils before the round, kid! I just need to have a quick chat with our *teammate* JJ.”

Georgie speedwalks away from us, but not to tend to her stationery. She runs up to her friend from the B-team, pointing at us. My chest tightens. She reminds me of Remy coming back from Art Club with seniors’ gossip.

“I’m kicking you off the team,” Aang says. “You cannot appeal the decision.”

I roll my eyes. “As always, overreacting.”

“You told her I was grabbing your ass!”

“And I made sure to say that it was with consent. You’re welcome.”

He buries his head in his hands, groaning. “What am I being punished for?”

Ten meters away from us, Georgie is gesticulating wildly at her friend.

I chuckle. “She’s definitely more energetic than your freshman last year. He looked like he was going to throw up the whole team round.”

He stiffens.

What? What did I say?

He slowly moves his hands away from his face. “How do you know what the freshman last year looked like?”

My cheeks flush. “I-I just saw some photos on the school’s website.”

“No one was taking any photos. This is a math competition.” He’s studying my face like he’s trying to solve an equation.

I squirm.

“What the ...” His eyes widen. “You were here last year?”

I scoff, but it sounds more like I’m being strangled. “Why on Earth would I have shown up to an invite-only math competition?”

“You tell me. Did ... did you actually come last year?”

Thankfully, I don’t have to brainstorm a response because a voice booms, “Let’s begin the individual round!”



The scribbling of pens and the ticking of the clock are the perfect white-noise machine as I read out question number ten.

Which of the following is irrational? A. $\pi/6$ B. 8.1 C. 11.999... D. $\sqrt{36}$

A. I circle the correct answer.

The speed of sound is approximately 3×10^2 meters per second. The speed of light is approximately 3×10^8 ...

C.

I have twenty more minutes and only three questions left. I allow myself a smile before moving on. At least Mathletes is going well for me today.

At Highbury High, there are fifty lockers in a hallway, numbered one through fifty. All lockers start closed. A group of fifty students walks past the lockers. The first student opens every locker. The second student toggles every second locker. The third student toggles every third locker. This

continues until the fiftieth student toggles only the fiftieth locker. Once they're done, which lockers are open?

At Highbury High, there are fifty lockers ...

At Highbury High, there are fifty lockers ...

A memory wrestles its way to my prefrontal cortex. The after-school math club in Poland. Pan Wełnicki is standing in front of the blackboard, chalk in his hand. If I focus more, I'll see the board and the technique to use. I'll get the answer and move on to the next question. But the memory shifts to the whispers, the looks, the laughs ...

My fingers dig into the pen. I'll do it a different way. I grab a pencil and draw the lockers out. I have ten minutes left, and I don't need his help. I don't need to go back *there* even in my mind.

If this one is opened, that one closes ...

I push the pencil against the paper. It breaks. I take the next one. The answer is right there. Just five more minutes. I glance at the person next to me. They're finishing up the last question.

I look back at the badly drawn lockers.

Time runs out.

¹⁰It is shocking the way you raise my blood pressure.

Chapter 13

we sign the bounty-hummus bilateral agreement

JJ

I stare at the vending machine. The lockers dance in front of my eyes, pointing at me and laughing. One of them is waving a Polish flag, trying to jump me.

My brain's melting.

I forgot how mentally draining math competitions are. I need sugar. Preferably a Bounty, but any chocolate bar will do.

Footsteps echo to my left, and I tense up.

Aang leans against the vending machine. He got rid of the blazer, and the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up to his elbows. He crosses his arms, and his metal watch glitters in the hallway lighting. I look away.

"Do they not have Bounty?" he asks.

"You know very well they don't." I train my eyes on the machine.

"You shouldn't be surprised. They're not very good."

"They are. You just have faulty taste buds."

"I'd call them developed."

He used to say this as a joke all the time. I ignore the knot of pain in my throat, my eyes still on the machine.

"I'll make you an offer. You answer the question I asked before the round," he says.

"In exchange for?"

He produces a Bounty from his pocket.

I stare at the blue wrapper. "Where did you get that?" They don't sell these chocolate bars in the US. You have to import them.

“My mom forcibly placed it in my backpack, rambling about freshman year Halloween.”

An unwilling laugh escapes me. “I got so cranky because no one was giving out Bounties.”

“Hard to forget all the complaining.”

“You complained about the lack of sugar-free options.”

Another universe might see Bryn and Aang as allies in their war against refined sugar. Of course, Bryn’s reasons stem from medical necessity, while Aang is an octogenarian trapped inside a teenage body.

He shrugs. “I stand by what I said.” He waves the Bounty in front of my face. “So what is it going—hey!”

I snatch the bar from his hand.

He snatches it back. I attempt to grab it again, but he raises his arm above his head. I’m not reaching that, and he knows it.

I prop my hands on my hips. “Since when do you have quick reflexes?”

“Since I have to catch flying girls three times a week.”

And I won’t be one of them. My nails drill into my hipbones. I need sugar to drown my sorrows.

“Fine.” I extend my palm. “But Bounty first.”

“Absolutely not. You have no credibility, and the attempted theft just proved it. Answer first.”

He’s not wrong. I was going to run away with it. “Fine. I came last year.”

“Why?” He lowers his arm.

I snatch the Bounty from his hand, tear open the wrapper, and take a bite of the coconut–chocolate happiness. “Good shit.” I moan, sliding down the wall and sitting cross-legged.

“Shit indeed. Not sure about the good part,” he grumbles, and the joke is just so familiar that the words escape my mouth.

“I wanted to support ...”

A ghost of a smile flickers on his face.

Shit. I rolled my “R” on *support*.

My accent is slipping, but I don’t have the mental energy to keep it up. So, I let my tongue do its thing.

What a feeling. Like taking a bra off.

I'll put it back on tomorrow.

"I wanted to support ..." I repeat, looking at his lips curling that little bit more. "... the team."

He slides down the wall, leaving enough space for our shoulders not to touch. I inhale. He still uses the ginger soap. How did I not notice before? The scent travels through my bones, muscles, and cells until everything relaxes. I extend my legs in front of me.

He bites the inside of his cheek and tugs on his tie, then loosens it. I follow the knot as it goes from his neck to his chest.

"I came to the first home game last year," he blurts out.

The synapses in my brain scramble. "You did?"

"I did."

"Why?"

He lets out a breathy laugh. "I asked myself that question the whole time I was there."

We sit in silence as I process this information. Aang was there. My parents couldn't get off their shifts to make it, but he was there. Someone came to see my first cheerleading performance.

I didn't know memories could get better retroactively.

I open my mouth. No words come out, because I don't actually know what to say.

Apologize.

I roll my shoulders and swallow my pride. It goes down like knives. "I'm sorry I said you dropped me on purpose during the game. You're a good backspot, and I appreciate how hard you work to keep us safe. Thank you."

He draws in a breath.

I drum my fingers against the floor. "Yeah ... so, that's all."

A beat of silence. Two.

He leans a touch closer, stopping before his knee grazes mine. "I'm sorry for dropping you. During the game. And during the first practice. Both of them were my fault, and I ..." When he turns his head, my eyes get tangled in his. "I'll never let you touch the ground again, JJ."

My heartbeat turns arrhythmic, and my body moves toward him of its own accord.

*Co ty kurwa robisz?*¹¹ *Abort! Abort! Abort!*

I jerk away, scrambling up. “My mom packed me carrots and hummus. She was hoping I wouldn’t find a chocolate bar to eat. She claims that, as a doctor, I must promote healthy eating at all times. I argue that *everything in moderation* is a better concept, as it allows patients more flexibility, and really, does she expect me in the future to tell a woman who has painful periods to *not* self-medicate with chocolate? As a surgeon, she doesn’t talk to patients enough, and her bedside manner flabbergasts me.”

There’s a swallowed sound of amusement in his throat.

I bite my lip, trying to find the train of thought I displaced. “You can have the *sugar-free, healthy* hummus. As a sorry for accusing you of attempted murder.”

He hesitates, and it stings.

“It’s just hummus,” I say.

“Okay. Just hummus.” He stands up.

We’re indoors, but the corridor looks like the sun just shone a bit brighter.



Aang and I are sitting next to each other. Georgie’s on my right and Drew’s on Aang’s left. In front of us is the Finsbury High team table.

“Next question! What’s the probability that ...” The emcee reads out the question.

“Georgie, you worked on this,” Aang says, but Georgie’s a step ahead of him, already writing the equation down.

“I think it’s 12.75 percent.” She presses the button.

“Blackstock High?”

Georgie hesitates and looks at Aang. He gives her a thumbs-up.

“12.75 percent?”

“That’s correct! One point to Blackstock High. The score is 4–0.”

Georgie beams, and I remember the thrill of my first competition. Aang was sitting in the first row, cheering me on. I was on the B-team while he was on the A-team. We were so looking forward to being on the team together the following year. I wonder if he remembers the handshake we prepared two years ago.

Drew gives another correct answer. The score is 5–0. Fifth question done. Five to go.

“Next question! A mix of logic and geometry! Let ABCD be a quadrilateral ...”

Aang and I grab our pens at the same time. He’s scribbling away as my hand’s flying on the paper.

“It’s 120,” I announce at the same time as Aang says, “It’s 130.”

We both still, our pencils suspended over our papers. The ceasefire built on a carrot-and-hummus foundation trembles. *No. I’m not doing this again.*

“Captain, hello!” Drew shakes Aang’s arm. “What’s the answer?”

Aang’s gaze bounces between Drew and his own paper with the 130 clearly visible.

Before he looks at my sheet, I put my hand over it, hiding the numbers. “Actually, I think I’ve made a mistake. It can’t be 120.” I smile. “It’s your answer, Aang. It’s 130.”

He frowns. “But—”

I use my other hand to press the buzzer.

“Blackstock High?” asks the emcee.

Aang looks at the teacher, but his eyes stray back to me. He blinks like his glasses have stopped working.

“Blackstock High? You have to answer.”

I motion for him to respond. *Come on. You said it’s 130.*

“It’s 120,” he answers, still staring at me.

What?

“That’s correct! It’s 6–0 to Blackstock High,” says the emcee.

Whatever happens now, we’ve already won.

They get the next question correct and beat us to the buzzer on question eight. We’re faster on question nine, and they take question ten.

“Blackstock High wins seven points to three! We’ll be posting the cumulative scores of the individual and team rounds for each school in fifteen minutes. The closing ceremony is in twenty minutes in the gym hall.”

I grin at Aang, and he almost grins back but stops himself. My insides shrivel.



An hour later, we’re packing ourselves back onto the bus, with Georgie hugging a first-place trophy.

“Aang, wait!” I stop him before he boards. I play with the Bounty wrapper in my hands, the aluminum foil crinkling. “Thank you for giving me the chocolate bar. And saying my answer instead of your own. That was really nice.”

“Of course.” He scratches the back of his neck. “We’re teammates, and you were right.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Listen,” he cuts me off. “There are five weeks until cheerleading Regionals, and today proved that when we work together, we win stuff. And we have to win for Stanford and Columbia. So, from now on, I will stop fighting you, and you will stop fighting me. We’ll be civil. But I can’t be friends with you again. I just ... I don’t think we can go back to how it was before.” He steps onto the bus.

“No matter how much I’d kill for it,” he says quietly before leaving me alone on the sidewalk.

Clouds bury the sun, leaving the afternoon gray.

¹¹What the fuck are you doing?

Chapter 14

for my mental stability, i have to leave her on read

Aang

Over the next month, JJ comes to Mathletes early to stretch, but she does it at the back of the classroom. I listen to her reasoning for her math answers, and if I disagree, I do so calmly. She never disagrees with me. I start making atrocious mistakes on purpose, but she never calls me out on them.

She gives me a cheerleading tip sometimes, but now that she's been relegated to being a front spot, she mostly just stands in front of our group during the stunts with hollow eyes and does whatever Paige and Emmy order her to do. Apparently, front spots are so low on the priority ladder that Coach forgets to give them something to do half the time.

Her cheerleading smile is still glued on. But when she was flying, her eyes were animated and sparkly, and even though she looked psychotic, it was weirdly endearing. Now, the combination of the smile and the empty eyes makes me feel like I'm in a horror movie.

But we haven't fought in over a month, so the civil agreement is clearly working. Yet, somehow, I'm more drained and annoyed now than when we were arguing.

Maybe I can accuse her of violating the civil agreement by not warning me about what the last training before Regionals looks like.

Sweat drips from my forehead, and my eyes are blocked by wet lumps of hair. My hand shakes as I try to lift my water bottle to my mouth.

Coach forced us to recreate the competition-style warm-up, where you move from a general warm-up to jumps warm-up to

tumbling warm-up to stunt warm-up to whole-routine warm-up, with intervals so precise they'd put a military camp to shame. Then came the full-outs, where we did the entire routine. We've done a couple of full-outs here and there over the last month. But not five. In a row. Without a break.

Anytime I think cheerleading is getting easier, a new level unlocks.

I gather enough strength to tip the bottle into my mouth, the icy water cooling off my overheated body.

Everyone on the team is tired. But there are levels to it. You have girls who do everything. They lift, jump, tumble. They're the ones heaving on the floor, popping energy gels. Then there are non-tumblers. They're sitting with their backs against the wall, drinking water, saying a word or two before deciding it's too much effort.

Then there's JJ. Standing with her arms crossed next to heaving Monique and Bryn, not a single bead of sweat on her forehead. As a front spot, she's not doing much lifting. And it seems tumbling and jumping don't tire her out.

And then there's me, who's doing only the stunting. And I look the worst out of everyone.

Coach whistles.

No. Not again. Please.

Everyone gathers around her. Some walk, some crawl.

"We're going to take a break from full-outs for thirty minutes," Coach says.

I would cheer if I had oxygen left in my lungs.

"We'll work on the rest of the routine now. Let's start with the jump section."

Fifteen girls make an inverted pyramid with JJ at the front. Bryn and Emmy stand at her sides, slightly behind. Monique's somewhere in the middle. Addy's in the last row. Paige, like me, is not a jumper, so we sit on the floor to make the most out of our precious rest.

The first jump is the one I saw JJ do during my first training. Legs extended outward. Arms in a T position. A toe touch. JJ, Bryn, and Emmy kick their legs above their heads. The midsection's jumps are

solid with their legs at the height of their arms. The girls at the end are there to make up the numbers.

Immediately after they land, they spring up into a new jump, one leg extended in front of them, the other bent at the knee, tucked underneath the body. A hurdler jump. They land. One count break. Extend their hands again. Do another toe touch, and as they land, the front ten immediately throw a backflip.

Who knew observing could be so exhausting?

Coach is in her element, shouting orders.

“Standing tumbling!”

“Running tumbling!”

“Dance!”

“A three-minute break and we’re doing another full-out!”

I cry internally. Is it too late to quit now?

After three more full-outs, Coach gathers us around her. It takes everything in me to walk up to her on my jelly legs. This is what I get for partaking in American sports. My grandmother must be laughing at me from above. Is there even a Buddhist heaven? I need to buy a book on it.

“Thank you for your hard work. Meet on Saturday at seven a.m. in the school’s parking lot. Uniform on, hair and makeup done. Get a good night’s sleep.” Coach leaves the gym.

I collapse, pressing my face against the cold floor. My dad will have to carry me to the car. Or I’ll sleep here. Or I’ll die here.

A shadow looms over me. White shoes with pink socks. Something drops on the ground next to me. “It’ll hurt less tomorrow. And don’t stress about Regionals. We’ve won five years in a row. Nationals are where the competition is.” The footsteps retreat.

Packets lie in front of me, but I can’t read them. My glasses are in my backpack. I started taking them off for cheerleading because the harder the stunts got, the more they kept getting knocked off my face. I can see people just fine, but the writing on the packets is a blurry mess. I groan, holstering myself up.

In the locker room, I put on my glasses and read the labels. She gave me a protein bar and an electrolyte powder. I unwrap and bite

off half the bar. Chewing, I pour the electrolytes into my water bottle and then take a sip. Of course, it's vanilla flavored. I inspect the protein bar packaging. A no-sugar, nut-based recipe. I take another bite. It's actually tasty. I should bring her another Bounty for Region—

No.

This isn't, and won't be, within the remit of the civil agreement.

But I'm scared that the hurt and anger are now being kept alive only by the sheer force of my will.

At Mathletes Invitationals, I realized there was a weight pressing on my lungs, and it lifted with one sentence from her. She had come to see me compete. Breathing became so much easier, you'd think I'd been choking for the past year.

Immediately, I was back to being the freshman with a massive crush. A crush on a girl who kept talking about how she'd love to do cheerleading but was late for the tryouts. From that moment, I knew she'd abandon me for the all-American high school experience I'd never have or want. And she did leave. Like I knew she would. I just sped up the process.

Everyone's better for it, and there's no going back to how it was.

I repeat my mantra as I finish the protein bar.



On Saturday evening, I lie in bed, twisting the gold Regionals medal in my hand. The second-place team scored eighty points out of a hundred. We got ninety-three. I've won stuff before, but never like this. Never showed complete dominance. Never obliterated the competition.

I stand up and hang the medal on the corkboard above my desk. Between the map of Hong Kong, tone charts, and a poster showing one thousand digits of pi, I have some space, so it might as well be there. I adjust the medal so I can read the engraved side when I sit at the desk. Actually ... if I move the map a bit to the left, I'll have space for the State medal as well.

When we get it.

As I reorganize the board, my phone pings. It's the video of our routine. I don't need to look at the sender to know who it is. For all her English-language perfection, she makes five spelling mistakes in a four-letter text.

trouitine.

I imagine it means *routine*, but it could easily be the mating call of an endangered bird species.

I chuckle. She'd find that funny. I type out the message, but my thumb freezes.

You need to stop this right now.

I delete the message and focus on the recording instead. I put my headphones on and sit at the desk. There's no need for my mom to overhear and discover there's a recording of the performance.

My finger hovers over the play button. So far, I've avoided watching the videos from trainings. I'm already cheerleading. I don't have to witness myself doing it. I shouldn't watch this. I'll cringe too much.

My gaze drifts to the medal hanging on the board, and I press play.

My headphones fill with cheers from the crowd as we *skip* onto the mat. I'm sandwiched between Paige holding my left hand and Emmy holding my right, with a scowl on my face. They didn't let me just walk onto the mat.

We take our positions, and the music starts.

Cheerleading music is what I imagine they listen to at raves on other planets. It's a mix of a dozen pop songs played at five times the normal speed, propelled by EDM drops and "Let's go, Cardinals" voiceovers, drowning in enough laser-beam effects to be the soundtrack of a particularly long space battle.

And fuck does it hype you up.

And there's a method to its madness. Every laser beam hits at the same time as a stretch or a flip, making the routine look even better and all those moves more impressive and more synchronized.

Two minutes and thirty seconds go by so fast, I can't focus on anything. I play it again. I'm barely visible behind my stunt group,

but I see enough. I lift Addy into the stunt. I hold her thigh as she switches legs, and I catch her after we throw her up into the air. My muscles still hurt, but in the video, it looks like it's no effort for me at all. I look like an athlete.

I am an athlete.

The routine ends with a fifteen-second dance, which I spend lifting Alexis at the back. Coach threatened me, saying I'd have to perform some dance moves for State. She enjoys torturing me in the name of gender equality.

I play the video again. And the third time, I look at her. JJ's running in with Monique and Bryn, the red glitter on their cheeks matching the shining red bows that hold their ponytails. My eyes follow her throughout the routine. Her massive smile on the tiny screen as she helps lift Addy. As she runs from one tumbling spot to another. As she pats Monique on the back before she tumbles. As she touches my shoulder and shouts.

Touches my shoulder?

I rewind the video and zoom in. Her hand squeezes my arm when she runs past me to the front of the group. Her lips move. I zoom in even more. I can't decipher what she's saying. But as I rewind and rewind, the tiniest part of my brain thinks it's something like, "You got this."

The smile happens before I can control it.

Civil teammates.

There's no going back to how it was. There's no going back to how it was. There's no going back ...

Chapter 15

the audacity of him leaving me on read

JJ

I knock on the door to Remy's house, balancing the massive gift basket from my mom in my other arm. I adjust my black miniskirt and pink sweater as I wait for someone to open the door. I check my phone, but no matter how many times I stare at it, my message is the last one in the thread.

I cannot believe he left me on read.

Freshman year, on my ancient phone, I typed too fast for the keyboard to register stuff and made silly mistakes. He used to find it so funny. So, I made it more ridiculous on purpose, and he used to reply with something like, *It took me ten minutes to decode this message. Is this a ploy to keep me on my phone for longer, so you'll get better grades than me?*

I thought he would respond to *trouitine* purely on instinct.

Well, I thought wrong. And either way, I didn't accept Remy's invitation for Aang, so I don't know why I care. I'm here because my parents are at work, and the Smiths' Thanksgiving "leftovers" for the Alabama game viewing are delicious.

The knob rattles, and the door opens. Aang's face falls.
"Absolutely not."

I narrow my eyes. "That's not very civil of you."

"You being here is not very civil of you!"

"Why? I won't fight you over the turkey."

"That ... that isn't what I meant." He huffs, pulling on his collar.

I take in his white shirt and brown trousers. No tie this time, but the top three buttons are unbuttoned. Huh. He used to button it all

the way up.

“JJ!” Remy, dressed in a crimson American football jersey, appears behind Aang. “Come in, come in!” He opens the door fully, and I walk past Aang into the corridor.

It smells exactly like it did freshman year. A mixture of roast turkey, bread rolls, and pumpkin pie. The holiday makes no sense to me, but Mr. Smith is a good cook. I’m ready to eat.

Behind me, Aang and Remy are hissing at each other with the door still open. If they were talking in Polish, I’d be able to understand them. But the joy of English as a second language is that the words blur into indistinguishable sounds at about three steps away from the speaker. One step if you’re at a party. Half a step, if they have an accent. I slowly backtrack, creeping closer to hear them better.

“Why would you invite her? I barely want to celebrate this holiday as it is.”

I strangle the gift basket. He’s such a dick. He couldn’t even respond with a *thank you* to the video.

“Then tell her to leave.” Remy crosses his arms.

“What?”

“Tell her to leave.”

“Oh ... but ...”

“That’s what I thought.” Remy shuts the door and points to my basket. “Is that for us?”

“Sorry, Mom insisted.” I explained to her that Americans don’t bring gift baskets for Thanksgiving, and she said that it’s a good thing we’re not Americans.

Not yet.

“What are you saying sorry for? Mama’s still raving about *kielbasa* you gave us two years ago.” He takes the basket from me. “Let’s go!”

She should be raving about *kielbasa*. The way it tastes straight off the stick after you hold it over a campfire, smoky fat juice scalding your tongue. It reminds me of damp pine needles, the mountains in the distance, and my grandma and me laughing. My parents hate camping, so they never went with us.

My nails dig into my palms. *Stop it. It’s just a stupid sausage.*

I follow Remy into the dining room. Southern sayings and Bible quotes line every available surface. I come from a country where Catholicism is heavily suggested as a lifestyle. But I never realized how much money can be made from selling Religion™ until I got here.

The moms are gushing over the orange-red-yellow flower arrangements, and Aang's dad is doing a sudoku. He waves at me as Mrs. Lau envelops me in a hug, her tweed jacket scratchy against my cheek. "JJ, finally!"

Mrs. Smith hugs me too. She's wearing the same jersey as her son. Remy's dad walks in, holding a massive "leftover" turkey, his jersey matching the rest of his family's and his nail polish matching the jersey. Definitely Remy's work. "Welcome back, JJ! The turkey this year will be to die for."

"Is it bought or hunted?" I grin.

Mr. Smith drops the turkey on the table and waggles his finger at me. "If you don't watch your mouth, you won't get any of my *hunted* turkey."

"JJ, sit with me." Mrs. Lau moves to sit and pats the chair next to her.

Aang grimaces. Making faces shouldn't be allowed under the civil arrangement. Maybe I can text him that so he can ghost me again.

After the turkey is cut, the table goes silent, save for the clatter of cutlery and frequent appreciations of the food.

"So ... JJ ..." Mrs. Lau turns to me, a sweet potato on her fork. "What did you do over the summer?"

"I went to a cheerleading camp in Texas."

Babcia was sad there wasn't one in Poland, but she got to do a history fellowship in Czechia, and she wouldn't have gone if I'd come home. *No*. Not home. Just Poland. Ugh. My dad makes it seem so easy not to travel to the country of his birth. After thirty years outside of Nigeria, does he still refer to it as *home* in his mind? And if he doesn't, when did he stop?

"Speaking of cheerleading, congratulations on winning Regionals!" Mr. Smith turns to Aang. "Remy showed us the video. You looked like a pro!"

“What?” Aang’s mom points a butter knife at her son. “There’s a video of the competition?”

“There is. I’ll send it to you,” I say quickly. “I’m sure it just slipped Aang’s mind.”

“Aren’t you just the loveliest! I’m so happy Aang joined the team with you. I saw he hung his medal on—”

“Mom.” Aang’s fork clatters against his plate. “Could you pass me the garlic rolls?”

“Sure, but ...” She passes him the basket. “Your plate looks full. Did you eat anything?”

“Yes, the turkey is very well-seasoned.” He grabs one roll and drops it onto his plate, glaring at me.

I hold his gaze. At least Mrs. Lau will reply to me after I send her the video.



“Kids, could you put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, please?” Mrs. Smith asks while her husband puts on the game.

I grab as many plates as I can and speedwalk to the kitchen. During dinner, the parents demanded a day-by-day report of my life over the past year. On top of that, the mental gymnastics I had to do to fill in the words I didn’t understand from Remy’s parents’ accent fried my brain. Time away from them will be good. I put the dishes down, rest my forearms on the cold marble counter, and exhale into the silence.

Aang follows me into the kitchen with more dishes. He puts them down with too much force. Remy’s embroidery, propped up against the cookbooks, rattles. He finally finished it. I smile at the addition of American footballs next to the flying birds.

I scrape food off the plates into a bin and hand them to Aang. Remy delivers more dirty dishes while we work. The silence between us grows heavier with every clean plate.

At some point, Remy runs into the kitchen empty-handed. “The game started. Can you guys do the rest by yourselves?” He doesn’t

wait for a response before disappearing into the living room.

With only one plate left, we go for it at the same time. It's Aang's plate. Still full.

"I can do it." I pull the plate toward me.

"No, I'll do it." He tightens his grip on the rim.

"I've got it."

"It's my plate." He pulls harder, and my fingers slip in the gravy. The plate tips upside down.

We stare at the scattered food, the brown sauce spreading over the white kitchen floor.

"Look what you've done." Aang grits his teeth.

"What *I*'ve done?"

"You were insisting you had it. Well, clearly you didn't."

Heat floods my face. "You never take responsibility for anything!" I open a cupboard, searching for cleaning supplies. I find glassware and shut the cupboard with too much force. Something rattles.

Aang scoffs, opens a drawer, and takes out a dish towel.

Something in me snaps.

If it weren't for Aang not being able to own up to his shitty behavior, I would have stayed friends with Remy. I would have known where his family keeps the fucking dish towels. But only Aang gets to have that.

Aang gets to be the captain of his Mathletes team and win a cheerleading competition without getting demoted from his position.

He doesn't lie awake at night, wondering whether not hurting his grandmother by going back is worth the hurt of going back.

And he left me on read.

I come up to him and jab his chest. Hard. "Why do you always act like only *I* have done something wrong?"

He turns away from me. "The civil agreement included no fighting." Something rattles again as he yanks the faucet on and wets the towel.

"Screw the agreement!" I squeeze between him and the sink, and he goes rigid. "You broke it first. You didn't answer my text!"

“What?” He blinks. “Out of everything you could start a fight over, you’re starting it over an unanswered text?”

“Yes!” I stomp my foot.

“That’s ridiculous.” He starts moving away.

“Well, then, screw *you*.”

He pauses, his muscles shifting under his shirt like he’s about to pounce. “I’ll give you a chance to take that back.”

“Screw. You.”

His throat jumps. He puts his hands on the counter, either side of me, trapping me in the narrow space. His hips press into mine. “You want a fight? Fine.” His voice is steady, but his fingers tighten on the counter so hard his bones must be at the breaking point. “You chose cheerleading over me. You chose popularity over me. So, *forgive me* for choosing not to answer a text.”

“*Excuse me?*” I shove at his chest, but he doesn’t move a centimeter, and my blood boils because freshman-him would have stumbled back. “There was no choice until you created one. I could have done both!”

“No! You were already lying about where you were and coming late to Mathletes. You would have eventually dropped out and left me behind. I just made you rip off the Band-Aid instead of prolonging the torture.”

“Rip off the ... You didn’t even have the guts to tell me you did it! Do you know how confusing it was, showing up to Mathletes with no one there? And you weren’t answering my texts or calls! I was convinced the only reason you wouldn’t be there was if something happened to you, and that was scarier than the time I walked into a *sporting goods store* and realized they were selling guns, not cheer shoes! They had thousands of guns! Who’s buying them? How do they stay profitable?”

I’m getting off track. I shake my head and jab him in the chest again. His expression has melted into something else. Hesitation? Guilt?

“Thankfully, Drew answered my call and told me about the schedule change. Turned out you weren’t dying, you were just a coward. And then *I* had to go to *your* house to confront you about it.

You know how bad public transport is here. It took me an hour and three different buses to get to your neighborhood, for you to tell me I was a waste of your time!" Dangerous heat is stirring behind my eyes.

He pushes away from me, and cold air rushes in where his chest used to be. My vision blurs with tears, and I look away from him.

And suck in a breath.

The embroidery is teetering on the edge of the counter, food scattered below it.

"Aang ..." I freeze.

He follows my line of sight as the embroidery loses its balance. I watch Remy's art fall toward its death in the pile of food.

"No!" Aang throws himself forward to catch it before it hits the pile.

He gets there in time. But his clothes pay the price. He lies frozen on the floor, his white shirt fully in the gravy. A garlic roll is squashed under his elbow, and turkey slices peek out from under his stomach. And his expression is one of complete and utter mortification.

A giggle bubbles out of me. "Good catch. Are you maybe a backspot?"

His eyes narrow. "Stop."

The door swings open, and the laughter dies in my throat.

"What are you doing—" Remy halts in the doorway, taking in Aang's ruined shirt, the food, and the embroidery. He walks up to Aang and rips the embroidery out of his hands. "You two, with me. Now."

In silence, we follow Remy upstairs to his room. He opens his closet and takes out another red jersey. "Change of clothes." He throws it at Aang.

"Do you not have anything else?"

Remy cocks an eyebrow.

"Sorry." Aang's gaze falls to the floor. "Thank you for your generosity."

"You won't leave this room until you're friends again."

“Your door doesn’t lock from the outside,” Aang points out. “You can’t keep us in here.”

“Try me.” Remy points between us. “You better pray I didn’t miss a touchdown.”

He leaves us alone in his room.

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Chapter 16

aang gets on his knees

(hot)

(very very hot)

(i have no opinions on the attractiveness of aang kneeling)

JJ

Aang studies the jersey. “I must have created terrible karma in my past lifetimes that I’m still paying for.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

He doesn’t respond. Instead, he drops the jersey on the floor and unbuttons his dirty shirt.

My cheeks heat up, and I look the other way. Have I ever seen him without his shirt on?

No. I would remember.

I focus on Remy’s room. A (hopefully) fake shotgun hangs above a vanity table overflowing with eyeshadow palettes and makeup brushes. A rack stacked with paints, canvases, and fabric scraps is draped with an Alabama Crimson Tide flag on one side and a rainbow flag on the other. On top of a wooden chest of drawers, next to a plush panda, sits a framed photo. Remy, his parents, and Aang at the Pride Parade in Boston. Delight bounces around in my chest at the glitter and gemstones sparkling on Aang’s frowning face. He’s been letting Remy outfit him for Pride every year since they

met in middle school, and I don't understand why, in photos, he always looks like he's been blackmailed into it.

A heavy sigh draws my gaze back to Aang, and my giggle is involuntary. "Pretty dress." The jersey, made for a six-foot-two, two-hundred-and-twenty-pound Remy, swallows Aang whole.

"That's not civil."

My smile falls. "I was just making a joke."

"I know, it's just ..." He takes off his glasses and rubs his face. "The problem is you making jokes, laughing. It makes it so easy to want you back in my life. And I can't want that. Not after I barely survived what happened last year."

A knife-twisting pain hits my gut. "What about me? You think you didn't hurt me?" I blink furiously.

"You were always going to be fine without me. You were right, I wasn't your type. Even for friendship." He looks like someone's carving his skin away. He looks like he actually believes what he's saying.

The dam finally breaks, and my tears come pouring out. "*Przepraszam*—I mean, I'm sorry for what I said to Bryn and Monique." I shake my head, and tears go everywhere. "I shouldn't have said those things—I didn't mean them, and I've regretted them ever since. The best thing about moving to this country was meeting you, and I fucked it up so badly. And even when you're being a dick to me, I can't help wanting you back, and I'm such a massive idiot for that."

I sit down on Remy's bed. I'm sobbing, and my hands are shaking so hard that even clenching them together doesn't stop the trembling.

"I was ..." Aang's voice is so weak it seems he's about to faint. "... the best thing about moving here?"

"And a massive dick." I hiccup.

"JJ ..." He takes a step toward me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but tears still leak and drip from my jaw onto my hands.

Muffled shouts filter in from downstairs. Probably a foul. Freshman year, I watched half the game. At that point, I had been in

the US for only three months, so the Smiths' Southern accent and all the conversation topics I didn't understand overstimulated me. Aang just hated watching the game, so we ended up playing Categories in the quiet of this room. How on Earth did we get from there to here?

"I'm sorry," he says.

My eyes snap open in time to see him drop to his left knee in front of me.

The weight of his hands on mine finally stops the shaking. "I'm so, so, so sorry." His gaze falls to our joined hands. "Our whole first year, I couldn't believe you were actually hanging out with me. You were too pretty, too smart, too funny, too outgoing. I was scared you were biding your time until you met cooler people. And then you joined cheerleading, and I overreacted. I felt so bad about changing the schedule, and I knew I had to apologize, but what I overheard in the hallway ... it was like all my worst fears came true.

"I hated you. And I hated myself for hating you. But ..." His head drops even further, the strands of his hair tickling my hands. "What I did was cruel. And I was such a shitty friend to you even before that. I spent our entire friendship waiting for it to end."

A roar comes from downstairs. Definitely a touchdown.

He looks up, and his eyes find mine. "But I'd like to try again. Be a better friend. If you let me. If you forgive me. Because I'm forgiving you."

Tears stop pooling in my eyes.

He sighs. "Oh, thank god, the crying was killing me. Please, don't do that again."

"You'd like to be my friend again?"

"I would. But I have a question for you first. If you let me ask it."

I raise an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Why did you come up to me on that first day of high school? I mean, there were so many free seats. Why me?"

I disentangle my hands from his. "And you'll still be my friend?"

He inspects his hands like he's not quite sure what to do with them now. "I don't think I have a choice."

I dry my cheeks with my sweater. "You know what they say. Forced friendships are the best friendships."

He grins, and it's been so long since he directed his smile at me, I get lightheaded. I missed the way his face cannot decide whether to smile with his lips closed or show his teeth, ending up halfway between the two.

"So, what's the answer?" he asks.

"Because I knew you'd get how it feels to stand out without wanting to."

His eyes fill with understanding that travels through the air and envelops me like a warm blanket.

There's a knock on the door. Aang scrambles to his feet, and I fight the urge to jerk him back down.

I choke on my own saliva. I shouldn't want him kneeling in front of me.

"I brought you pumpkin pie." Remy enters the room, holding two plates. He puts them on the chest of drawers and shuts the door on his way out.

"Want some?" I dash for the plates, my voice coming out squeakier than intended.

Aang shakes his head, but his stomach rumbles.

"You sure? It has sugar and reeks of America." I sit on the floor and take a bite. "Two of your favorite things."

He groans. "Just hand me the plate." He joins me on the floor, and I hand him the plate. There's a fork stabbed into each slice.

We spend a couple of minutes in silence, stuffing our faces with pumpkin pie.

"So what was your grade on the math final last year?" I ask.

He bursts out laughing, throwing his head back. His smile stayed the same, but his laugh has changed. It's hoarse now, the sound scratching my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

"You know, I expected nothing else from this conversation." He takes a bite of his pie. "I got ninety-nine percent."

"Same."

We lock eyes. The steps to our dance return like we didn't take a year off from practice.

"Physics?" he asks.

"Ninety-five."

“Ninety-eight. One point for me.” He puts a finger up. “Biology? I got ninety-six.”

“Ninety-nine. One—one.” I put a finger up. “World History?”

“Ninety-three,” he responds.

“Eighty-nine.”

He gasps, his fork dropping onto the plate. “You got a B?”

“My content is impeccable. The teacher takes my points away for missing a’s and an’s!”¹²

“Still, two—one.” He wiggles two fingers. “GPA?”

“It’s 4.83,” I say.

“Mine’s 4.834.”

“You know it to three decimal places?” I poke his shoulder with my fork. “Is that why I had the second-highest GPA instead of joint first?”

He shrugs. “You snooze, you lose.”

“Well, I passed my driving test.” My second finger goes up.

“Well, I don’t want to pass it, so that can’t count toward the tally.”

I’m convinced Aang doesn’t want to drive because we all know he’ll be terrible at it. Once, he got confused about why the horn still works with the engine off.

I stand up and put our empty plates back on the chest of drawers. “How about you count it, and I’ll drive you and Remy to school from now on?”

He shakes his head. “I’m not getting into a car with you.”

I grab the plush panda off the dresser. Before I throw it, I give him a chance. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to die.”

I hurl the panda at him, but he catches it with one hand.

I scowl. “It’s no longer fun now that you can catch things.”

“You shouldn’t have made me a backspot, then.” He throws the plushie back at me and walks to Remy’s desk to take out some paper and two pens. “Categories?”

“Aww, but then you’ll miss the rest of the game downstairs and be sad!”

He holds my gaze. “I couldn’t be sad right now if I tried.”

My heart flutters. “Give me the pen.”

It takes ten minutes of arguing for us to decide on the categories, and five more to decide on the scoring system, but once we start playing, I lose track of time.

At some point, Aang’s phone pings. He reads the message. “Remy says my parents are ready to go home.”

We stand up, ending up in front of each other. I open my mouth to say something inconsequential, like *See you on Monday*, when he envelops me in a hug with such impact that I stumble backward. But he doesn’t let me fall, keeping me upright. My arms close around his waist.

“I missed you so much.” His mouth moves against my braids.

“I missed you, too.” His jersey muffles my voice, but I know he heard me, because he squeezes me even tighter. So tight, the little shattered pieces in my chest that have been broken since last year press back together.

I don’t know how long we hug each other. Ten seconds? Ten minutes? It’s too short. We peel apart when Remy knocks on the door. “Am I about to walk into a murder scene? Is that why no one is answering my texts?”

“We’re alive,” Aang shouts, smiling at me.

“Better than alive.” A wicked grin spreads across my face. “I’m driving you guys to school on Monday.”

¹²Polish language doesn’t have articles – *a, an, the*. Not knowing when to put them in front of nouns is one of biggest hurdles for Polish speakers learning English. I still can’t do that most of time.

Chapter 17

the most terrible thing happens

(i get invited to a high school party)

Aang

Several days after Thanksgiving, Remy's holiday spirit is gone, and he's in the mood to criticize my room décor.

"You could put a nice plant here." He points to one corner of my room. "And I need to buy you a frame for this." He inspects a poster of Bruce Lee in a kung fu stance. "Explain to me why you have it?"

"He's from Hong Kong." I lean back in my chair, studying the poster. A kid at the supermarket called me Bruce Chan once. He confused Bruce Lee with Jackie Chan. But they're both from Hong Kong, so that tiny scrap of accidental accuracy made something in my chest unclench.

Getting identity validation from eight-year-old racists. That's rock bottom, right there.

I turn around in my chair to face the desk. "Please, let's finish your homework before I lose my hair from the stress." Helping people with math is great. Unless it's Remy. I flip the page of his notebook. He wrote that seven multiplied by eight is fifty-four. My head spins a little.

"Please wait. No self-respecting Southern belle would pass up an opportunity to make this house a home."

My hand tightens around his notebook. How does Remy do it? He moved here from Alabama when he was ten. My dad left Hong Kong when he was seven. But Remy still has his accent and

mentions the South all the time, while I can't remember Dad ever talking about Hong Kong.

Remy plops back onto the stool next to my desk. He smiles at the medal hanging on the corkboard above us. "How about we text JJ to see if she wants to join us?"

My heart speeds up. "I don't know ... Is that a good idea?"

"Why not? She's been driving us to school for a couple of days now. It's time we all hung out more."

But what if it's going to be awkward? What if Thanksgiving was just a fluke, helped by the holiday spirit and the fight adrenaline wearing off, and we can't go back to how it was before? Remy called shotgun for the past two days, and they've spent the rides catching each other up on every single thing that has happened to them in the past year. I stared out the window, feeling bad for being the reason they didn't experience those things together.

But Remy takes my silence as permission. He grabs my phone from the desk.

"What are you doing?" I try to wrench the phone away from him, but fighting Remy is impossible because he's built like a giant. Or, in his own words, a linebacker.

He searches through my contacts. "Why did you save her as Józefina-Ibifubara?" He pronounces Józefina as Joe-zeh-fee-nah instead of Yoo-zeh-fee-nah. I don't think he remembers the correct way to pronounce it since she started going by JJ on the second day of school.

"It's her name." Unlike me, her parents gave her a real name instead of one from an American cartoon.

"So is JJ." He clicks the call icon.

My heart stops at the sound of the outgoing video call. "You said you'd text her!"

"I changed my mind." He examines me before ruffling my hair. "That's hotter."

"Give me my phone. Now." I launch myself at Remy as JJ's voice fills the room.

"Hi, Aang!"

Remy throws me the phone. I try to catch it, but it ends up on the floor.

“Hello?”

I pick it up, my hair ruffled even more than before. “JJ! Hi!”

“Hi.” She smiles.

“Hi!”

“Hi?” Her smile turns into a frown.

Remy laughs. I shove him off the stool.

“Remy thought, I mean, we thought ... you could hang out with us?” I turn my phone toward Remy, who waves from the floor.

“I’d love to! But I can’t right now.”

A weight settles behind my ribs. *I’m not disappointed.*

“I’m at Monique’s. The girls are helping me take my braids out.”

Bryn pushes her face into the camera. “It’s an absolute nightmare, by the way.”

“Bryn told her to take the braids out after two months. It’s been over three!” Monique is fighting with a strand of hair.

“We’re also stalking the routines of the teams we’re up against at State. You should see what someone from Whitechapel High posted. The first sequence of the pyramid! Including the transition!” JJ shakes her head. “Amateurs.”

“Stop shaking your head, or you’ll go home like this.” Monique takes out a blond strand.

Half of JJ’s head is blond braids, and the other is a mixture of curly and straight black hair sticking out everywhere.

“There’s no need to threaten me.” She laughs, and my face warms. “What time do you have free period tomorrow?” she asks me.

“One.”

“Me too.”

“Me too!” Remy shouts, inspecting the Bruce Lee poster again. “We should all study in the library!”

“Sounds great,” JJ says.

“It does,” I agree.

“See you then.”

“See you then.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Oh my god, just hang up. You’ll see him tomorrow.” Monique grabs the phone, and my screen goes black.

Remy grins at me.

“Shut up. And leave my poster alone.” I walk up to my desk and look at his homework again. His atrocious math weirdly doesn’t bother me anymore. “Let’s finish your exercises.”

“Why are you smiling so much? Ten minutes ago, you were behaving like my homework was your ultimate penance.”

Helping Remy has never been more enjoyable.



My left hand is stained with ink. It’s cramping. There’s an achy indent on my middle finger where I’m holding my pen. I turn the page and start practicing the characters for adjectives.

“The free period started five minutes ago.” Remy sits down opposite me in the library. “How have you already filled ...” He looks at my *tihn jih gaak*¹³ notebook. “Fifteen pages?”

“Fourteen.” I don’t look up. “I started at six in the morning.” I stretch my hand to relieve the cramp. “The test is coming up soon, and I can’t fail it.” And if I do better than Michael, I’ll be able to rub it in his face.

“You mean the *constructive feedback* test that’s at the end of February?” He takes out his sketchbook. “With now being late November?”

“It’s not at the end of February. It’s in the middle of it.” I attempt the first stroke of *beautiful*, but the ink in my pen has run out. I press harder, but only ghost marks appear.

“Maybe you should have signed up for an easier class.”

“There was no easier class.” I grab a new pen, and it glides on the paper. There’s just something about writing with a fresh pen ...

“There was Introduction to Cantonese and Intermediate Cantonese.”

“Exactly. There was no class other than Advanced Cantonese.”

Remy opens his sketchbook, his expression resigned.

Maybe I’m not the best fit for Advanced Cantonese when the other four kids in my class are heritage speakers. But I did the easier classes before. I sat there on Saturdays surrounded by elementary school kids. They got better. I didn’t. No matter how hard I try, I don’t get better.

So no. There were no other options but to enroll in Advanced Cantonese, sit at the back of the class twice a week, and try to understand one out of twenty words spoken. At least I’m surrounded by high schoolers. Call me crazy, but it’s more dignified being laughed at by a high school senior than a third grader when you mix up the tones and say *dick*¹⁴ instead of *dog*.¹⁵ Why was I saying dog? I don’t have a dog.

I press the pen to the paper and go back to practicing characters. I’m writing out the first stroke of *beautiful*¹⁶ when JJ flops onto the chair next to me. “You’ll never believe what happened after our call.”

“What was it—” My voice hitches. The pen slips, the stroke gets too long, and the character loses its meaning.

The braids are gone. Her black curls cascade to her shoulder blades, swept back into a half-up, keeping the bulk of her hair away from her face. But there are some coils around her temples, getting into her brown eyes. She smiles at me, and my vision fills with dark spots like I’m staring into the sun.

“Aang, are you listening to me?”

I blink, and the spots disappear. “I’m sorry?”

“I know your head is with your Cantonese homework, but I need your attention for like two minutes.” She leans over with her phone. Our shoulders touch. I put the pen down.

“I don’t think that’s what he’s distracted by,” Remy mutters.

I give him a warning look and fix my eyes on JJ’s screen. I’m watching a guy throw a girl up in the air and catch her feet with no other bases helping out. She ends up standing in his palms at his shoulder level.

My eyebrows shoot up. How did they do that?

“This is Southfields High, one of our rivals for State. I can’t believe they’re adding a partner stunt into their routine! Their difficulty will skyrocket!” JJ keeps replaying the video, her eyes glued to the guy. “He’s so strong.”

I grit my teeth.

“I tried getting Brad to do a partner stunt with me once, but he’s not cheerleading-coordinated.” She relays the story to Remy, and my teeth grind harder with every word. I’m literally right here. And she won’t ask me if I want to do it. Does she think I’m not strong enough? I can be strong enough.

“And then his wrist gave up, but instead of letting go of my foot and—”

“How about *we* do that?” I interrupt her.

Her brow knits together. “What do you mean?”

“State is more than two months away. We could stay longer after school and learn ...” I wave vaguely at her phone.

“Partner stunts,” she says.

“Yes, we could stay longer after school and learn partner stunts. You still need to prove to Coach that you can fly. That’d help, right? And surely we should match our competition to have a better chance at winning State, and you know winning will improve our chances for Stanford and Columbia.”

She stares at me with a blank expression. “*You* want to do more cheerleading?”

It will definitely take time away from Cantonese. That’s fine. I’ll just start waking up earlier. “Yes, I’m happy to do even more cheerleading. For Stanford.”

The smile that spreads across her face will be worth the five a.m. alarm. “A partner stunt ... and the difficulty ...”—she’s jumping in the chair—“and flying ... oh my god ... thank you so much!” She throws her arms around my neck.

My hands instinctively settle on her back. The smell of vanilla knocks the air out of me, the same way it did on Thanksgiving.

“JJ!” a voice calls out from behind us. Brad’s striding to our table in his varsity jacket.

She starts pulling away, and for a split second, my hands tighten around her, and I think I should hold her where she is and stare Brad down.

I let go and shuffle my chair away. *Don't let your mind go there. We're just becoming friends again.*

"Hi!" She grins at Brad. "What are you doing here?"

"Searching for an embroidery book."

Remy's head whips up from his sketchbook. "You like embroidery?"

"Yeah, it's super relaxing during game days. You like it, too?"

Remy nods, leaning forward. I frown.

"I'm Brad."

"Remy."

"Love the name." Brad winks at him.

Remy's cheeks turn pink, and he plays with his pen.

I frown some more. I think I know what's happening, but I don't think I *understand* what is happening.

Brad rests a hand on JJ's shoulder. He does a lot of resting for someone who's supposed to be an athlete. "My mom's managing a brand trip in Miami and taking my dad with her for flower arrangements. Which means I'm throwing a party."

"Finally!" JJ claps her hands. "It was making boring around here."¹⁷

My lips curl up. She makes English sound more interesting than it actually is.

Brad tilts his head. "Yeah? Either way—"

"Getting!" JJ interrupts him. "It was *getting* boring around here." She chuckles awkwardly. "Sorry." Her knee bounces under the table, and I fight the urge to rest a hand on it. What I'd do to make such small mistakes in Cantonese.

"Don't sweat it." Brad bumps her shoulder. "The party is in two weeks on Saturday. Costumes mandatory."

"But Halloween was a month ago" slips out of me.

Brad gasps, clutching his heart. "I don't need a reason to throw a costume party!"

“So true.” Remy nods.

Brad smiles at him. “You two want to come?”

“Yes!” Remy shouts before I even register the invitation.

“See you all at the party, then.” He walks toward the art section.

JJ and Remy start throwing costume ideas at each other, while I look down at my notebook.

What just happened?

[13](#)

[14](#) (gāu) [extremely rude]

[15](#) (gáu)

[16](#) (méih laih)

[17](#) In Polish, a literal translation of *It was getting boring* would be *It was making boring* (*Robiło się nudno*)

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Chapter 18

i get to second base

(and i'm chill about it)

(literally, i've never been more at ease in my life)

(WHY DO YOU NOT BELIEVE ME?)

Aang

“Let’s start the warm-up!” JJ jumps up from the bleachers the second I enter the gym.

“Hello to you, too.” I throw my bag on the floor and switch off my headphones. I spent the thirty-minute break after Mathletes listening to a podcast on Chinese classifiers, and I still only remember ten. I bet Michael knows fifty. Or a hundred. How many classifiers are there?

“Yes, hello, I’ve never been happier to see you!” JJ grabs my arm, and classifiers fly to the back of my brain. She pulls me into the middle of the gym, where Monique finishes laying down a mat and Bryn’s holding a speaker. After hearing we were going to try some partner stunts two days ago, they volunteered to help.

JJ lets go of my arm. The outline of her hand is warm on my skin.

Bryn puts the speaker on the floor, and cheerleading music blasts from it. I’m afforded the privilege of joining in on a series of jumping jacks and squats.

“Your timing is off!” Monique shouts at me.

I speed up. If I reported her for bullying me, would it be considered “unnecessary contact” by our guidance counselor? I tried emailing Ms. Foster about how to incorporate cheerleading into my college application, but she responded with, “Your application is a year away. Leave me alone.” At least, that was the spirit of the message. She sounded more professional, I’ll give her that.

The music stops. We end the warm-up and get a drink of water. Bryn reties her shoes, Monique does a couple of push-ups, and JJ pulls her T-shirt over her head.

Which is completely fine by me since this is the thirty-seventh time I’m seeing it happen, so really, my heart is beating faster because the warm-up was extremely effective.

Monique raises her eyebrows at me, and I find the most interesting stain on the ceiling.

JJ turns to me, doing arm circles. “Did you watch the videos I sent?”

“Yes, I’ve watched over an hour of the cheerleading content you managed to send me in two days.”

“Great! What are we doing, then?”

“On one, I grab your waist, and you put your hands on my wrists. On three, we dip. On five, I throw you up in a vertical line, and on seven, I catch your feet in my hands.”

“Perfect.” She rubs her hands. “Let’s do it, then.” She stands in front of me.

“Hold up!” Monique raises her hand. “We’re going to go way slower than that. Start by just getting the timing right. Go until five, but do a tiny jump.”

“Killjoy,” JJ mutters, and my lips quirk up.

Bryn claps. “And five, six, seven, eight!”

I curl my fingers around JJ’s waist and force myself not to stroke her hips. Months of cheerleading, and this is getting harder instead of easier. We dip, and I lightly throw her up.

“And again,” Monique orders.

We repeat it until she’s fully satisfied with the timings. “Okay. Now, I’ll hold one of JJ’s legs and help propel her up. Bryn, stand behind Aang and make sure she doesn’t die.”

Bryn salutes her and jogs behind me.

Monique squats in front of JJ, grabbing her foot. We throw her up, but her feet don't go past my belly button.

My stomach constricts. That was way too low. Brad probably got her all the way up on his first try.

"Good height for the first one," JJ says when her feet touch the ground. "Let's go again!"

But after ten repetitions, the most I can manage is for my hand to graze her foot.

"Let's take a break," Monique says. She and JJ walk toward the bleachers, speaking in hushed tones, with my flyer gesticulating wildly. I bite my lip. I need to be better.

Bryn's wide grin appears right in front of my face, and I suppress a yell. "You coming to Brad's party next week?" she asks.

I could be unconscious, and Remy would still drag me there.

I shrug. "We'll see."

"It'll be so much fun! Monique had to pull some strings to get our costumes last minute, but even she's not regretting her decision. They're so pretty." She tilts her head. "Especially JJ's."

Jealousy prickles my neck when it shouldn't. JJ has refused to tell me what her costume is, but Bryn knows. And that should not be surprising. It's only been a week since Thanksgiving, and though we're crawling around in friend territory, she doesn't owe me anything.

Bryn bumps my elbow. "You should definitely come!" She skips toward the bleachers, where she lunges at Monique. Before Monique can swat her away, JJ grabs her arms. She laughs while Bryn tickles their friend. They stop when Monique starts kicking.

I realize my nails are digging into my palms, and I force them to relax. It's my fault I missed a whole year of seeing her laugh.

JJ jogs back to me, while Monique curses her from the bleachers. "Next time, you should join us in torturing Monique."

I force myself to nod.

"You know, even if we can't do the stunt, I'm happy we're here." She smiles.

I translate her words in my head. *Don't worry if you fail at it. You're not Brad.*

I bite my lip. "We should go again." I shout for Monique and Bryn to join us.

"Oh ..." She tucks a loose curl behind her ear. "Okay." She moves into position when the girls jog over.

This time, I count. "And five, six, seven, eight!" I squat deeper and throw harder.

And she gets there. She flies all the way to my shoulders. Which is so unexpected, I forget to grab her feet.

She squeaks when there's nothing to land on in the air and falls down. We catch her. I hold my breath, waiting for her annoyed expression, but instead she beams at me. "We were so close. Go again!"

I throw her again, ready to catch her feet this time. But nothing prepares you for the impact of a human landing on your hands. My wrists bend inwards, and JJ tilts, going over my head.

Fuck.

My hands automatically tighten around her ankles, but that doesn't stop her from falling backward. My heart stops, expecting the thud of her hitting the mat.

Bryn catches JJ's head, only letting her hair brush the ground.

My heart revives itself. Before I can ask if she's okay, Monique pokes me in the chest. "Are you stu—"

"Hey." JJ shoots her a look. "Be nice."

Monique closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. When she speaks again, her voice strains to contain itself to a non-shouting volume. "If the flyer is falling backward, the best thing you can do is let go of the feet, move back, and catch the torso. Coach has said it so many times."

I nod quickly. "I know, I just didn't think and ..." I turn to JJ. "I'm sorry."

She waves my apology away. "Everyone's first instinct is to grab the feet. And Monique is conveniently forgetting she's had ten years to fight that instinct, not barely three months." She stands up. "Bryn, help stabilize Aang's wrists once I land on his hands. Let's go again."

I throw JJ up and brace my wrists for the impact. My hands tremble, but Bryn wraps her hands around my wrists, reducing the shaking. It doesn't matter, because JJ tilts backward again. Not as much as before, though. A small enough tilt that she should be able to right herself. But the fear clouds my judgment, and I let go of her feet to get her down. I wrap my arms around her trunk, and when her feet softly touch the ground, I exhale, squeezing her tighter to me.

"That was ... a good catch." There's an edge to her voice.

I look at where my arms are wrapped around her. My right hand is squeezing her left boob.

It's like I put my hand in a fire.

I disentangle myself and jump away from her. What is my life? The closest to a kiss I've ever gotten was a peck on the cheek from a girl at math camp, but in the last three months, my hands have been on multiple girls' waists and butts. And now I've gotten to second base. I don't think this is the sequence of events promised to me by baseball metaphors.

Hot splotches pop up on my cheeks.

"Should we ... finish for today?" Bryn asks.

JJ's mouth makes the shape of a *no*.

I'm beginning to hyperventilate. *Calm down. Do not look like you liked it. Act like it's not a big deal.*

I shrug.

Monique furrows her brow. "Is that a yes or a no?"

I shrug again.

The three of them survey me skeptically. "Monique, Bryn ..." JJ says. "Maybe you should get some water."

When they walk away, I focus on JJ's face. And nothing below it. She has dark-brown eyes, but there are also patches of green in the irises. Maybe she got them from her mom.

JJ takes a step toward me. "You okay?"

"Yes!" I squeal. "I mean, nothing happened to not be okay about! I am your backspot, and I was just doing my job!"

"Yes, you were." Her voice is slow, like she's talking down a wild animal. "I'm not upset about anything. Are you?"

I shake my head so fast that the world goes blurry. Her cheek twitches, amusement playing in her eyes.

I blink. "Are you trying not to laugh at me?"

She nods.

"This isn't funny."

She bursts out laughing, and my lips pull up against my will.

"Let's finish for today. Try not to grab anyone's chest on your way home, perv."

I hide my face in my hands. "This is bullying."

"And I missed it so much." She rests an elbow on my shoulder. She's not an adequate height for it, so she contorts herself to get there.

I look down and meet her eyes. There are definitely patches of green there. "I missed you bullying me, too."

"Great friendship we're having here."

Yes. I'm happy that we're friends again.

I'm happy that we're friends.

Me. Happy. Us. *Friends*.

Chapter 19

i have a shot of vodka, and my neurons die

*(a retroactive note from jj: contrary to popular belief,
alcohol does not kill brain cells)*

(a retroactive note from aang: it sure as hell felt like it)

Aang

I lie on my bed, trying to find a Hong Kong claypot online. Ten dollars? That cannot be authentic enough.

One day, I'll go to Hong Kong and buy one myself, even talk to the cashier in Cantonese. But for now, I'll have to do with the wonders of online retail since I need one for Chinese New Year in February. I overheard Michael and the others making plans for CNY, and I decided this year I'm going to make my parents celebrate properly. No more Panda Express.

I'm scrolling through another website when JJ video calls me.

I scramble up and press the green icon. "Hi!"

"Why aren't you in your costume yet?"

I groan and flop back down onto my back. "Do I have to go?"

"I won't even entertain that question." She rolls her eyes. Dark green eyeshadow sparkles on her eyelids.

"Well, what are you going as?"

"You'll only find out when you show up to the party. Not if. When."

"Is that Aang?" Bryn appears from behind JJ. She's wearing a purple top and a seashell in her red hair. "Tell him that I simply have to see him at the party!" She bangs on the door in the background.

“Monique, get out of the bathroom! How long can it take you to do a side braid?”

“Please come. If you don’t show up, I’ll be ...” JJ searches for a word. “Wait a second, I learned a new adjective ...” She closes her eyes and scrunches her nose.

I take a screenshot before I consider what this means.

“Despondent! I will be despondent.”

“And I don’t want to make you”—I hold in a laugh—
“despondent?”

“No, you don’t.”

No, I don’t.

I cough to avoid saying that out loud. “Remy’s going to be here soon. He put himself in charge of my costume.”

“Oh, then there’s nothing to worry about.” JJ sighs in relief.

Another bang from the background.

“I have to go before Bryn commits a hate crime. I’ll see you at the party.” She hangs up.

Brad’s party is all I heard about at the last two partner-stunt trainings. Bryn went through the list of possible attendees. Apparently, people from other schools are coming. She wondered how many kegs Brad would supply. Talked about every song she *needed* played.

JJ kept getting quieter with every failed stunt attempt. All the enthusiasm from the first session was bleeding out of her.

I exit the claypot website and open the photo app. I knew throwing someone up and catching them standing would be challenging, but I hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be. Three sessions so far, and we’ve managed to hit it only a few times.

I scroll through the videos from the sessions. I pause on one clip and zoom in, studying my form. My hand was too far from my shoulder. That’s probably why—

My bedroom door slams open, and I drop my phone on my face.

Remy barges in with three plastic bags. “Get up! Get up! Get up!” I get off the bed. “What’s this?”

“Your costume.” He hands me a green T-shirt, a green hoodie, and matching green track pants.

“That’s it? What am I supposed to be?”

“Just put it on. No complaining.”

I take off my T-shirt, and he checks me over. “Have you been going to the gym without me?” He pokes my stomach.

I double over, grunting in pain. “Why did you have to put so much force into that?”

“Just making sure it isn’t fake.”

I put on the green T-shirt. “No, I haven’t started going to the gym. With or without you.”

“It must be cheerleading, then. I’m impressed. You still have chicken legs, though.”

I throw the old T-shirt at him. “Aren’t Southern belles supposed to be polite?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes New England gets to me.”

After I change into the hoodie and pants, Remy puts a green headband with frog eyes on my head.

“I’m going as a frog?” I frown.

He attaches a small gold crown between the eyes. “You’re going as a frog *prince*.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” He starts changing into his costume.

I don’t argue further. It could have been much worse. I could have been forced to dress as a pirate. Or a lifeguard. Or a firefighter. Or any of the above, but shirtless.

But a frog prince? It’s a well-known story, but there’s another memory I have of it ...

Remy breaks my train of thought. “I’m ready.” He’s in one of his red football jerseys with black markings smeared under his eyes.

“That’s not a costume, that’s your Sunday attire—*oh my god*. Is this”—I can only get the next part out in a whisper—“because of Brad?”

“No! What an outlandish suggestion.” Remy turns red.

“What’s up with everyone I know and Brad? My best friend, my ...” I search for the correct description.

The pause is a mistake, because Remy descends on it like a vulture.

“The girl you’ve been obsessed with since the first day of high school?”

I dart for the door. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The girl you joined cheerleading for? Or—”

“Mom!” I shout as I open the door. “I think we’re ready to go!”

“Let me get my keys!” she squeals.

I don’t know who’s more excited. JJ, Remy, or her.



We arrive at Brad’s, and I cannot even attempt to estimate the number of people flowing into his two-story house. Maybe Mom should drive me home.

“Don’t make that face.” She shakes her head. “I’m not driving you home.”

“But—”

“It’s your first high school party! This is how it all starts. Today, a party, tomorrow, you’re dreaming of going to a liberal arts college, and in four months, you’re deciding to do a gap year.”

Blasphemous. You’d think my Chinese mother could at least endorse majoring in mathematics at Stanford. I bet JJ’s parents bought her a medical coat the second she was born.

I try a different method to get her to take me home. “But what if there’s alcohol?”

“You can drink it, but not too much. You don’t want a hangover tomorrow.”

“But what if ...”

“Remy, you know what to do.”

Remy drags me out of the car.

“Have fun!” My mom waves. “Tell JJ to send me a photo of her costume!” The car tires screech, leaving marks on the asphalt.

I watch the car disappearing around the bend. “My mother is so irresponsible.”

"I know, we're so lucky to have her." Remy grabs my arm. "Now, party!" His cowboy boots make a clapping sound as he marches toward the entrance.

The inside of the house is precisely what I feared it would be. *Popular music* is blasting through speakers set around the living room. My ears will be ringing for hours after leaving this establishment. There are people everywhere, pushing past me with their red cups. A ping-pong ball hits me in the back of the head. This is a nightmare.

"This is so cool!" Remy pulls me into the kitchen. "Let's get some beer."

"I don't want a beer."

"But I do." He grabs a can from a bowl filled with ice and looks around. "Where do you think Brad could be? We need to thank him for hosting us."

Southern manners, my ass.

We push past people and, for a high school party, a surprising number of vases full of fresh flowers. The sickly sweet scent hits my nose. As if not enough of my senses have been assaulted so far.

We get some breathing room against the wall opposite the front door, where the floor is miraculously not sticky. I'm sure the situation will be rectified soon.

Remy stares at the living room's crowd with wide eyes while I take my phone out to text JJ. What if she arrives super late and I'm left here on my own, my eyes abused by having to watch Remy flirt with Brad? Or what if she doesn't come at all? Maybe she and her friends changed plans at the last minute. Or what if ...

Remy sighs. "I'm a genius."

I look up from my phone. "What are you talking about?"

He points to where three girls dressed in green, blue, and purple are striding through the door, and my knees buckle under me.

Her hair is in a bun, and a gold tiara rests on her head. She's wearing a short green dress and white elbow-length gloves. Her gaze goes straight to me, and a smile spreads across her face. She says something to Bryn and Monique and walks toward us. She looks like a princess. She is a princess.

She is ... a green princess.

The Princess and the Frog.

I'm dressed like a frog.

The ground wobbles below my feet.

"You." I point a finger at snickering Remy. "How did you know?"

"It must be a lucky coincidence."

"Remy ..." I rasp out as she gets stopped by a group of people but waves them away and keeps moving in our direction.

"I might have one or two classes with Bryn. But she wouldn't know anything about it either."

JJ gives me a light tap on the shoulder. "You actually came!"

"Yeah! Hi!" My voice cracks like I'm thirteen again.

Remy buries his face in his hands.

JJ looks me up and down, and my heartbeat quickens. "So, your costume—"

"Remy chose it! I had nothing to do with it!"

"Oh ..." Something flashes over her face. "Okay." She turns to Remy. "Thanks for dressing Aang up and getting him here. I can't imagine how hard it had to be with all the kicking and screaming."

"Mrs. Lau and I planned on sedating him. But he wasn't fighting it as much as we thought he would ..." He strokes his chin. "I wonder why that is?"

"Brad!" I spit out. "Remy was really excited to talk about embroidery with Brad, so obviously we had to come."

"I see." JJ's smile wavers, but she gets it back on. "Brad's there." She points to some people playing drunk Twister in the dining room.

Everybody's so creative these days.

Remy springs to life even more than before. "Let's go talk to him!"

"I'll stay here." I need to get a grip on my eloquence before attempting more conversations with JJ.

Remy ignores me, already walking away, dragging JJ along with him. She glances at me over her shoulder but keeps walking.

I lean against the wall, watching as they approach Brad. He hugs her, probably telling her how pretty she looks and referencing the

time they watched *The Princess and the Frog* together when she was dating *him*.

Why didn't I ever watch the movie with her? Oh right, I refused to watch Disney movies after seeing *Mulan* in elementary school for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. And having my teacher ask me about the accuracy of it, and me having to tell her I knew nothing about Chinese culture.

But *Mulan* is not *The Princess and the Frog*. So maybe we should watch it. I could say I haven't watched a movie in a while, and if she was interested ... We're friends. Friends watch movies together.

"Wanna know why they broke up?"

I yelp, my heart breaking out of my body. I turn around, clutching my chest.

Bryn is standing in front of me with two shot glasses in her hands.

"What did you say?" I breathe out.

"Wanna know why they broke up?"

"Who?"

Bryn points to the Twister area. "Who you've been staring at like a stalker."

My ears burn. "I'm not a stalker."

"Don't worry, I think it's very romantic! Just like in *Love & Basketball*!" She hugs the glasses to her chest.

"I don't know that book."

Her smile falls. "Maybe I don't want to help you." She starts walking away.

"No, wait! How ... why did they break up?"

"Sorry, I don't volunteer information for free." She wiggles her finger. "You have to pay."

"I have one hundred in cash."

"Not in money!" She hands me a glass. "In alcohol!"

"I don't drink."

She takes the shot away from me. "Then you're not finding out from me."

That's fine. I don't need to know. It's private information concerning private individuals. Except ... what if I accidentally reference their breakup and JJ gets upset? If I knew the details, I

could avoid saying the wrong thing. Yes, that makes sense. That's not complete gibberish.

I glance toward the Twister area, where JJ (and, I guess, Remy) is laughing at something Brad said.

I grab the shot.

"Fine, I'll do it." I smell the glass and gag. "Jesus. Are you planning on poisoning me?"

"That would be illegal."

"So is drinking underage."

"That's less illegal." She points to my glass. "If I were you, I'd drink it in one go."

Oh, what the hell. My mother said to drink a little. I tip the shot into my mouth.

It takes everything in me to swallow the liquid instead of spitting it back into the glass. My throat is burning. My stomach stirs. My neurons are dying one by one. How many neurons die from one shot of alcohol? How many neurons are there to kill? JJ would know. I cough. And then I cough some more.

Bryn raises her eyebrows. "So, I take it you've never drunk vodka before."

"No, I haven't," I rasp.

"The things we do for love." Bryn drinks her shot without flinching.

"I have to sit down." I slide down the wall. My mouth is scorched. Isn't vodka the one where you need something to chase it with? Why didn't she give me anything to chase it with?

Wait.

I did this for a reason.

Bryn slides down next to me. "She broke up with him."

My head gets hotter. It's probably the alcohol coursing through my poor brain. "The agreement was you tell me why."

"Oh yeah! She told us she broke up with the hot quarterback because he didn't get her flowers for International Women's Day. Who gives flowers for Women's Day? In high school? To be fair, Brad's dad is a florist, so maybe it does make some sense ..."

I keep my face impassive, but blood is pounding in my ears, and not all of it is due to the alcohol.

Bryn might not know what it means, but I do.

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Chapter 20

how does she look so pretty rolling her eyes?

(vodka makes me delusional)

Aang

I remember how sweaty my hands were that day, walking to JJ's locker, clutching a pink camellia. The eighth of March, freshman year. The week before, I had opened thousands of websites that a Google search gave me for Poland, Women's Day. Most of the ones I read said it's customary to give Polish women flowers for Women's Day. The rest was porn. And even the porn had flowers in it.

I strolled up to her, pushed the flower into her hand, and squeaked, "I didn't know what flowers you liked, but this one is pink. Happy Women's Day!"

She got so excited. "This is for me?"

"Yes, I-I googled it and saw that everyone in Poland gives flowers? Like dads, uncles, friends. And since we're friends—"

The smile fell from her face. "You're giving me flowers as a friend?" She looked almost disappoi—

"Hey!" Bryn pats my cheek. "Are you alive?"

"Huh?" My eyes flutter open. I didn't realize they were closed.

"Thank god. She would have killed me if you died from one shot of vodka."

Pink sneakers enter my line of sight. My eyes move up the long legs until I get to JJ's frowning face.

"What are you two doing down there?" she asks.

"Hi, girl!" Bryn puts her hand out, and JJ hauls her up.

I don't feel like standing. I've had a shot of vodka, what if I get dizzy and fall? And get a permanent brain injury? There goes my attempt at Stanford and San Francisco.

"Why would you give him alcohol? I told you he doesn't drink." JJ crosses her arms.

"I gave him one shot of vodka! I even diluted it with water!"

JJ stares at her in horror. "You mixed vodka with *water*? That's a sin against Pola—" She purses her lips. "It doesn't matter that you diluted it. You still gave it to him!"

Bryn shakes her head. "He knew he was taking alcohol from me!"

"What?" JJ's eyes snap to me. "You knowingly drank alcohol? Are you ill?"

I shake my head.

"Then why did you do it?"

Oh, to find out how you and your ex-boyfriend broke up. Maybe I am a stalker? My eyes flick toward Bryn, but instead of ratting me out, she winks at me. I look back at JJ, who's clearly waiting for an answer. I could lie to her. But I'm racking my brain and cannot think of anything that doesn't make me sound deranged.

Honesty is the only thing left, then.

"I can't tell you," I mumble, and immediately know I've made a mistake.

Panic runs across her face. It's the same face she made the first time she heard Remy's parents' Southern accent. The same face she makes whenever more than three people are talking over each other at Mathletes.

"I can't tell you," I repeat louder, my voice carrying over the music and the crowd.

Her shoulders relax, but she's still frowning. "Why not?"

"I can't tell you why I can't tell you."

JJ opens her mouth, but Bryn interrupts her. "I'm gonna go find Monique. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She adjusts JJ's tiara and skips away.

"So nothing is off-limits," JJ mutters before squatting in front of me. She puts her hands on my shoulders. "Look at me."

Would be hard not to.

“Have you had dinner?” she asks.

I nod.

“Then there’s no way you can already be drunk. It’s in your head.”

“You’re in my head.” *Oh god, what did—*

Her grip on my shoulders tightens. “What?”

“I mean ... I mean, I’m Asian. Don’t we have low alcohol tolerance?”

She huffs. “This is what happens when mathematicians try to read biology papers. You have less than a fifty percent chance of getting the ALDH2 gene mutation. And *low alcohol tolerance* is not a good description of the condition. Even if you had it, on a full stomach, with your height and weight, one shot of *diluted* vodka wouldn’t make you drunk. You’re just freaking out.”

Fuck me. She’ll make a hot doctor.

I shut down that train of thought.

She hoists me up. “Let’s get you some water.” She pushes me through the crowd toward the kitchen. “And relax. Your neurons will be fine.”

When we get to the kitchen, also full of people, I gulp down a bottle of water. “You know what? I feel much better.” I keep speaking loudly so she can hear me without stressing out.

“Placebos can be effective for hypochondriacs.” She rolls her eyes.

She looks pretty when she rolls her eyes. “JJ, you’re really pre—”

“Aang?” The voice grates on my ears.

I squash the plastic bottle.

How is *he* here? He doesn’t go to our school. He doesn’t even live in this town.

People from other high schools were invited.

“Aang?” the voice repeats.

I turn around.

A tall guy with short black hair is staring at me, bewildered. He’s wearing yellow trousers, red suspenders, and a firefighter hat. Isn’t it too cold to be walking around shirtless?

“*You’re* at a party?” he asks, but doesn’t wait for my reply because he spots JJ behind me. A slow smile spreads over his face, and he

walks past me. "Aang, want to introduce me?" He extends his hand.
No, I don't.

JJ takes his hand with a puzzled expression.

I sigh. "This is Wai Hung. We know each—"

"Just use my English name. You always pronounce the Chinese one wrong."

My blood curdles. As opposed to him, who grew up speaking Cantonese at home and has a perfect accent, perfect writing, and perfect vocabulary.

"I'm Michael." He's still holding her hand. "Aang and I go to the same Chinese school."

"Same class as well," I add.

"But that doesn't say much, does it?" He finally lets go of JJ's hand.
"Aang's not very good at Cantonese."

JJ doesn't say anything. The kitchen's too loud, and she probably can't make out his words. She gives him a tight smile and adjusts her glove. He takes in her whole outfit. His eyes dart from her to me, to the frog eyes on my head.

"*You* have a girlfriend?" he exclaims, so loudly that even JJ had to register that. He leans toward me. "Always thought you'd go for a Chinese girl."

My stomach drops. JJ tilts her head, but there's no way she heard the second part of what he said with the speaker blasting right next to us.

The music pounds against my skull, each beat making the room feel smaller. Someone bumps into me. I try to breathe, but the air is too thick. Michael opens his mouth again.

I turn on my heel and escape the kitchen, barely registering JJ shouting after me. I push open the first door on the right, and a wave of freezing air hits me. My lungs remember how to work again as I walk into the cold.

Massachusetts in early December at ten p.m. isn't the most pleasant time to be outside. But the other option is to go back inside, where Michael can make me feel like an asshole by telling the truth.

I sit down on the porch steps and look out into the garden.

I have thought before that having a Chinese girlfriend would solve everything. We'd speak Cantonese together. I'd take part in her family's Chinese New Year, and she could teach me the things I should already know. But hearing Michael say it out loud made it sound so calculating.

I wouldn't reject someone because they're not Chinese. Michael barely knows me, yet he's sure I would. Is that what people think? Acid surges in my throat. Is that what JJ thinks?

I tense as footsteps thump behind me. "It's freezing."

My muscles relax a bit as JJ sits down next to me. Her dress hikes up, and the goosebumps spread all the way to the top of her bare thighs.

I have to swallow before I find something intelligible to say. "You can go back in if you want to. I just needed some fresh air."

"Nah, I'll stay here. There's no place I'd rather be than outside in a corset dress when it's five degrees." She laughs, but it doesn't hide the shiver.

She means degrees Celsius. She must be freezing if she didn't do the math of turning Celsius into Fahrenheit before speaking.

I take my hoodie off and hand it to her. She stares at it for way too long.

I pull the hoodie back. "It-it ... it's fine if you don't wa—"

"I'll take it." She grabs it and pulls it over her head. Her tiara tips to one side.

The cold slowly numbs my fingers as we sit in silence, staring into Brad's garden. Which isn't particularly easy, as the only source of light is the fairy lights wrapped around the porch roof.

JJ turns to me. "I like your hair. It frames your face nicely."

In a flash, my body forgets it's December. Heat spreads across my cheeks and down my neck. I'm suddenly hyperaware of every strand of hair touching my forehead.

"Why did you grow it out?" she asks.

"Started at math camp. A girl there said I'd look good with longer hair."

"I see." She plays with the strings of the hoodie. "Do you keep in touch with her?"

“No. She lives in San Francisco.”

“Oh!” JJ pulls on the hoodie string too hard, and most of it now dangles from the right side. “Well, when you go to Stanford ...”

“I don’t think we’ll talk again. She hit me with a canoe paddle.”

JJ’s laugh fills the garden. “At a math camp?”

“Yup.” I lean back, my elbows resting on the steps. “My mom signed me up for one of those *sporty* math camps without my consent. I was forced to rock climb, canoe, and hike between classes.”

“That actually explains a lot.” She smirks, and I might be imagining it, but her eyes flick to my bicep.

“Explains what?”

“Sorry, can’t tell you.” She leans back to match my position. The bottom of her dress shimmers.

“I like your costume!” I blurt out.

“Thank you.” Her eyes warm up at the compliment, and my heart skips. “Monique negotiated a Pilates class once a month in exchange for her mom buying us the princess costumes.”

I nod like I understand what that means.

Leaning back has set her tiara even more askew. Before my brain can stop my arm, I reach my hand out and correct it. My fingers linger on her curls, and I can’t get myself to move my hand away. And she’s not pulling away, so my hand is hovering awkwardly by her temple.

She angles her head barely eight degrees, and it’s enough that my fingers press against her skin.

“You never corrected him,” she whispers.

“What?”

“You never corrected Michael when he assumed I was your girlfriend.”

“I didn’t?” I’m trying to remember the Michael conversation, but my brain’s fuzzy. The vodka shot. At it again.

“No, you didn’t.” She looks at me through her dark eyelashes.

I want to lean forward.

I snap my hand back.

That door was never open. She might regret what she said last year, but she was right. I'm not her type.

But *she* broke up with Brad. She ended her perfect cheerleader-footballer relationship. And she did it over a Women's Day flower. My hand fidgets to go back to where it was.

The back door flies open, and we jerk apart.

"What are you guys doing out here? Do you want to freeze to death?" Remy looks between us. At my heaving chest and JJ's crazy eyes. "Did you—"

"Aang drank a shot of vodka!" JJ scrambles up.

I follow.

"You did *what*?" Remy smacks me on the arm. "You did your first shot without me?"

"I'm sorry." I massage my arm. "It'll never happen again."

"Girl, I sure do think so." He slings his arms around our shoulders, leading us off the porch. "Did you think it was water?"

"No. I just needed to know something."

"Was it worth it?"

Great friendship we're having here pounds against my brain, but I can't help the smile that spreads over my face, the vodka making me delusional. I look at JJ. "You know what, I think it was."

Chapter 21

*aang fulfills his promise of never letting me touch the
ground*

JJ

Days after Brad's party, I'm sitting at a desk in Monique's room. She's at her second desk, in front of two computer screens, typing loudly on a keyboard. Bryn's on the other side of the room, being swallowed by a beanbag. She's doing her biology homework, which must be difficult considering her supplies are next to me.

I reread the paragraph in my textbook.

British mathematician Alan Turing developed machines capable of decoding Germany's Enigma code, a turning point in the Allied effort during WW2 ...

I scoff. Always the Western heroes. What about Marian Rejewski and the other Polish cryptographers who figured out how to break the code before the war even started, and who kept breaking the new versions of the code during the war? Without *their* work, the work they *gifted* to the British and the French, the Allies wouldn't have done shit. But that's not worthy of history textbooks.

I smother my highlighter and throw the thoughts away. I'm not a cultural heritage warrior for people who won't claim me as theirs.

Defending Poland is just instinct. My grandmother is a history professor who considered these facts fun bedtime stories. I suspect she also knew it was better for me to know every single patriotic thing that I could. I had to earn my Polishness when others inherited it by virtue of looking the part. Well, if they don't want me, I don't want them.

The aggravating voice at the back of my head is pointing out that I'm just helping them erase the reality that to be Eastern European doesn't mean to be White.

Monique's clicky mouse joins her keyboard.

I shut the book. "Do you have to type that hard?"

"Yes." She doesn't take her eyes off the screen. "I literally bought this keyboard because it's louder." She presses the keys even more aggressively, and a new line of code appears on the screen.

"Ugh." I stand up and walk to the bookcase. I pull out *Our Kind of People* and *The Senator and the Socialite* to get to the chocolate bars pressed against the back wall. I grab a Bounty.

Bryn looks up from her phone. "Did you know that a *Boston marriage* in the twentieth century meant two women living together, financially independent from a man?"

"Literally my aunt Jacqueline and her *friend* Denise." Monique keeps typing.

I throw myself onto the beanbag next to Bryn. "Are you proposing?" I bite into the chocolate bar.

"If you're interested." She lays her head on my shoulder.

"I'm not your type. I wouldn't tell you I'm in love with you on the first date."

"Jessica was just passionate!" Bryn tries to push me off the beanbag. "And we knew each other before we went on the first date."

"Yeah. She was texting you for three weeks." Monique purposely falls on top of us, hitting my quad with her elbow.

"I thought we had something special." Bryn sighs as Monique and I burst out laughing.

"Hey!" Bryn pokes me in the arm. "I know the real reason for your rejection of my proposal! I can't compete with Asian Clark Kent."

My face warms. "Don't call him Asian Clark Kent. He'd hate it."

"Have a better descriptor?"

I think of Aang's full brows and long eyelashes. His high cheekbones. His thick black hair falling just below his ears. The camp girl was right. He does look better with longer hair. The way

he keeps brushing it back, but it gets into his eyes anyway. He would look perfect in a suit with his hair gelled back. Taking me to junior prom.

“JJ? You’re drooling,” Monique says.

Ugh, I need to get a grip. “I don’t know. He looks like a young Aaron Kwok? But with glasses.”

They exchange looks. “I have no idea who that is,” Bryn says.

“Maybe you should research your ’90s Hong Kong heartthrobs. I think you’d like them very much.”

“I think one of us likes them enough for this friend group.” Bryn winks.

I purse my lips. “I don’t like anyone.” Especially people who jump away from me when I delusionally think they’re about to kiss me.

Monique rolls her eyes. “You were wearing what you referred to as ‘the prettiest dress you’ve ever seen,’ and you covered it with his crusty-ass hoodie.”

“I was cold?”

Bryn clicks her fingers. “And the stunting sessions! He’s standing way too close to you when you’re not doing the stunt. And he’s standing way too close during the stunt! I didn’t even know that was possible!”

“He’s a good stunt partner.”

“That he is for sure, but I don’t know how much it has to do with wanting to be good at cheerleading,” Monique huffs.

Bryn pats me on the arm. “You’ll figure this out on your own.”

I clench my fists. “The only thing I have to figure out is how to get better at staying tight at the top of the stunt so we can show Coach that we can do it on our own. She needs to make it part of the routine. And speaking of that, I’m going to text Aang to ask him to do a training session tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? We’re scheduled to train again in two days,” Monique points out.

“Well, then we’re going to train tomorrow *and* in two days.”

Bryn shakes her head. “I can’t. I’m helping my mom at the salon.”

“Monique?” My voice trembles.

“I’m doing the Pilates class with my mom.” She looks at the expression on my face and groans. “But I can come after.” I brighten up, and she sighs. “You’re lucky I’m friends with you.”

American high school films gave me very different expectations about what it would be like to have cheerleading friends. I’m glad these two have proved them wrong.

One day, maybe I’ll share more with them. My real name, for starters. They’ll share too. Bryn will tell us about being a White person adopted into a Black family. Monique will explain how she feels about being wealthy in a country where wealth is built on the backs of people who look like her.

But after a year of friendship, we’re still tiptoeing around these topics. Pretending none of us are drowning under the weight of our identities. It’s easier this way.

I look at Monique. “Thank you.”

She gives me a side hug and strolls back to her desk, and her typing fills the room again.

“Can I braid your hair?” Bryn asks me. “I want to practice before tomorrow. Two cornrows? And with the golden hoops?”

“Sure.”

She sprints to Monique’s bathroom to get the supplies.

I unlock my phone to text Aang. *Prastise tmrows?*



I throw my phone on the bleachers. “Monique’s going to be late.”

“And Bryn?” Aang asks.

“She’s not coming today. Work.” I sit down on the floor of the gymnasium. There’s so little time left. With every cheerleading practice that Addy’s in the air, my chances of being a flyer again are dwindling. And I’m still failing at this stunt.

I need to tighten all my muscles so I don’t move forward or backward while going up. I have to lock my knees at the top, no matter how much Aang’s hands are shaking. Over the recent

sessions, it's worked only with either Monique's or Bryn's help. And we need to do it by ourselves to be able to show Coach.

Aang sits by my side and plays with the tape around his wrists. He's started using it for additional stability.

Months of cheerleading have made his hands rough. A scratch on the right knuckle. A bruised left pinky. Callused palms. How would it feel to hold them?

"Why are you staring at my hands?"

My cheeks heat up. "Just ... um ... they've changed a lot."

He examines his hands. "They have."

"Sorry about that."

"No, I like it. It makes me feel more competent."

"I get it." I extend my legs. I have a bruise on my right calf from falling while tumbling. I have a bump on my left quad from Addy falling on me during pyramid practice. And all the tiny scratches and cuts that I hardly notice anymore. "It feels like you've worked hard, that you're pushing yourself to be better."

I miss my flyer's bruises. The ones from my backspot grabbing my calf too tightly. The ones from the impact of being repeatedly caught in the same position. Every single one meant that I was doing it, but then I got benched. And I'll stay benched unless I can show Coach that I deserve to fly.

I turn to Aang. "Let's try the stunt without Monique."

He doesn't even hesitate. "Absolutely not. Too dangerous without a spotter."

"You quote Coach way too much."

"Because she's right."

"Whatever." I drum my fingers against the floor. *One, three, five, seven. One, three, five, seven.*

He contemplates my tapping fingers for a while until he sighs and stands up. "How about something else? You can teach me a forward roll?"

I stop drumming. "You want to learn a forward roll? When I brought it up last time, you said you don't have a death wish yet."

"And look how fast it developed." He nods to the mats.

I spring to my feet. "Okay, let's go!" I run to the center of the mats. I love tumbling. I'd love to see Aang tumble more.

He walks over and crouches down.

"Palms on the mat in front of you," I say.

He puts his palms on the mat in front of him.

"Hide your head between your shoulders."

He attempts to hide his head between his shoulders.

"Not like that. Chin closer to your chest." I move his head into the correct position. My fingers brush his neck, and I can imagine my lips doing the same.

I sway on my feet.

His head flies up. "You okay?"

"Yes!" I squeal. "I've never been more in possession of my mental faculties! Now roll!"

His eyebrows shoot up. "That's your instruction? Now roll?"

"It's a forward roll. Not much to teach here!"

"I was expecting more details. What if I break my neck?"

"You're an idiot." I push his head down and grab his waist. "Push your hips over your head."

I feel his muscles tense under my hands. I guide him through the roll, my hands steady on his hips as he goes over. He lands on his back with a small thud. "I did it!" He sits up, grinning.

He did something, that's for sure. "See? Not that hard." My hands tingle from where I touched him.

"Should we go again?"

"Sure ..." I wipe my hands against my bare thighs. "Let me just check where Monique is." I run to my phone. There's a new message.

I'll be there in twenty, sorry!

I grip my phone. I don't have twenty more minutes.

I spin on my heel. "Let's do the stunt. Monique won't be here for ages, and we don't have that much time left."

"JJ ..." Aang stands up. "This isn't a good idea."

I walk up to him. "There are two months left until State, and that's counting winter break. Coach needs time to put it into the routine. And we'll need time to practice it in the routine."

“But—”

I grab his arm. “It’ll be fine, I promise! I tried this with Brad without a spotter, and it was fine!” Sure, I almost broke my neck, but here I am, standing.

His eyes darken. “I’m not Brad.”

“I know that, but—”

“Bryn told me why you broke up with him. At his party.”

The whiplash of the statement shakes the ground, disorienting me. My hand tenses around his arm before going slack. Why is he bringing it up now?

I step away from him. *On sobie ze mnie żartuje.*¹⁸ He said it to make me back off doing the stunt. My blood boils in me, and the steam scorches my throat. I cross my arms to hide my clenched fists.

“Why I broke up with Brad had *nothing* to do with you. Nothing.”

His shoulders sag. “It ... it didn’t?”

If I didn’t have so much anger coursing in my veins, maybe I’d stop to ask myself why he looks so deflated, or why I’m lying about the breakup, but instead, I keep going. “And it has nothing to do with the stunt. If you’re not strong enough to lift me, just say so, and we’ll wait for Monique. Don’t bring my ex-boyfriend into it.”

His face hardens, sealing away whatever emotion was there before. “Fine. Let’s do the stunt.”

I move into position. He’s behind me, digging his fingers into my hips harder than usual. We dip on one, and I go up on three. He puts more power into propelling me up than ever before. I land on his hands on five, every single one of my muscles tight.

We’re doing it! It’s happening! I will fly during State! I ...

I do the worst thing I possibly can. I relax.

Aang’s hand wobbles on one. On three, I tip backward. On five, I’m falling.

Is this how I die?

Aang does the best thing he possibly can.

He lets go.

He lets go of my feet and throws himself under me so I fall on top of him. The impact leaves me breathless. Aang grunts in pain. “Shit, JJ, are you okay?”

I don't respond. I slowly move my head. My legs. My arms. I can move. My neck's not broken.

"I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have agreed to this. Are you okay? Are you okay?" He's lying on his back, my back pressed against his stomach. He cranes his neck to look at my face. He's so pale you'd think he donated all his blood.

I close my eyes and take a breath to calm down. And then another. My nostrils register a familiar scent.

He shifts us from lying down to sitting up. My back is still against his front. His left arm is wrapped around my stomach, between the bottom of my sports bra and the top of my shorts. "Please say something."

"Ginger." I rest my head against his chest.

"What?"

"You always smell like ginger."

"Oh." He chuckles. I know this laugh. The one you give when you almost died in a stunt. And as the adrenaline wears off, the rambling comes, the stream of words, just being happy you can still talk.

"Two years ago, I went to Chinatown on my own. I took a bus to Boston, four and a half hours, but I did it, and I went into the first place I could see. It was an herbal shop. The lady started talking to me in Chinese. And I couldn't bring myself to admit to her that I didn't understand a word of what she was saying. She assumed I knew, and that's who I wanted to be. A person who can have a conversation in Cantonese in an herbal shop. But I wasn't. I panicked, pointed to the first thing I could see, paid for it, and ran out. Turned out to be ginger honey soap."

"And you still have the same soap?" I don't know if he realizes it, but he's stroking my arm.

"No, um ... well ... you said that you liked the smell. So, I went back to the shop and bought more."

"I see." I turn my head while he turns his. "I still like it."

His eyes flick between my eyes and my lips, and my pulse jumps.

The door bursts open, and Aang startles, his lips hitting my collarbone.

Monique runs in. “I’m sorry I’m late—why are you lying on the floor?”

I push off Aang and get on my feet. “We tried doing the stunt.”

Monique’s eyes widen. “Without a spotter? Are you insane?” She points at Aang. “You! I know JJ’s insane, but you? You’re supposed to be a backspot!”

Aang scrambles to his feet.

“It’s not his fault, Monique. I made him do it.” I stand in front of him, shielding him from her glare.

“Does he not have a brain of his own?”

“That’s not fair—”

“No, she’s right.” Aang comes up from behind me. “I shouldn’t have agreed. You sure you’re fine?”

“I didn’t touch the ground. Like you promised me.” We hold each other’s gaze until I break it off. “Well, since everyone’s here, we can start again.”

“No. I’m sorry, I don’t think I can do any more today. I’m going home.” Aang grabs his backpack.

“What? Wait!” I run after him. “You hit the ground hard. Are you hurt?”

He shakes his head.

“I know that was a scary fall, but I’m really fine.”

“That’s good.” He takes his glasses out of his bag and puts them on.

“And sorry for what I said about Brad, I shouldn’t have—”

“No, all good. I shouldn’t have brought up the breakup. I was just obsessing over something extremely delusional the last couple of days, and it just slipped out. But it’s all cleared up now.” He forces a smile. “I’m happy to be friends with you.” He sprints out of the gym.

Friends?

The word drops onto my heart, leaving a crater of disappointment.

¹⁸—He’s got to be kidding me.

Chapter 22

aang asks me to dig up a grave (i have to, i owe him)

JJ

I put my tray on the table. “Can we crash your lunch?” I smile at Aang and Remy.

Aang nods, his mouth full of noodles. Remy greets Bryn, who sits down next to him. I plop down next to Aang, and Monique takes the seat beside me. After deliberations that spanned about half my usual sleep time, I decided to be extra friendly. Because I am his friend, as he reminded me yesterday. We’re friends. That sounded better at two a.m., but what can you do?

The spot where his lips crashed against my collarbone itches. I ignore it.

I grab my hamburger and start on my second goal for being at this table. “Should we go to Coach after Mathletes practice today and show her the partner stunt?” I take a bite of the burger and try not to gag. Cafeteria food is disgusting. In moments like these, I miss the fresh meals of my Polish public school.

As I force myself to take another bite, I realize no one responded to me. “So? Today after school?” I look between Monique and Aang. “We have Mathletes Invitationals again, so Aang and I are missing training on Thursday. I’d like Coach to see the stunt before that.”

They exchange looks.

“What?” I squeeze my burger.

Aang coughs.

Monique puts down her fork. “Aang and I talked about it this morning ...”

My burger now bears a significant imprint of my fingers. When did these two start spending time together without me present?

“And what was the outcome of that conversation?” I grit my teeth.

“I know how much you want it, but with the last fall ...” Monique starts.

No.

I put the burger down. “I think it should be up to Coach to decide. And the last fall was all my fault. It would have worked if I hadn’t relaxed, and Coach would put a spotter with us during the competition for sure, and you know it would add so much difficulty, and obviously that is most important to win State and get to Nationals, and Southfields High has a clear advantage over us ...” My knee bounces under the table.

Aang puts his hand on it to steady it.

I look at him. Only one thing left to try. “Please?”

His eyes soften behind his glasses. “Okay.”

“Really?” I squeak.

“Yeah.”

Monique rolls her eyes. “Oh god.”

“Amazing!” I throw my hands up, knocking over my water bottle. I prepare for the deafening sound of the metal slamming down on the table. But Aang catches it before that happens.

“Here you go.” He gives me the bottle as his hand slides off my knee.

That’s not a big deal. We do cheerleading. At this point, his hands have touched my waist, my butt, my chest ... honestly, every single part of my body. Whether by design or by accident. No reason I should be melting because he touched my knee.

“JJ?” He tilts his head.

I snap out, “Thank you,” and put the bottle down. “Thank you for the bottle and thank you for, you know, training with me and ...”

“As long as you’re happy.” He smiles.

Warmth starts deep in my core and rises to my cheeks.

Monique gags.

We all look at her.

“Sorry, this burger is just disgusting.”

"I completely agree." Remy also gags.

"You're not eating a burger." Aang points at his lasagna.

"What can I say?" Remy shrugs. "I'm an empath."

"I think the burger is very tasty." Bryn's head is propped up on her hands as she winks at me. She's also not eating a burger.

I turn my attention back to my food. Still tastes disgusting. But slightly less.



After the Mathletes meeting ends, I lean against the teacher's desk.

"Ready?" I ask Aang.

"Just let me pack."

He takes his time organizing the papers. Geometry exercises. Notes on algebra. I look at his hands as they sift through the documents. Those scratched-up hands held me yesterday after I fell. He puts the papers in his backpack and zips it up. And they were on my knee at lunch today. He swings the backpack onto his shoulder. Would his hands feel rough pressed against my cheeks? What if they strayed lower, this time on purpose, not by accident?

He leans toward me, and my hands tighten on the desk. *What is he doing? Is he going to ...*

Nope.

He bends down in front of me, picks up my backpack off the floor, and swings it onto his other shoulder. "Ready to go?"

My heart stills. "You don't have to ..." I weakly point to my backpack hanging off his shoulder.

"It's okay. You looked so deep in thought. You're prepping for the stunt, right?" He heads to the door.

I force a laugh. "Yeah ... the stunt." I follow him to the sports wing on wobbly legs.

Monique's already waiting for us. Bryn texted me good luck, but she had to cover a shift at the salon. I knock on Coach's door.

"It's open!"

I peek my head through. “Hi, Coach. Aang, Monique, and I ... we ... um ... sorry, I forgot a word ...”

Aang pushes the door further open. “JJ, Monique, and I have been working on a partner stunt for the last few weeks, and we wanted to show you. We hope you’ll put it in the routine for State.”

Coach puts down her pen and grins. “That is so exciting! I’m so happy you’re more involved in cheer, Aang, and with JJ as well! What an amazing show of teamwork.” She claps, getting up. “Let’s go to the gym and see it!”



We change into sports clothes as Coach organizes the mats.

I tie and retie my left shoe. I tie my right only once. Monique and I do our cheer handshake, inherited in our sophomore year from the seniors. Left high five, right high five, grab each other’s elbows, slut drop.

It gives me enough courage to push open the locker room door and walk into the gymnasium.

We stand in front of an excited Coach, Aang behind me, Monique on my right side, ready to step in if necessary. I’m nauseous, the burger from lunch reminding me of himself. *Itself. This isn’t Polish. Don’t gender your food.*

“And five, six, seven, eight!”

Aang grabs my hips as I wrap my hands around his wrists. We dip on three, and he throws me up on five. I don’t reach his shoulders on seven. My stomach tightens.

“That’s okay. I didn’t expect it to work on the first try. Go again,” Coach instructs.

This time I’m too far forward.

And again. I dip at the wrong count.

And again. I bend my knees at the top.

On the fifth try, I’m on the brink of tears. *It has to work. It has to work. It has to work.*

I avoid looking at Coach, but she's probably frowning, wondering why we're wasting her time, even more sure of her decision not to let me fly ...

"JJ and I need a quick break." Aang grabs my hand and moves me away. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. It's just ... it has to work. It has to work. It has to work."

"Hey, hey." He brushes the cornrows Bryn braided off my shoulders. "At the end of the day, it's fine if it doesn't work. We'll find another way for you to fly."

"We will?"

He squeezes my shoulders. "Isn't that what I'm here for?"

"I thought you were here for Stanford."

"Yeah, let's not lie to ourselves anymore." He rolls his eyes. "That wasn't the biggest consideration." His hands slide off my shoulders, and he walks back to his stunting position.

He did it for me?

"You coming?" He glances at me over his shoulder.

I'll spiral later.

I jog up to him. "We're ready, Coach." I stand in front of Aang and give her my best cheerleading smile.

"And five, six, seven, eight!"

I bend my knees and squeeze my quads to get as much explosive power as I can. I tighten my core and don't move a centimeter forward or backward as I go up. My feet land in Aang's hands. We're wobbly, but I stay in the air. I do a high V. Aang dips and lets me go. He catches my hips and lowers me gently. The second my feet touch the ground, I turn around and throw my arms around him. "We did it! We did it!" I let go of him and throw myself at Monique.

"I'm so happy you're alive!" Monique lifts me off the ground. I let go of her and throw myself at Aang again. He squeezes me so tight, I can't breathe. We peel apart when Coach starts clapping.

"I'm so proud of you! It's, of course, not perfect, but we can work on it! And it's great to see you all taking initiative." She high-fives us. "I'll think about where to put it in the routine over the weekend."

She's putting it in the routine.

She's putting it in the routine.

She's putting it in the routine.

Monique and I do our handshake again. I'm about to ask Aang if he still remembers ours, but Coach asks, "JJ, can I talk to you for a second?"

I follow her away from Monique and Aang.

"For now, I still want Addy to fly. But how about after State, if we win, of course, you start flying the rest of the stunts? I'm happy you took what I said on board."

"Of course, Coach, you got it! Thank you!"

It's enough. For now.

The parking lot's nearly empty when we make it outside. We wave at Monique as she gets into her Mercedes. When she drives off, Aang gets into my used Honda Civic. "I cannot believe your parents bought you a car. I mean, I met them one time and still remember their tirade about how insane it is that teenagers drive in America."

I switch on the car. "They changed their minds pretty quickly when they realized how much they'd have to drive me around. They thought I'd be able to take the bus everywhere like in Pol—" I stop myself. Poland is not ruining today. I shift into first gear with too much force.

Aang points to the stick. "Why are there numbers on this?"

I press the brake to stare at him. "Are you joking?"

"What? I've never seen this in a car before."

"You've been in this car before."

"But I was in the back. Remy was calling shotgun all the time."

He puts his seat belt on. "So what is it?"

Aang has never been more American than in this moment. But I don't say that out loud, because it'd make him cry. And become obsessed with manual cars.

"It's a manual transmission. Most cars here are automatic, so the gears change on their own. In this car, I shift the gears." I adjust the clutch and press the gas to drive out of the parking lot.

"Why do you have it, then? It seems like a lot of hassle."

"Because my parents claim you can't drive a car unless you can drive a manual."

He nods like it makes sense.

I park in front of his house twenty minutes later. He takes off his seat belt and turns his head toward me.

I meet his eyes. "Thank you. Really, thank you for talking me off the hedge there ..."

A slow smile spreads across his face. The one he uses when I say something wrong. He thinks I don't notice, but it's pretty obvious. His reactions are actually what made me better at English. Freshman year, he was correcting me without realizing it.

But correcting myself now doesn't seem as important as keeping going. "Thank you for agreeing to do the stunt, and suggesting we do the stunt, and joining cheerleading, and ..." I'm running out of breath. "I owe you one."

"Can I cash it in now?"

"Already? Is there a grave I have to dig out?"

He laughs softly. "Something like that."

"Okay, then. What is it?"

He plays with the mini cheer bow hanging from the rearview mirror. "Why do you want it so much?"

My hands tighten on the wheel.

"The cheerleading and the flying ... I won't judge, I promise. I just want to know."

We've never talked about these things before. I used to treat him the way I now treat Bryn and Monique, skirting around these topics. If I tell him, it'll fundamentally change what this relationship is. But his eyes are soft, and he's looking at me like he has all the time and patience in the world to listen. And maybe this friendship needs a change to last longer than it did the first time around.

I get ready to dig out the grave.

"I watched a lot of American high school films when I lived in Poland. And in all those films, cheerleaders were always surrounded by other people. It didn't even matter to me that they were portrayed as mean girls most of the time. They walked around like they belonged, and no one questioned that they should be there." I play with a gold hoop in one of my cornrows. "In Poland ... people used to stare at me with that look on their face ... like ... what is this

Black girl doing here? It made me want to disappear. Before I left the house, I would think, do I really have to go outside? Is it worth the constant stress of being ... what's the word ... monitored? No, that's not it, I don't know ..." I break off one of the hoops.

"Don't ruin your hair." His whole body is turned toward me. "I really like it."

"Oh, okay." I let go of the braid. My eyes are getting misty. "And then flying ... it's great. People stare because I ask them to. And they stare because I'm doing something worth looking at. In Poland, existing was enough of a circus."

The silence that fills the car doesn't help the flooding memories. The school. The bus. The gymnastics gym. The streets. They all pound against my skull. I turn to him, my eyes pleading for a distraction. "Would you like to share a traumatic experience, by any chance?"

He chuckles. "As long as it makes you happy."

"Go on, then."

He sighs, pushing his head against the headrest. "People always have questions. What do you eat at home? How do you say this or that in Chinese? But I have nothing to give them. I see the confusion in their eyes. Disappointment, even." He balls his hands into fists.

"I'm about to say something, and I know it'll sound crazy ..."

"No, it won't."

"It won't?"

"I promise, it won't."

"Okay." His hands relax. "Compared to those people? And their questions? I've always preferred the racists. At least with them, I knew I didn't make it up—that I *am* part of the community, even when I feel completely cut off from it. Sometimes the lack ... it hurts so much. But then some asshole yells at me on the street, and it's like ... they don't care what I can speak, what I know. Because they see me as Asian without question." He rubs his face. "Having your identity confirmed by the people who hate you for it. It's so fucked up."

That's what it is. He put it into words for me.

I don't have much connection to Nigeria. I've never been there. I don't speak Kalabari. My name and a few dishes are the extent of my knowledge. But in Poland, my dad and I have always been Black first. People made sure we were Black first. And I didn't quite realize until now how much it hurts to have a bond with my father—and a bond with a country that is half of me—be based on a foundation of other people's hate.

Emotions float to the surface, bringing all the dirt with them. My eyes are filling with tears I did not consent to.

He misunderstands my silence. "I shouldn't have said any of that. It was too much. I'm sorry." He reaches for the car door. "I'm just gonna go."

"Wait!" I grab the back of his shirt, the soft cotton bunching under my fingers. "Don't go!" He stills, one hand on the door handle. "Can we be together? In silence. Just for a while. I-I would like that."

His gaze flits to my hand holding on to the fabric. I grip the shirt harder. "Actually, scratch that. I need it. Please. I don't want to be alone."

He slowly settles back into his seat. I let go of his shirt and start shifting back into my seat.

He grabs my forearm. "Could you ... maybe ... come here?"

My heartbeat picks up, and without a thought, I climb over the gearbox. He moves over in his seat, but there's not enough space for both of us, so half of me ends up in his lap.

"This doesn't seem particularly comfortable," he says.

"It's not."

One hand wrapped around my waist, he shifts me so I'm fully in his lap. He rests his head on my shoulder. "Is that better?"

His breath tickles my ear, and my eyes flutter closed. "I ... what ... yes."

"Good."

We sit in silence for what feels like hours. The scent of his ginger soap mixes with my vanilla perfume and our cheerleading sweat, and I sink even further into him. The steady rhythm of his breathing, the warmth of his skin against mine, the way my chest stops feeling tight ...

I'm safe here.

My mind finally goes quiet in this small pocket of peace we've created.

Where the only identity is just us.

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Chapter 23

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car. car. car.

Aang

JJ sitting on my lap has imprinted itself on my brain.

Holding her waist during cheerleading makes me think back to the car. Getting a whiff of her perfume at Mathletes makes me think back to the car. Sitting next to her at lunch makes me think back to the car. My thoughts are now *car*.

I hoped that not seeing her over the Christmas break would provide respite.

Nope.

My mind imagined new scenarios. I could have whispered in her ear to turn around, and then leaned forward until our lips met. Pressed my palm against her cheek. Asked if she would let me put it lower. These fantasies never lasted long before I was drowning in guilt.

She told me something so personal, and I spent my Christmas pondering how I could have turned it into a make-out session. One she wouldn't even have enjoyed, because I would have had no idea what I was doing. Going from Brad to me would have been a significant step down in the quality of the experience. But I can't help it. Now that I know how it feels to have her in my arms, on my lap ...

I walk into a cloud of hairspray and go into a coughing fit.

The chemical fog hangs in the air of the corridors of the sports arena where the cheerleading State Championship is being held. I move away from the girls doing their ponytails before they release another round of hairspray.

Wait.

I look around. Where am I?

I went to the bathroom, but now I have no idea how to get back to my team's base. Thousands of people are milling around this sports hall, decked out in bows, pom-poms, and foam fingers, obstructing my view of any possible direction to take. Pop music blasts from every speaker, combining with the screeches of girls who haven't seen each other since State last year and have very loud opinions on each other's uniforms.

This is nothing like Regionals. Regionals was held in a local school, with thirteen teams. The State Championship has thirteen teams in our division alone. And there are so. Many. Divisions. Small, medium, large, all-girl, co-ed, novice, intermediate, advanced, game day, performance ... I've lost track of which one we are in.

Almost as lost as I am right now.

My phone rings. Maybe JJ noticed I've gone missing.

I answer without looking at the caller. "Hello?"

"Aang, hi!"

"Mom?" I tighten my grip on my phone in concern. She doesn't call people. Instead, she sends twenty-minute-long voice messages. "Is everything okay?"

"I wanted to wish you good luck with the competition!"

Seriously? I fight not to fling my phone across the corridor. I'll bet my very small allowance that I won't get a call like this for the Cantonese exam next month.

"Also, a package came for you."

"Huh? What packa—" *Fuck.* I forgot I had ordered a claypot for Chinese New Year.

Between school, winter break, Mathletes, cheerleading, preparing for the exam, and my thoughts being generally consumed by the car, it slipped my mind that the celebration's in only two weeks and I haven't started preparing.

“Aang?” my mom prods. “What did you buy?”

“A claypot. So we can celebrate the New Year properly.”

Silence.

“Mom? Hello?”

“But ... we do celebrate properly.”

I scoff. I wouldn’t call going to an American fast-food restaurant “celebrating Chinese New Year properly.” Even if they claim to sell Chinese food. More Chinese-adjacent.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, making me turn around. A girl in a blue cheerleading uniform is standing in front of me. She throws her long blond hair over her shoulder, and either her shampoo or her hairspray is very strong, because it smells like I put my nose in a bowl of strawberries. She motions for me to hang up. Are cheerleaders everywhere this level of bossy? She’s lucky I’m not in the mood to talk to my mother anymore.

“Mom, I have to go.” I hang up.

The girl extends her hand. “You’re the guy from Blackstock High. It’s so nice to meet you.”

I shake her hand, but she holds on to my fingers, stroking them with her thumb before letting go. Weird. Is this how strangers greet each other in the cheerleading world? I didn’t get the memo from JJ.

“I’m Kaycee. From Kensington High. The first football game? I was cheering for the other side.” Her eyelashes flutter, which is particularly pronounced because, like most girls here, she’s wearing fake ones. It makes facial expressions pop more, according to JJ.

“I see.”

“I didn’t have a chance to say hello at the game, so I wanted to do it now. And tell you that you’re a great backspot.”

Is this a way to intimidate the competition? JJ didn’t warn me that people play mind games with you here.

“Would be fun to do some stunting together. I’m a great flyer!” She points to her phone. “Would you like my number? To go out?”

She’s asking me out? I open my mouth, trying to figure out what to say. How does one respond to being asked out?

“Aang?” a familiar voice says from behind me.

I whip my head around, a wave of relief washing over me. The red glitter on JJ's face reflects in her brown eyes. "What are you doing?" She crosses her arms, frowning.

I look back at the girl. Was she standing this close to me before? I step away.

"Hey!" Kaycee smiles at JJ, but it looks more like a sneer. "I'm from Kensington High. I never said sorry about your fall during the game. Such a shame."

JJ narrows her eyes. "I remember you. You're the one who tripped last year during the routine. It was unfortunate. I mean, who knew the floor would be right there?"

Kaycee scowls. But then gives me a smile. "Find me later. You can be my backspot anytime." She walks away.

JJ turns her frown on me. "You were supposed to go to the bathroom, not flirt with the competition."

Flirt? "I said two words during that conversation."

"You were gone for thirty minutes." She surveys me suspiciously.

"I got lost! And I wasn't flirting! I only said, 'I see!'"

That makes her snort. "You know what, that actually sounds more correct." Her mouth quirks up, and the red lipstick—the shade chosen specifically to match the uniform—makes her lips look even fuller.

If I kissed her, would it smudge the lipstick?

I snap my eyes away from her lips. Did she notice I was staring at her mouth? I take a step back for good measure, and she definitely notices that—her expression crumples.

"I didn't mean to ... it's just ... she was ..." She shakes her head. "I can't tell you what to do. I'm sorry, let's just go back." She points in the direction she came from, her shoulders slumping.

I grab her hand before she walks away. "I would have said no. I already have a flyer."

"I know. You even have two."

That's not what I meant.



The sports arena is divided into two parts. The warm-up area, full of cheerleading mats and tumbling tracks, hidden from view by a thick curtain, and the competition area, with one cheerleading mat in the center, surrounded by stands.

We fly through the warm-up, and the only thing left to do is wait for our school to be called. We stand in our marked zone behind the curtain. The girls around me are quietly going through the counts, adjusting their uniforms, and doing their elaborate handshakes and prayers.

I peek through the curtain.

The lights in the arena are dimmed except for the reflectors illuminating the mat. Further up, there are five judges, each tasked with evaluating different parts of the routine. Stunts, pyramid, basket tosses, tumbling, choreography, execution, creativity, violations, safety issues—JJ tried to explain the scoring system to me once. It's been a long time since numbers confused me.

The audience sits in the shadows, filling the arena with their chants, counts, hand clappers, and thundersticks. How will we hear the music through all that?

JJ appears next to me. "Excited?"

"Horrificed." I grip the curtain, staring at the crowd. "Why are there so many people here?"

"Because it's a great spectator sport! Frankly, there should be *more* people here."

My stomach drops at the thought. "No, no more people. Please."

"Hey!" She bumps my hip. "It'll be fine."

"How will it be fine? How am I supposed to lift you with so many people staring? What if I drop you?" I can picture it ... my grip slipping, JJ hitting the mat, the entire gym going silent ...

"Then you catch me." She shrugs. "And we move on."

My airways constrict, my words coming out unevenly. "But ... then we lose. And you won't be able to fly during Nationals."

She tightens the bow on her ponytail. "How about if you don't drop me, I'll find that girl for you later?" She cracks her knuckles.

"Is that supposed to be a reward or a punishment?"

“You choose. I heard she doesn’t fall during game days. Not like me.”

I grimace. “She shouldn’t have been mean to you. I’ll—”

“Oh, it’s okay, I loved it.” JJ jumps up and down in delight. “That could not have been more like a scene from an American high school film!”

I try to read her face. “Are you serious?”

“I’ll let you in on a secret.” She leans into my ear. “I’ve been praying for my own cheerleading nemesis.” Her breath tickles my skin, and I think back to the car. I know how she feels sitting on my lap. I know how she feels standing on my hands. I want to know how she feels lying on top of me.

I let out a shaky laugh at her. “You’re insane.” *I’m insane.*

“Really?” She narrows her eyes. “You’re flirting with me right before the routine?”

Blood drains from my face. “I wasn’t ... What? That wasn’t ...”

Her mouth quivers, and she chuckles. “You’re so easy to freak out.”

“Oh my god.” I shove her face away. “You really are the bane of my existence.”

“I find that hard to believe. You’d spend every waking minute with me if you could.”

She’s joking, but my heart still trips over its next beat.

Over winter break, when she went with her parents to a medical conference, every day felt like a countdown to seeing her again. And when she came back ... between cheerleading training, additional stunting sessions, Mathletes meetings, drives to school, library time, and hanging out in the school corridors ... yeah, I’d spend every waking minute with her if I could. Whatever I’m doing, her presence makes it better.

This time, I lean into *her* ear, and she stands up straighter. “How about this—if I drop you, you’ll find Kaycee, and if I don’t drop you, you’ll come over for Chinese New Year. In two weeks. Saturday.”

“Deal. Now give me a cheer smile.”

I smile.

“The judges wouldn’t even notice you changed facial expressions. Bigger smile.”

I emulate her psychotic smile.

Laughter springs out of her, and my pulse skyrockets. “Exactly that, but maybe don’t try it outside of the mat.”

I never thought I’d get addicted to anything, but making her laugh gives me a rush I can’t replace with anything else.

“One minute left!” Coach shouts.

I reach out my hand. JJ grabs it. This time, we’re running out together, because the opening of the routine is our partner stunt. I trace a circle on her hand with my thumb. The repetitive movement calms me down.

“And now, let’s welcome in the performance division, advanced, large, co-ed—the Blackstock High Cardinals!”

We run out. We take our positions. I put my hands on JJ’s hips. She grabs my wrists. No one can see my face from behind her massive ponytail, but I smile anyway.

The music starts with a ping. I dip and throw JJ up. She lands on my hands on three. High V on seven. Dip to bring her down on one. I catch her hips on five and lower her to the ground.

Yes.

But that’s as much of a celebration as I can afford.

I run to my stunt group. Full-up to extension. Heel stretch. Tick-tock. Tick-tock again. Dip. Full twist. Catch. Put down. Run to the back of the mat for the jumps section. Lift Alexis. Run back to the front for basket tosses. Throw Addy. Catch Addy after she does a kick and a single twist in the air. Put Addy on the ground. Run to the left side of the mat.

Wait for Alexis to finish tumbling. Catch her as she jumps into a smoosh straight out of her tumbling pass. Move her to the center for the pyramid section. I’m out of breath, but I shout the counts to help everyone be on time. Put Alexis in prep. Then in extension. Throw her up, catch her in a cradle. Put her on the ground. Move. Catch Addy as she’s released from another stunt group. Move with her in a smoosh. Throw her up.

My legs are cotton candy. I run, for the last time, to my dance place at the back. The dance is a whirl of flying ponytails. I throw Alexis up on my shoulder. I shift her from one shoulder to the other. I put her down. And because Coach made good on her threat of making me do at least one dance move, I dip Alexis down like we're doing an Argentinian tango.

The routine ends.

No one celebrates. We rush off the mat before we get penalized. The next team is scheduled to be on the mat at 16:58, and they will be on the mat at 16:58.

Everyone collapses backstage. I crash down on the ground, panting. Did we actually do it?

"We hit zero! No deductions in the whole routine!" JJ tackles me, but I stay seated.

Bryn runs over and hugs JJ, and her added weight knocks me over.

Monique comes over, giggling. "We did it! We did it!"

Lying on the floor under the weight of two girls, with twenty-five more screaming and jumping around me, I realize that the routine is done. That the two-and-a-half-minute routine that we worked to perfect for more than one hundred hours barely registered in my brain. And when I look at JJ laughing and pushing herself off my chest, it hits me that I didn't let her down.



Hours later, when they call us back for awards, the mat is a sea of polyester uniforms. Every team stands in a circle holding hands. My palms are sweating. JJ keeps bouncing on her toes. Monique's muttering a prayer. Bryn looks even paler than usual.

"Thirteenth place, Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ..."

We suffer through each team name being called out, with the announcer stretching each pause for hours. Like they're getting paid by the minute, and not barely the minimum wage of the state of Massachusetts.

"Tenth place, Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ..."

My heart palpitations are so loud I can barely hear the announcer.

“Seventh place, Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ...”

Someone behind me weeps when their team’s name is called.

“Fifth place, Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ...”

What if the difference between winning and losing is Addy’s bent knee on the tick-tock?

“Third place, Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ...”

Parents in the stands take out their phones, ready to record the winner.

“And now for the Massachusetts State Champions ...”

Everyone in the arena holds their breath. JJ squeezes my hand so tight I think she might break my fingers. I want this for her. I want her to win, and I want her to fly at Nationals.

“... in Advanced Co-Ed Large Division ...”

And in the seconds it takes the presenter to take a breath, I realize I want it as much for myself. Not because I want to get into Stanford. But because I want to win a cheerleading competition, and hang the medal on my board, and ...

“Blackstock High Cardinals!”

The sound that comes out of our team isn’t human. Addy starts crying. Monique’s screech is so high-pitched that dogs three counties over definitely heard her. JJ tackles me again, shouting something in Polish.

We spend an hour taking photos with the gold trophy. Everyone has to get an individual one. And a stunt group one. And flyers only. And bases only. And backspots only. And then in pairs and in threes. And then every girl wants a photo with me.

“It’s for the history books, Aang!” Coach says.

By the time everyone’s satisfied, most teams have packed up, families have filtered out of the venue, and the arena feels normal-sized again.

I’m charged with getting the trophy to the bus. JJ carries my backpack for me so that I “can focus on protecting this precious piece of metal.” The glitter on her cheeks has mostly rubbed off, her bow is crooked, her hair is sticking out everywhere, and her lipstick

is completely gone. But her whole face is lit up, and she has never looked more beautiful than right now.

I wish I had the guts to tell her.

“So ...” She grins. “Chinese New Year?”

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Chapter 24

content warning: premarital handholding

JJ

When I open the door to Aang's house, smoke hits my nostrils.

I sprint to the kitchen, where I find him waving a dish towel in front of the smoke alarm. He's wearing a white apron that he definitely got from Remy's mom, considering the *Sweet as Peach Pie* embroidered across it.

"Are you trying to burn your house down?" I ask.

Aang lowers the towel. "Hi." His smile turns dopey as he takes me in. Like the simple fact that I'm standing in front of him fills him with overwhelming joy.

The smoke alarm shrills.

"Not again!" He swings the towel at the ceiling.

I open two windows and grab another cloth. "What happened?" I ask as I wave the cloth at the alarm, too.

"I was steaming fish—I mean *yú*¹⁹—in the oven, and *bōu jái ... bōu jái ...*"²⁰ He sighs. "... claypot rice on the stove, and then I was chopping spring onion, but I cut myself ..." There's a bandage around his right index finger. "So went to get the first aid kit, butut I couldn't find it, and the fish was steaming too much, and the rice was supposed to be burnt at the bottom, so I didn't bother about the smell until this started ringing ..." The alarm stops mid-shriek as the smoke dissipates. We stop waving.

Aang uses the towel to take a rustic brown pot off the stove. He puts it on the counter and opens the lid as I look over his shoulder. He grabs a wooden spoon and scoops rice out of the pot. More than

half of it is stuck to the bottom. The mushrooms have turned black, and the bok choy has wilted.

A choked sound escapes him.

I take the spoon from him and salvage whatever I can, but it's like scraping a sidewalk. "It's okay, we can start again or ..." The words die in my throat at the look on his face. The color has drained from it, and his eyes are empty. Without the blare of the alarm, I realize how silent the house is. This is how quiet my house is. Not his.

"Where are your parents?"

He stares at what remains of the rice, the hollowness consuming his eyes. "They didn't want to celebrate properly."

I'm not sure what he means, and I don't get to ask, because he grabs the pot and hurls it into the trash. The sound ricochets off the bin like thunder.

A flash of memory.

Christmas, freshman year, when my mom tried to make *bigos*, because they obviously didn't sell it at the supermarket here. I ran into the kitchen, shouting about wanting to go to a cheerleading summer camp. She startled and tipped the pot over. It broke into seven pieces on the floor.

I'd seen my mom survive multiple night shifts in a row, and I'd seen her survive multiple dead patients in one night. But I never saw her break down until that first American Christmas. She was sobbing on the kitchen floor over the broken wedding gift from her mom, asking why we were even here. *Pieniądze nie są tego warte.*²¹ My dad cleaned the floor and drove us to Boston to celebrate at a restaurant in the Polish Triangle.

The haunted look on my mom's face eventually dissipated. But that same haunted look is on Aang's face. It hurts to see it now as much as it hurt seeing it then.

I take out my phone and google how long it'd take us to get to Boston. *That's doable.* I check to make sure the stove and oven are off and pull him upstairs.

"What are we doing?" he asks.

I don't say anything until we get to his room. "Where do you keep your T-shirts?"

He frowns but points to a chest of drawers. I spot the T-shirt I need immediately. The bright red stands out against blacks and blues. I unfurl it. *Parallel lines have so much in common. It's a shame they'll never meet.* My heart swells. He still has it.

I throw the T-shirt at him. "You need to change."

He glances at the black T-shirt peeking out from under his apron. "I didn't get this one dirty."

"It's the first day of the Chinese New Year. Aren't you supposed to wear red to improve your luck for the year ahead?" I read up on the holiday before I came here.

"I don't feel like celebrating anymore."

"Then wear it to amuse me, *Peach Pie*."

He groans. "Fine, I'll change." He pokes my shoulder. "But do not make 'Peach Pie' a thing."

"No promises." I smile and turn around. His bookcase is in front of me. Cantonese textbooks are stacked on top of each other. There are thick tomes about the history of Hong Kong. A bright yellow book draws my eyes. It looks brand-new. *Buddhism in Hong Kong*. I open it and find every other sentence highlighted, the margins full of questions. I've seen fewer annotations in my grandma's Bible, and she's had that thing since Poland overthrew the Soviet regime.

"I think I've grown since freshman year."

I look up. The book drops from my hands and hits the ground with a thud.

The T-shirt used to be baggy. But Aang *has* gotten taller since freshman year. My eyes trace the hard lines of his shoulders and arms, the definition that wasn't there before. His chest stretches the fabric where it once hung loose.

"You look like you're about to laugh at me. I'll just take it off." He raises the hem.

"No!" I force my gaze away from the curve of his hips where his jeans sit low. "I mean ... this is the only colorful item in your closet!" He lowers the T-shirt, but now my eyes find his flexed bicep. "And it's important to wear colorful things. For Chinese New Year. And for no other reason! You don't want to have bad luck. What if that means we lose cheerleading Nationals? And Mathletes Nationals?"

He holds up his hands in surrender.

Veins run through his forearms, and I want to know how it would feel to slide my lips along them. My body burns so hot it feels like I'm in *Hell* again, but this time, I'd be happy to stay.

I beat the thought down with a baseball bat.

"We're ... going out." I'm trying for nonchalance, but my voice comes out choppy.

"I don't feel like going anywhere."

"I don't think you have a choice, Peach Pie." I grab his coat and pull him out of the house and into my car. I type our destination into the navigation.

His eyebrows shoot up. "We're going to Boston? That's two hours away! What on Earth are we doing?"

"We're going to celebrate Chinese New Year." I shift into reverse and back out of the driveway. "In Chinatown."



The buzz of different languages permeates Chinatown. English mixed with dialects of Chinese. And something neither English nor Chinese. Korean? Vietnamese?

And the smells. Smoky pork. Fried onion. Soy sauce caramelizing in hot oil.

The air is hazy from burnt incense. Mandarin trees line the streets. From every lamppost, red lanterns hang in rows, swaying in the winter wind. I stop to admire the Chinese calligraphy on them as people jostle around me. I'd ask Aang what they mean, but he probably doesn't know. But that's okay. We can find out together. I look around for him.

My stomach drops. Where did he go? I dart my head around until I spot his ruffled hair. He's a few meters in front of me, frantically searching the crowd. I squeeze through the people and tap him on the arm.

"Oh, thank god." His shoulders relax. "What happened?"

"Sorry, I stopped."

“You *stopped*? You can’t just halt in the middle of busy foot traffic.”

“Okay, foot traffic police.” I roll my eyes. “Do you want to hold my hand so I don’t commit any more pedestrian violations?”

His eyes find mine, and time stops following the rules of physics—a heartbeat stretches into eternity as people push around us. His fingers slide against mine, interlacing them. “In case you decide to stop again.”

“Yeah, just in case.” I nod quickly.

He looks around. “Where should we go?”

“The shop you bought the soap from?” I want to stock up so he never runs out.

“I’m not sure where it is. There weren’t this many people here when I came.”

“What general direction?” I squeeze his hand.

He points south, and we start weaving through the crowd. He grabs a red menu flyer written in Chinese characters from a tiny elderly woman. There’s an English translation at the bottom. *Year of the Dragon*.

After searching for thirty minutes, we give up.

“That’s okay. I can drive us next week when there are fewer people.” I stroke his hand. His cheerleading calluses are rough against mine, and his warm skin protects my fingers from the freezing cold air.

“You’ll drive two hours one way for my soap?” He frowns.

I’d drive longer, but that’s an inside-the-mind thought. “Isn’t this America? If I burn enough gasoline on the highway, I should get my citizenship, right?”

His frown deepens.

Is it too much for a friend to do a four-hour return trip for a block of soap? I’d do it for Bryn and Monique. Of course, Monique’s family doesn’t do their own shopping, and Bryn steals Monique’s shower gels. But I’d drive Bryn two hours so she could commit petty theft. So, yes, that’s normal friend behavior.

Our interlaced hands beg to differ.

Fine, so I have a crush.

God forbid a girl has hobbies.

“JJ?”

Ah yes. I need to respond. Or deflect. “How about some food? I’m starving.”

We pick up some spring rolls. The woman hands them to Aang, speaking Chinese. I decipher something like *hwung jin*,²² but I don’t understand what it means. Neither does Aang, because he parts his mouth like a fish and freezes. I hand her the cash and drag him to the next food cart. We munch on fried sesame balls and steamed dumplings. I grab a slice of General Tso pizza. It has a sweet-and-spicy glaze instead of tomato sauce.

I extend it toward Aang. “You want some?”

“Ew, no.”

I shield the slice from him. “Why not?”

“General Tso isn’t even a proper Chinese dish. They don’t eat it there. So why is it here? And why is it in pizza form?”

“Maybe because it’s Chinese New Year in Boston.”

“It’s not authentic Chinese food.”

“I don’t think it’s trying to be. It’s probably more than happy being authentic Chinese American food.” I take another bite, and he winces. Why does he not appreciate what he has here? Not everyone gets the privilege of mixing cultures together. My fingers flatten the edge of the pizza crust. “We’re not in Hong Kong, and I don’t think anyone but you is trying to be.”

“But ...” He spots someone behind me. “Huh?”

I turn around. The same guy who was at Brad’s party, Michael, is exiting a boba shop with three other kids our age. They stop laughing and drinking their bubble tea when they notice us in front of them.

Aang steps around me. “What are you all doing here?”

Michael and a girl in a red coat exchange a look. A short girl shifts from foot to foot while another guy plays with his boba straw.

Finally, Michael says, “We organized a CNY trip. What are *you* doing here?”

“I came to celebrate too.”

“Yeah? It must not be without its difficulties.” Michael slurps his bubble tea.

My eyes narrow. *What is that supposed to mean?*

Aang’s hands ball into fists. I’m still annoyed about the pizza, but I cough loudly, shifting the attention to me.

Michael’s face lights up. “Hey! It’s Aang’s girlfriend!”

The girls’ eyebrows shoot up their foreheads while my body gets heatstroke from its internal temperature. The red-coat girl eyes my pizza. “I see girlfriends are spared the torture of the General Tso chicken monologue.”

I shake my head. “No one’s spared the monologue.”

The girl cackles. “Have you gotten the lecture on the evils of Panda Express, or is it too early in the relationship for that?”

I open my mouth, but Aang grabs my arm. “See you all in class,” he tells them while pulling me down a different alley. The rest of the pizza slice slips out of my hand and lands on the sidewalk.

“Hey!” I shrug out of his hold. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m sorry.” He adjusts his glasses. “Just ... we need to see part of the parade, right? It’ll finish soon.” He doesn’t meet my eyes and shoves his fidgeting hands into his pockets.

I purse my lips. A part of me wants to push, but I’m scared it’ll end in a fight, and we’ve fought enough for this lifetime. I want to enjoy the parade and find an excuse to hold hands again. So I let it go. “Okay. Let’s find a good spot.”

Five minutes later, sulfur tickles my nostrils and smoke stings my eyes as people dressed in yellow, red, and pink papier-mâché lion costumes dance and protect themselves from firecrackers on the ground.

“This is so cool!” I shout over the gongs and cymbals.

“Imagine how much better it must be in Hong Kong. The real thing.” Aang watches a pink lion creep closer to a child. The boy hides behind his dad, but the man only laughs. He crouches down and hugs his son, and together they stroke the lion’s head.

All of this looks pretty real to me, but I don’t have the option to respond, because Aang’s fingers snap around my wrist. A massive smile splits his face for the first time since we entered Chinatown.

He points to a person carrying a red banner with Chinese characters on it. "I know what that means. That character. Right there. It's at my grandmother's altar." I follow the direction of his finger and see

"It's pronounced *ga*. First tone." His voice is pitched higher than normal. "It means *family*. Or *home*." He squeezes my hand, the smile still there, but wistfulness creeps into it. The way he said *family* and *home*. Like they're both a comfort and an ache.

I squeeze his hand back.

When the clock hits five, we decide to walk back to the park-and-ride lot.

We stroll and chat. I still need to choose a major for the pre-med track and can't decide between biochemistry and bioengineering. He wants to live in San Francisco if he gets into Stanford. They have Cantonese immersion programs, and maybe he can find one for adults.

We don't hold hands. But the back of his hand brushes the back of mine at every step. Each touch feels accidental, but there is more than enough space on the sidewalk, and he still stays this close.

He didn't correct Michael when he said I was his girlfriend. Again.

Hope lights up in me. Maybe he doesn't think it's a crazy idea anymore. Although ... weeks ago, he had me on his lap in my car and didn't make a move to kiss me. Has cheerleading numbed him to the point that he thinks this amount of body contact isn't a big deal? And why did he barely text me during Christmas break? Was he not replaying the car moment over and over again, trying to find a way to bring it up? Oh my god, did he really only hold my hand today to steer me through the crowd? Did Michael say *girl friend* instead of *girlfriend*?

I halt mid-step when I spot the first flag, and my Aang-related freak-out flies out of my brain.

White-and-red flags hang in rows from the buildings lining the street. A chill spreads through me when I realize where I am. I've been here before.

“Hey, that’s a Polish restaurant!” Aang grabs my hand, but this time, I feel no warmth. “We should go in! We can make it a Hong Kong–Polish day! And after, let’s find a Nigerian restaurant! Chinese–Polish–Nigerian day!” He pulls on my hand.

I don’t move my feet. I’m not going in there again. They’ll stare. They’ll point. They’ll make surprised faces when I speak Polish. I’ll explain I’m Polish and they’ll nod politely. *But where are you really from?*

And for a second, I will wish I were White, that I were blond, with straight hair and blue eyes, so that when I speak my language, the sound that is *my home*, I don’t have to explain how I know it. I don’t have to justify why I know it. And after that second, I will feel guilty. I will feel guilty toward my dad, toward the other half of me that I don’t know shit about except for the fact that Ibifubara means “good luck.”

Aang tugs on my hand. “Want to go in?”

No.

“We shouldn’t make more stops,” I say instead. “I have a long drive in front of me.”

“Okay.” He smiles at me. “We can come back another time? Maybe after we win Nationals? I wore the T-shirt, so now we have all the good luck we need to win.”

I nod, backing away from the restaurant.

In the car, Aang falls asleep, clutching the *Year of the Dragon* flyer. I drive, listening to a *Thinking in English* podcast.

[19](#)

[20](#)

(bōu jái faahn)

[21](#)

Money is not worth it.

[22](#)

(Cantonese: wòhng gām maahn léuhng). (Mandarin: huáng jīn wàn liǎng).

Loosely translates to a ton of gold.

Chapter 25

*"dysmenorrhea" is the medical term for painful
menstrual periods*

*(it's one of the most common yet untreated conditions
in the world)*

JJ

When I open my eyes on Tuesday morning, there's a dull ache in my stomach. I grab my phone. *Kurwa mać.*²³ The period app proudly announces it's day one.

No. No. No. No. No. No.

We're adding new difficulty to the stunts today. I *have* to go to training. If I'm not there, Coach will have Addy step in.

It's okay. It's okay. I've got this.

I take the pink bike shorts out of my gym bag and throw in black double-layered running shorts. If it was going to be one of the really bad periods, I would have started getting cramps days before. And I was fine in Boston.

Just in case, I text Monique and ask if she can pick me up today so I don't have to drive. But it'll be fine. I had no cramps in Boston. It won't be a bad one. I don't have to stay home.

At my desk, I take off my silk bonnet. Black, with my grandma's embroidery in the Łowicz style. A symmetrical pattern of tulips and peonies in reds, yellows, and blues, surrounded by green leaves.

When I was five, my dad dropped me off at my grandma's with my hair not done. A massive mistake. My grandma didn't realize she couldn't let me go to sleep in my curls. In the morning, my hair was so tangled that the best choice was to shave it off. We cried while the

curls were hitting the floor. She had a stack of hair products and the bonnet ready for the next visit.

Yesterday, she sent me another text with possible flights to Gdańsk. Mom bothers me about my June plans every day. Which is suspicious, because she wasn't this insistent last summer. Dad doesn't mention it. He can't really tell me off, considering he hasn't been to Nigeria in thirty years.

I hug the bonnet and let my tears fall. I want to see my grandma. But that will mean it's back to the stares and the whispers. Why should I go somewhere where they don't want me?

I sigh and put the bonnet down. As the tears dry, I spray my curls with the vanilla conditioner from Bryn's salon. Monique texts back that she'll be at my house in thirty minutes.

It won't be one of the really bad ones.



Another cramp hits.

Gritting my teeth, I tighten my core. I kick my right foot up and stay in a heel stretch for two more counts. My stunt group dips on one, and I switch feet. I pull my leg up high and do a bow-and-arrow stretch. On one, they release, and I twist twice in the air before they catch me.

I'm doing great. Aside from the slowly increasing pain in my stomach. And if the definition of *great* has been modified to mean *not falling*. I should have taken a triple dose of the painkillers. Mom said the doctor prescribed stronger ones, but it seems my uterus was not notified of that fact.

"The stretches are looking strong!" Coach claps. "Flyers, you need to snap your feet together. Otherwise, it looks ugly, and I don't want ugly!"

I don't want ugly has been Coach's mantra during this training. And everything I have done today has been ugly. My smile feels more like a grimace. My arm isn't perfectly parallel to the floor on the bow and arrow. And I haven't snapped my feet together.

“Water break!”

I slump onto the ground. Pearls of sweat go everywhere. Another cramp hits, and I dig my nails into my thigh. Twenty more minutes of training. I’ll survive, Monique will drive me home, and I’ll crawl into bed and pass out.

“You okay?” Aang is standing in front of me.

“Yeah ... just not my day.”

He sits next to me, his hair sticking to his sweaty forehead and the back of his neck.

Another cramp. I hug my knees. “I’m sorry you have to work harder to pick up my slack today. I keep bending my legs.”

“No need to say sor—”

Another cramp. I squeeze my knees even closer to my chest and try not to wince.

He frowns. “You sure you’re okay?”

It could be worse. It could be one of the really bad ones.

“I just need to rest.” I give him a weak smile.

“End of break!” Coach shouts.

He stands up and offers me his hand. I grab it and rely entirely on him to get me off the floor. His frown deepens. “I won’t be able to convince you to sit this one out, right?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, then. I’ve got you.”

In the next twenty minutes, the only reason our stunt doesn’t keep failing is Aang. He locks my knee, balances me, and lifts my weight for me. I’m getting a bruise from how tightly his hands are holding me, and I could not be more grateful.

Another cramp. My eyes sting. I put even more teeth into my smile.

When the last flyer touches the floor, Coach ends the session.

“Thank you, everyone! I’ll see you at the next training!”

The gym empties quickly after that. I manage to take three steps toward the exit before another cramp hits. I hiss under my breath.

“You’re not okay.”

I yelp, and for a second, I forget I’m in pain. I didn’t realize Aang hadn’t left my side since he put me down on the floor. But then I

remember the pain, because the next cramp screams, *It's a really bad one.*

Everything tilts at the wrong degree as I stumble toward the wall. I slam against the cold brick and slide until I'm sitting down. Another cramp. Tears spring to my eyes.

"JJ?" Monique and Bryn are by my side. They must have come back from the locker room when I didn't show up.

I thought my face was sweaty before, but I'm drenched in sweat now. It's getting into my eyes and mixing with the tears.

"A really bad one?" Monique asks. "Pills are in your locker?"

I nod.

"I know the code." She stands up.

"I'll get a hot water bottle," Bryn says.

"Wait! What's happening? Should we call an ambulance?" Aang swims in and out of focus in my vision, but his voice cracks with unmistakable panic.

"Ambulance?" Monique asks. "She's just on her period."

"Just on her ... She looks like she's dying."

Monique sighs. "Stay with her and don't call an ambulance." They sprint off.

I close my eyes and lie on the floor in a fetal position. Change to lying on my back. Change back to the fetal position, clutching my stomach. The sweat and tears are in my mouth now.

A backpack drops next to my head. "I'm back," Aang says.

Huh. I didn't even notice he left. I crack one eye open. He takes out his phone and types aggressively before dropping it on the ground. "How do I help?"

"Distract me."

"Distract, okay." He lies down, facing me. "I've watched *The Princess and the Frog*."

I perk my head up. "Huh?"

"And I loved it. We should go to New Orleans. You'll only have to drive for twenty hours."

"I can't believe you watched it without me."

"We can watch it again together." He smiles. My attempt at smiling back is more of a wince.

The girls come back. Monique puts the pills and my water bottle in my hands. Bryn puts the hot water bottle on my stomach and strokes my hair. I force the water and pills down my throat. Maybe this time they'll work as intended. I close my eyes and lie down again.

At some point, their whispering becomes louder.

"I'll drive her home." That sounds like Monique.

"So she can be alone in her house?" That sounds like Aang.

"Well, she's not going with *you*."

"I'd like to see you try and stop me."

"What's going on?" I mutter without opening my eyes.

Aang's voice gets closer to my ear. He must be kneeling. "I texted my mom. She'll be here in five minutes. You can stay with us until your parents get home."

"But ..." Monique starts, but she can't argue. Today is the Pilates class she promised her mom she'd go to. And Bryn has work.

I push the words out with the last bit of energy I have. "I'll go with Aang. Don't worry. Love you all." I fall asleep. Or pass out.



I wake up in a bed. The blinds are down, but a bedside lamp is on. There are rows and rows of books on the other side of the room. A framed Bruce Lee poster hangs on the wall.

I'm in Aang's room. I'm in his *bed*.

I dart my eyes around, searching for my phone. It's next to me, on the nightstand. I grab it, accidentally knocking over a book, and check the time. Six o'clock. I was out for an hour. Probably three more until my parents are home.

There's a gentle knock on the door. "JJ?" Aang whispers through the door. "Are you asleep?"

I sit up in the bed. "No."

He comes in, holding grocery bags. "My mom and I went to the shop." He unpacks things on the nightstand. A Bounty. Pads with wings. Proper bread.

Proper bread. Not the factory-made foam they sell in the supermarkets here. Real bread, like in Poland.

“Also, my mom made you brown sugar ginger tea. She promises it’ll help.” He sits down on the floor and sets a thermos beside him. “How are you feeling?” His forehead creases.

“Better.” I play with the duvet, eyeing the bread. “How did I get here?”

“I carried you.” He hands me the bread. “Piggyback style. You literally wrapped your hands around my neck.” His forehead crease gets even deeper. “Your pills are strong.”

“It’s not the pills that knock me out. It’s the pain.” I pick at the bread. “I’m sorry about the hassle. It couldn’t have been easy carrying m—”

“Are you serious right now? *I’m* so sorry. I should have noticed before. I should have helped you.”

My heart tightens.

“Have you been to a doctor about this or something?”

I snicker. “They said it’s normal and I should grow out of it.”

“Doesn’t seem normal.”

I hug the bread to my chest. “One day, when *I’m* the gynecologist, I’ll say that to my patient.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Just ...” He shifts around on the floor. “I always assumed you were going into medicine because your parents told you to.”

I shrug, taking a bite of the bread. “Most people think that.”

He looks like he wants to say more but holds back.

I lower the bread. “Please, don’t make this the first time you have an opinion but keep it to yourself.”

He chuckles. “That is fair.” He rests his elbows on the bed. “I don’t know. I guess I thought I wasn’t most people to you.”

“Who do you think you are, then?” I wipe a crumb off the side of my mouth.

His gaze darts to my lips, and my heartbeat quickens.

Yes. Do it. I slowly bite into my lower lip.

“I ...” he breathes out, still staring at my mouth. “Sorry, what was the question?”

I set the bread aside and lean toward him. “Who do you think you are? To me?”

He props himself up, but he’s still on the floor, so it’s one of those rare moments where I’m looking down at him. The thrill of him kneeling in front of me again zaps my spine. “What do you want to do? Right now?”

His eyes dart to my lips again. Triumph surges through me like adrenaline. I know what he wants to do. He knows what he wants to do. *Do it.* Slowly, he lifts one hand and skims his fingers over my cheekbone. I must look like shit, but he’s studying me with so much fascination, like he’s never seen a girl before.

He leans closer. “Would you like to ...” A low, vulnerable sound escapes his throat.

Yes. My eyes are already closed, and my lips part.

“... watch *The Princess and the Frog*?”

My eyes fly open. “Co?”²⁴

He’s already moving away; whatever emotion possessed his face earlier is gone. “We talked about it earlier. Us watching it together? Should do it. Now. As in, we have time now.” He tries to sound composed, but his words come out shaky. He grabs his laptop. “Movies. Would be fun. To watch movies. Great pastime. Cinematography.” His whole face is red, and he fidgets with his glasses.

This must be a pain-induced nightmare, but even my period could not be this cruel. I’m about to say as much, but his eyes are pleading with me to move on.

I look up at the ceiling, trying to find the strength. “Okay, let’s ... watch cinematography.” I shuffle over to make space for him on the bed. He sits on top of the duvet while I’m still under it. I pretend to watch the film, chewing on the bread and sneaking looks at him when his eyes are trained on the screen. His eyelashes touch the rim of his glasses.

Why is he so cute? Why didn’t he kiss me? I know he wanted to. And I’m convinced he could sense how much I wanted him to do it.

The desperation was seeping out of me worse than it did in sophomore year when I was about to have my first kiss at Brad's party with a senior whose name I'd forgotten.

Wait.

Was this going to be his first kiss? Did he just not want it to happen like that?

"I can play a Cantonese movie now? If you want?" he asks.

"Okay." I didn't realize the first film had ended.

He starts the next film, adding English subtitles. As young Aaron Kwok enters the screen, my eyes grow heavy. My head lolls onto Aang's shoulder. He goes rigid for a second before shifting himself lower so it's easier for me to rest my head on him.

I drift awake to the sound of Aang murmuring lines from the film under his breath. As a tram ricochets between the colonial buildings on the screen, he whispers, "I'll go there one day. I'll go home."

He absent-mindedly lifts his hand and strokes my hair, and my eyes flutter closed again.

If Aang needs more for his first kiss, I'll text Brad when I get home, I think, before falling asleep.

²³For fuck's sake. [very aggressive]

²⁴What?

Chapter 26

*so if i killed brad and ended up with a criminal record,
would they still let me into stanford?*

(fuck it, it'll be worth it)

Aang

I wake up at five a.m., but for the first time in months, I don't jump out of bed to practice Cantonese. Instead, I lie in bed inhaling the smell of JJ on my sheets.

I should have kissed her yesterday. I know, *I know*, she wanted me to kiss her. But I've never kissed anyone. I've never had a girl look at me and wait for me to kiss her. She wouldn't have liked it, and my chances would have been ruined in a second.

But I don't remember the last time I had a thought that didn't start or end with her. When we walk down the corridor, I need to shove my hands into my pockets to stop myself from reaching out and holding hers. I constantly ponder a good place to take her for a first date. Although, technically, she would take us because I can't drive, but that is neither here nor there.

It's like freshman math all over again, that helpless feeling of trying to concentrate on the lesson instead of sneaking glances at her. But now, it's dialed up to a thousand, and I can't take it anymore. This *want* that presses against my sternum like a stone. It's unbearable.

I slowly extract myself from bed and walk over to my closet, then sift through all my button-down shirts. I take out a dark-blue one.

I'm not a scrawny freshman anymore. I'll put this shirt on, and I won't drown in fabric. I can lift her. And hold her in the air. She

sneaks glances at *me* when we watch a movie.

I can do it. I can tell her how I feel.



I speedwalk through the corridor to get to her locker before the first class of the day. I can't help the goofy grin on my face. This is actually happening. I'm horrified, but it'll be worth it. I'd rather have one honest moment than torture myself for a minute longer.

Electricity's buzzing in my veins, and I know I will actually do it.

I turn the corner and stop in my tracks.

She's leaning against her locker. And in front of her is Brad. Giving her a flower.

Not just any flower. The same fucking flower I gave her freshman year.

I stumble back as the air is sucked out of my lungs worse than when she fell on me and I slammed into the ground. Are they back together? I turn around. She never mentioned anything. She never talks about Brad unless Remy asks about him.

Shit. *Remy*. How am I supposed to tell him about this?

I trip over something. A heart balloon? I look around. Lockers are decorated with pink hearts. My mom's favorite song, "Lucky," is playing over the intercom. Who's in charge of this playlist? A fifty-year-old?

Wait.

It's Valentine's Day.

My jaw sets. I was too much of a coward to do anything freshman year. Or yesterday. But today? If Brad wants her, he'll have to fight me for her first.



Alone in the math classroom, I step back from the board to check out the equation I wrote.

$$(x^2 + y^2 - 1)^3 = 3x^2y^3$$

My phone pings. I have four unanswered calls and ten messages from Remy. I've been avoiding him all day. If I see him, I'll have to break the bad news. So I'm stalling. Because there will be no Brad-related news by the time Mathletes finishes.

The club starts in thirty-five minutes. She should be here soon. Since the first meeting, she's always come early to stretch. At the beginning, I hated it but couldn't look away. And now ... I need to tell her she should do it anytime she has a chance.

Thirty-four minutes until Mathletes. She'll be here any minute.

Thirty-three.

Twenty-one.

I'm overheating. I roll up the sleeves of my shirt.

Fourteen.

Ten.

I pace the classroom. Why isn't she here yet? She's always here early.

I stop, my right foot hovering in the air. What if the same thing as yesterday happened? I sweep my phone from the desk to text her, Bryn, and Monique. If something happened to JJ and they didn't tell me—

The door creaks.

I turn around, and all my resolve disappears at the sight of the flower in her hand. She brought it to Mathletes? *That's probably where she was. She was with him.* My hand strangles the phone.

She strolls up to me, and the equation on the board catches her attention. I dive for the desk to find the eraser before she tries to solve it. I sift through the papers. "Shit!" I hiss, clutching my finger. I got a paper cut.

I'll erase it with my hand.

I whip around and find her even closer to the board. Her lips are moving, but that's not an equation you can solve in your head. The flower is still in her hand. She turns to me. "What's the equation for?"

"Nothing." I push past her, but she grabs a marker.

I yank it out of her hand. She startles and drops the flower from her other hand. I fight the urge to stomp on the petals. Why did he have to give her *that* one? Why couldn't it have been literally anything else? She picks up the flower gently. Like it's the most precious thing in the fucking world. Resentment churns in my gut. "Happy for you and Brad again," I spit out. It's petty, but it's all I have right now.

She frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw Brad giving that to you in the corridor." I point to the flower. "Classic American high school love story, huh? What you've always wanted."

She takes a step back. "You don't know what I want."

"I think I do." I scoff. "You want your stupid American high school movie. You want Brad."

She tightens her fists. "Brad and I are friends. But even if we weren't, why would that bother *you*? Aren't *we* friends? So what's your problem now?"

I draw back like she punched me.

The door creaks again. "Happy Valentine's Day!" Georgie skips in. She drops her stuff on the table and looks at the board. "An equation! So cool. Can I solve it?" She grabs another marker.

JJ shoots me a glare before throwing herself into her regular seat in the front row. She bangs her head on the table three times, the flower still in her hand. I clench the marker and walk to the teacher's desk. The room fills with the rest of the group.

"Got it!" Georgie steps back from the board. "When you graph it out, it makes a heart!"

JJ's head shoots up, and I grab the schedule and hide behind it. Three weeks until Nationals, and we're supposed to do logic questions today. Ugh. No way. I put the paper down. "We'll do geometry today."

"Again?" Drew raises his eyebrows. "We did that at the last meeting."

JJ crosses her arms. "Today is logic questions day."

I lock my jaw. "I think you're mistaken."

"I think I'm not."

“Aang, at the last meeting, you said we’d be doing logic questions today! I wrote it down!” Georgie points to her notebook, which has so much ink covering it that it’s hard to see the white paper.

Oh god. If Georgie’s anything like freshman-year me, she has a verbatim transcript of everything I’ve ever said. I owe my old captain an apology. Maybe therapy.

I sigh. “You’re right, Georgie, it’s logic questions day.”

She cheers. Loudly.

Yup, definitely tracking the old captain down.

When I distribute the exercise sheets, Drew turns to JJ. “You got a Valentine for today?”

She shoots me a look. “I thought I did.”

What is that supposed to mean?



We’re nearing the end of the meeting, and I am infuriated by how well JJ’s doing.

I read out the last question of the day. “You’re on a game show with three doors. Behind one is a car, and the others hide goats. You pick a door, and the host opens another door to reveal a goat.

Should you switch your choice?”

“Yes.”

Annoyance spikes in me. She’s right, but I don’t want her to be. “You sure about that?”

Hesitation flashes in her eyes. Guilt stabs at me, but before I can backtrack, her face hardens. “Yeah, I’m sure.” She stands up. “Give me the pen.”

That’s my girl.

I choke at the thought but cannot examine it any further, because she’s in front of me and trying to take the marker out of my hand. I wrap my fingers around it.

“What are you doing? Give me the pen,” she says.

“You don’t need a pen to solve this.”

“I think I do. The fact that you doubt my answer means I have to spell it out for you.” She tugs on the marker, but I’m not budging.

“There’s no need to spell anything out for me.”

“I must respectfully disagree. You have difficulty comprehending simple concepts.”

“I think I comprehend simple concepts pretty well.”

“Please.” She rolls her eyes. “The goat herself could tell you to switch the doors, and you’d still tell her *No, let’s just be friends.*”

“Well, the goat never told me to switch doors.”

“The goat was sending a clear message.” She rips the marker out of my hand.

“I’m confused.” Georgie leans sideways toward Drew. “How is that relevant to the question?”

“Oh, Georgie.” Drew doodles in his notebook. “They haven’t been talking about math since the beginning of this class.”

I scan the room. The group is staring at us, most with perplexed faces. My cheeks heat up, and I take a step away from JJ. “Sorry, guys. JJ’s really passionate about goats.”

She scoffs. “Really?”

The bell rings. Everyone packs up and leaves as quickly as possible. Drew shakes his head at us. “Maybe just kiss already? You’ve traumatized the freshmen.” He shuts the door on his way out.

My ears burn. I must have looked deranged, and that’s not a good look for a captain. And we haven’t actually solved the question.

JJ points the marker at me. “You should switch the doors. If you don’t switch, it’s a one-third chance. If you do, it’s two-thirds. The probability kicks in when you make the choice.”

She’s correct, but I’m not in the mood to agree with her. “The probability doesn’t kick in. Do I have to teach you middle school statistics?”

“I don’t know. Do I have to teach you primary school statistics?”

“I don’t know. Do I have to teach you kindergarten statistics?”

She throws her hands up. “You know perfectly well I’m correct. Why are you fighting me on this?”

“Are you sure you’re correct? Maybe your brain’s just busy thinking about *Brad*.”

“*Oh my god*.” She drops the marker and tugs on her hair. “Stop talking about Brad! I don’t like Brad!”

“Well, he clearly likes you if he’s giving you flowers for Valentine’s Day.” I cross my arms. “Let him down gently, okay?”

“That’s it.” She snatches the flower off her desk, then marches up to me and shoves it into my face. “*You’re* the one who established that a guy can give a girl flowers and still be her friend, aren’t you? Didn’t you give me flowers and, in the same breath, tell me we were friends?”

I take a step back and hit the teacher’s desk. “That’s not the same —”

“Why not? Why can’t Brad give me flowers without it being romantic, and you can?” She waves the flower in front of my face. The same kind of flower I spent two hours at the florist’s for, agonizing over whether it was the right shade of pink.

It’s like somebody has lit a flame in my bloodstream.

“Because it was romantic!” My voice echoes in the empty room. I take a step forward, and this time she steps back. “But I was a fourteen-year-old loser, and really, what did you expect me to do? Tell you I’ve fantasized about kissing you since the moment I saw you?”

“Yes!” she shouts. “And honestly? I didn’t even need words. You should have just pushed me against the locker and kissed me!”

“This isn’t one of your American high school movies!”

“Yeah, I thought it was going to be better!” She throws the flower at me. I don’t manage to catch it, and it falls on the floor. “This is for you, you idiot. Brad’s dad is a florist. Do you know how hard it is to find camellias last minute on Valentine’s Day?”

“What?” My brain is malfunctioning, my neurons scrambling to understand the words. Which has nothing to do with the fact that her accent reverted to Polish midway through the rant. “The flower is for me?” I take a step toward her.

“The flower is for you.” She takes a step back, heaving like she just went through a whole cheerleading routine.

“It’s Valentine’s Day.” I step forward.

“It is.” She steps back.

“Is it a friendly Valentine’s Day flower?”

“It most definitely is not.” She shakes her head, her back hitting the wall. She doesn’t have anywhere else to go, but it seems she’s exactly where she wants to be.

I cross the rest of the space between us. My sneakers graze hers.
“It is not?”

“It is not.” She leans forward, her breath hot against my lips.

My shaky thumb slides down her jawline until I’m cradling her cheek. I need to remember every second of this. The curls escaping her ponytail, brushing my hand. Her dark-brown eyes, like a leather-bound book.

That should be only mine to read.

JJ puts her chin up. “Well, what now?”

“Can I kiss you?” I whisper.

“I swear if you don’t, I’ll—”

I crash my lips against hers. She gasps, and fireworks erupt behind my eyes.

Her hands immediately tug on my hair, bending my head, pulling me more into her, her vanilla scent waking up my every nerve. My right hand is still cupping her cheek, but the left one clutches her hip, pushing her harder into the wall. Her lips are burning, and when they open mine and our tongues meet, air becomes impossible to find, but breathing turns optional.

She’s kissing me like she’s been waiting for this moment as long as I have.

My glasses are falling down my nose, and I’m getting a neck cramp from bending to her height. I start walking back, taking her with me, still kissing her, until I feel the first row of desks behind me. I spin us around and propel her onto one. Her mouth slides along my jaw down to my neck, and I—

The door swings open.

“Aaaaaaah!” Remy covers his face. “My eyes! My eyes!”

JJ pushes me away, but my palm is pressed against her shoulder blades, holding her in place. I’ve waited two and a half years, and

she's not getting away from me. Embarrassment doesn't even register—I'm too far past that. Still standing between her legs, I turn my head toward Remy. "What are you doing here?" I huff out.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? Girl, you've been avoiding me the whole day, didn't eat lunch with me, and didn't respond to any of my texts! I thought you were dying!"

"Oh ... sorry." Thinking back on my plan, I can see some holes in it. I brush my hair off my forehead and slide my other hand from JJ's back to her hip. "I'm fine."

"I can see *that*! How long has this been going on?"

JJ and I exchange looks. "About five minutes?"

Remy clutches his chest. "In a *math* classroom?" He shivers in disgust. "I'm going to tell you the same thing my grandma told me when I came out to her." He points between us. "Y'all need some Jesus." He turns around.

"Bye, Remy," JJ says.

"Sorry, I couldn't see you from where you were swallowing my best friend's neck." He leaves and slams the door.

JJ leans against my chest, shoulders shaking. Her laughter ricochets through the classroom.

I prop her chin up, my fingertips registering the heat emanating from her skin. "I was a fan."

"Yeah, I got that." She giggles. I lean in again, but she dodges my lips. "Was this your first kiss?" she asks.

Panic flickers behind my ribs. *Was I that bad at it?*

"Yes?" My voice is strangled.

"Aww, your first kiss was in a math classroom." She grins. "You're such a nerd."

"I hate you so much." But my face hurts from smiling, so it must actually scream *I like you so much, I like you so much, I like you so much ...*

"Hate me. Yeah, right." She strokes my hair. "Want to kiss me again?"

"Frankly, I don't know what else I'm supposed to do with my life."

She laughs, wrapping her hands around my neck.

And we kiss again.

And again.

And again.

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Chapter 27

HOW IS EVERYONE FINDING OUT TODAY?

JJ

The next day, I pick up Aang on my way to school. I park and text him to say that I've arrived, then giggle at the messages he sent me yesterday before bed. *Good night.* And a follow-up. *Sleep well.* And a follow-up. *See you tomorrow.* And a follow-up. *I'm counting down the minutes.* And a follow-up. *Did I say good night?*

My screen fills with an incoming call from my mom. I pick up. "Cześć, mama!" I chirp.

"Cześć ..." My mom's voice is immediately suspicious. "You seem very happy about something. Or someone."

An alarm blares in my head. Having Eastern European–African–immigrant parents is a very dangerous triple combo and they, of course, have set rules about their only daughter not being able to date without screening and approving of potential suitors.

"Oh, just excited to get to school. I can't wait for biology!" I speak in Polish as well. "Why are you calling?"

"You know how we were supposed to be making the palm tomorrow?"

"Yes?" Did she change her mind? Do I no longer have to celebrate Palm Sunday?

"I won't be able to leave work early. Could you come to the hospital with the supplies? We'll make it in the breakroom between my operations."

I groan internally, but that's not a battle I'm winning. "Okay, I'll be there tomorrow after school."

“Dziękuję!”²⁵ She sounds like she’s typing on her keyboard. “Also, I’m checking the plane tickets to Poland, and they’re a good price. We should buy them tomorrow.”

I clench my teeth. “I haven’t made any decisions about Poland.”

“But *Babcia* really wants you to come and—” A pager rings in the background, and I know I’ve been saved from this conversation. “I have to go. We’ll talk later.” She hangs up.

I drop my head against the steering wheel. My eyes prickle, and tendrils snake around my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. *Just relax. One, three, five, seven. One, three, five, seven.*

The door to Aang’s house opens, and I perk up my head. He’s stepping through the threshold with such a massive grin that he makes breathing effortless again.

“Morning!” He jumps into the car.

“Morni—” I get cut off when he leans over and gives me a peck on the lips. “Oh.”

“Oh no.” His smile fades. “I’ve made this awkward. I’ve been dying to kiss you since yesterday, but shouldn’t have assumed—”

I grab his face and collide my mouth with his. Our teeth clack together on impact. I don’t care. He doesn’t care. He angles his head, and his hand slides to the back of my neck. The cold metal of his watch makes my hair stand up. I clutch his winter coat to bring him closer. He shifts off his seat, bracing one hand against my headrest to keep from crushing me as he sinks into me. I unzip his coat and put my hands on his chest.

A sharp rap on the passenger window sends us springing apart. Aang’s head hits the roof of the car. “Shit!” he hisses.

I look around him.

Oh god. His dad is staring at us.

I fumble for the window control, and the glass whirs down. Aang moves back to his seat, massaging the back of his head. He refuses to make eye contact with his father.

I clear my throat. “Good morning.” My cheeks are reaching temperatures I didn’t know were humanly possible.

“Hello, JJ.” His face is blank. “You were parked here for ages, so I thought I’d come see if everything was okay.” Aang slowly closes his eyes, and his dad’s face cracks into a smile. “Well, have a safe journey to school.” He taps the door. “Wait till your mother hears about this.”

When he walks away, Aang buries his face in his hands. “I’m never going home again.”

I start the car and speed away.

I didn’t want it revealed like that. Remy knows. Now Aang’s dad knows, which means his mom will find out at any moment. I didn’t want everyone to get involved before we figured things out ourselves. Are we friends who kiss each other? Dating? In a relationship? And he’s going to get asked these questions by his parents the second he sets foot in his house.

I should have just left the greeting at the peck.

When we hit the first red light, I keep looking straight ahead. “I’m sorry about that.” I drum my fingers against the gearshift. “Your dad ... And you will get interrogated later ...”

“Do you need to have your hand on the gearshift now?”

“What?” I turn to him. “How is that relevant? Also, your car knowledge is abysmal.”

“Answer the question.”

“No, I don’t have to have my hand on the gearshift.”

“Good.” He takes my hand and presses it against his cheek. “The interrogation will be worth it.”

A car honks, and I jump in my seat. The light turned green. Aang puts my hand back on the stick. Another honk. I shift into first gear and drive through the intersection. From the corner of my eye, I see his mouth grow into a lazy smile while my heart is pounding wildly in my chest.

“You sure you’ve never dated anyone before?” I ask. “You seem ... competent.”

“You don’t know how many times Remy gave me a lecture on Southern gentleman behavior. I was forced to take notes. Maybe I reviewed them yesterday evening.”

Well, if there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s taking notes.

He leans against the passenger door, facing me. “You want that, or something else? I’m open to feedback.”

Heat flushes over my chest as I try to process the words. “Oh.” I take off my scrunchie, letting my curls create a curtain between him and me. “I ... um ...” I put the tie on my wrist. “Sorry. I-I need to focus on driving.”

“Understandable.” He nods. “I’ll go out on a limb and say you want that. Feel free to correct me whenever.”

I think I’m getting a fever.

When we stop at the next light, he leans over and takes the scrunchie off my wrist and puts it on his. The neon-pink satin stands out against his black watch.

I’m getting tachycardia, my heart is thumping so fast. I concentrate on a piece of snagged thread on the sleeve of his coat. I can’t look at his face, or I’ll do something stupid. Like get rid of my seat belt, climb onto his lap, and kiss him in the middle of an intersection.

Five breaths later, I manage to say, “That’s theft.”

“And I’m having so much fun committing it.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun.” My voice is faint.

“I’ve fantasized about this for two years and six months. I have so much fun in store for you.”



Between second and third period, he stops by my locker to squeeze my hand. During fourth period, he texts me to ask if I want to grab hot chocolate after cheer practice and before he goes to Chinese school. He hates hot chocolate. Too much sugar. At lunch, he hooks his leg around mine under the table. During the first water break of cheerleading practice, Monique comes up to us and says that we need to cut it out.

“Cut what out?” I blink.

She rolls her eyes as Bryn appears next to her. “Something clearly happened here.” Monique points between Aang and me. “You’re

lucky Coach is preoccupied with Alexis's basket and she hasn't noticed the flirting yet. But Bryn and I can feel the tension from the other side of the mat. I can't imagine how much your stunt group is suffering."

"Stop it." Bryn elbows her. "It's young love."

Monique prays to the ceiling. "May God be my witness that it never finds me."

I groan. *Is everyone going to find out today?*

Aang contains a giggle. I've never seen him giggle before. I like how his lips purse, trying to stop it from coming out.

"JJ, really." Monique pats me on the cheek. "Nationals are five weeks away. Get it together."

I refocus on her frowning face and am reminded of how we became friends in the first place. During our sophomore year, we both showed up an hour early for the tryouts to practice tumbling. We stayed an hour after to perfect the dance we were taught during tryouts, even though it was never used again. The next day, we were creating "win Nationals" battle plans.

I step away from Aang. "Monique's right."

She sighs loudly, mouthing *thank you* to the ceiling. I look up at Aang, my eyes pleading with him not to get upset. "No feelings on the mat?"

"Agreed." He nods. "But after training ..." he murmurs in my ear. I allow myself one last giggle. "After training."



In my car, Aang's doing last-minute cramming for his exam while I'm sipping hot chocolate and contemplating the Chinese school, a building made of red bricks with a bell tower. The double doors are painted burgundy. There's a wreath hanging from the porch roof. On the snowy lawn, the sign claims that the Sunday mass starts at ten a.m.

I drain the cup, tasting the dissolved marshmallows on my tongue, as I watch children with Bibles exit the church. The bell

chimes, announcing it's six o'clock. "What denomination is it?"

"Protestant. But that's not the school. There's an additional wing at the back. The Chinese school rents the rooms for the lessons."

"I see."

He looks up from his notebook. "I'm not Protestant."

The stack of brand-new books on Buddhism in his room would agree. "Obviously not. But if you ever consider Christianity, I think you'd do well in the Catholic Church. Your personality would find a home in how high-strung it is."

"I'm going to assume that's a compliment."

"A backhanded one for sure." I lean over and kiss him. "Your mouth tastes bitter," I say between kisses. "Because you're a weirdo who ordered dark hot chocolate and refused whipped cream."

"One of us is getting tooth decay at thirty, and it won't be me." He smiles against my lips.

I pull away as a car parks next to us. Three people get out of it, each holding a pencil case. I recognize them from Chinatown. Aang stiffens, but when I turn to him, his shoulders relax, and he smiles at me. "It's exam time." He kisses my cheek before exiting the car. "I'll see you tomorrow." He shuts the door.

I wave him away with my empty cup. Actually ... there should be a bin somewhere around here where I can throw it away. I get out of the car.

Michael struts through the parking lot, greeting the three people I saw earlier. He spots Aang and shouts something at him that makes the others laugh. Aang's hand tightens on his backpack strap, but he keeps walking. I don't know what Michael said, but I'm convinced it wasn't *Hello, friend! Let us learn this great language together!*

I chase after Aang before he enters the church. "What did he say?"

"Jeez!" He jumps. "JJ, what are you doing?"

"Trying to find a bin." I show him the cup. "What did Michael say to you?"

Aang bites his lower lip. "Nothing." He tries to walk away, but I cut off his path.

"If you don't tell me, I'll go and ask him."

Aang hunches, finally giving up. “He called me *gwái lóu*.”²⁶

I raise my eyebrows. “Which means?”

“It’s Cantonese for ‘White man,’ a foreigner.” He grits his teeth. “I’ve been coming here for two years. And I still can’t get it. For me, the language never flows, it never sounds natural, it’s always forced and fake.” He points his chin toward the group disappearing behind the church door. “They like to say it’s because there’s not much Asian left in me.”

My Nigerian family’s reunion flies into my brain. I stomp down on it.

“That is just ...” I pull on my hair. “We have to tell someone. They can’t tell you things like that.”

“Them stopping won’t change the truth.”

My heart aches at how dull his eyes look. I reach out for his hand. “But it’s not okay.”

“It’s fine, JJ, really. I’ve studied hard for this. I’ll pass the exam, maybe get a better score than some of them. Then they won’t be able to say it anymore.”

“That’s not how it works, Aang.”

He lets go of my hand and starts walking. “*Do not* get involved, okay?” He looks at me over his shoulder. “It’s not worth it.”

But I think about it when I drive the thirty minutes home. I think about the shame on Aang’s face that shouldn’t have been there in the first place.

And when I get home, I think about the Johnson family reunion in London when I was ten. Where I met my grandmother, who still lives in Bakana in Nigeria, where my dad grew up. I couldn’t talk to her, because I knew neither Kalabari nor English then. But I sat near her and listened as she taught Kalabari to other kids. The ones who didn’t grow up in Nigeria but knew English. *Mu I Diri Go*. The one phrase I remember, because I whispered it after her, time and time again. But my Polish mouth, trained on the percussion of choppiest *krz*, *szcz*, *prz*, couldn’t deal with the flowy melody of Kalabari, where the pitch was as important as the sound. And with every

attempt, my throat constricted more, making it harder to repeat after her.

I open my laptop and google *Cantonese language center*, searching for Aang's teacher's email address.

I think about my uncle who tried to teach me Nigerian dance moves. But at that point, I was already paralyzed with fear that if I did something—anything—not exactly the way it was supposed to be done, they would see that my only claim to Nigeria and our family was nothing other than my skin color. So, I pretended I twisted my ankle and sat out the rest of the party.

I find the address and start drafting an email about what I witnessed today.

And when I sat next to my mom, the only White person in the room, I wondered if I was just too White to claim this culture.

The shock. The shock of, for the first time in my life, thinking of myself as White instead of Black.

I hesitate, my cursor hovering over the send button. Aang told me not to get involved. I push the laptop away and stand up. I pace my room.

When I came back to Poland after the reunion, I must have had a preadolescent stroke. Because when the teacher asked the class what we did over winter break, I actually told them. I taught them how to say *Go read a book*. I explained how we used pounded yam to scoop up the *egusi* soup. I explained how *egusi* was basically the Nigerian version of *bigos*. For a second, it felt like the warmest blanket, claiming both Poland and Nigeria in one breath.

I sit back at my desk and stare at the laptop.

And then they used it against me. They used it to show me I was never Polish to begin with. *So, you are a Nigerian*. Because a White Polish person could know this stuff and be called *cultured*, but they used it to take away my culture. Because it is an equation, and you can only be equal to one thing at a time.

And being born and raised Polish was not worth as much as the cardinal sin of being dark-skinned and knowing a couple of facts about an African country.

I clench my fists.

They don't get to take away what is *mine*. They don't get to take away what is *his*.

So fuck them all.

I click send.

25 Thank you!

26 (literally: *ghoul man*, *ghost man*, *devil man*)

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Chapter 28

aang begs a girl not to call security on him

JJ

I don't tell Aang about the email the next day when I pick him up for school. I don't tell him the next week when I'm stretching in the math classroom and he pulls me up to kiss me. I don't tell him the week after that, when we're sitting at our lunch table and he has his arm around me the whole time, while Remy, Monique, and even Bryn gag.

And I don't tell him in Philadelphia, when we're walking around the shopping mall attached to the venue where the Mathletes Nationals are being held.

We've just finished the individual round, and we have two hours before the team round. Drew went to hang out with friends he hasn't seen since last year's competition. Georgie went to dinner with her parents, who came to cheer her on. Aang and I ended up in the shopping mall.

We don't discuss the individual round. There's no point in stressing about different answers we might have gotten. And when he traces circles on my hand with his thumb, I don't remember what answers I wrote down. I almost don't remember sending the email. And he hasn't brought it up, so maybe it didn't send? Maybe they never got it? Or they didn't care? I don't say anything and manage to forget about it.

We walk into a bookstore, where we spend thirty minutes arguing over what we should buy Remy for his birthday. I point out that Brad's buying him something embroidery-related, so it'd be better to get something else. Aang points out that he isn't making

present decisions for his best friend based on *Brad*. He finally concedes when I bat my eyelashes at him. I make a note to use that strategy more frequently going forward.

At the cash register, I point out a new version of his favorite calculator. He gets distracted, and I take out my phone and pay.

He groans. “You know that isn’t going to work ever again, right?” He tugs on my curls as we leave the store.

“I’m very creative. I’ll think of something else, Peach Pie.”

“You remember when you called me Captain during the first Mathletes meeting? I’d prefer that to Peach Pie.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so, Peach Pie. But ... I guess I can call you Captain somewhere else. If you want.”

He trips over his feet and falls in the middle of the mall.

I burst out laughing. “You’re pretty uncoordinated for a cheerleader.” I watch him gather himself up frantically.

“Why do you derive such pleasure from my pain?” He tries to poke my shoulder, but I ditch him, laughing even harder. I try to skip away.

He grabs my arm. “What you were saying ...” He swallows hard. “... about somewhere ...”

My cheeks heat up. “I didn’t mean anytime soon ...”

He nods quickly.

“Butinthefuture!” It comes out like a singular squeak, and I wonder if he understood me.

“Yeah, in the future sounds good ...” He puts an arm around me. “And you’ll call me Captain then?”

I shrug. “If you ask nicely.”

His lips brush the back of my ear. “What’s your definition of *nicely*?”

My blood turns into steam, scorching my arteries, veins, and capillaries, awakening a response that has no business stirring in the middle of a Philly mall.

His shoulders shake. “Who’s laughing at whom now, huh?”

I look around to calm my racing heart. Sports. Jewelry. Tech ... I zero in on the next shop. I wiggle out of Aang’s arm and sprint to the window display.

Prom dresses.

And not only prom dresses.

A black single-breasted suit with a crisp white shirt and a dark-pink tie. I look at Aang, who's striding toward me. I drag him into the shop and find the suit from the display. "What's your size?"

"I'm already wearing a suit." He points to his navy blazer. *Perfect for the competition*, according to him. Personally, I would have worn a hoodie, but I felt bad after he showed me his outfit. So I'm wearing a black miniskirt, a white Oxford shirt, and a navy tie I stole from my dad.

I flutter my eyelashes. "Please?"

He groans. "It's 40L."

I hand him the correct suit and go find the pink tie. When I come back, he's out of the changing room and checking himself out in the mirror.

My breath hitches. I take him in slowly, with the pleasure of knowing I don't have to pretend I'm looking somewhere else. I walk up to him and put the tie around his neck. I don't actually know how to tie it, so it's left hanging from him like a scarf. I can't help the grin on my face. "Perfect for junior prom."

Monique's mom will rent us a limousine, and Bryn's mom will do our hair and makeup. I'll go dress shopping with my mom, without her bringing up flights to Poland. I'll never go to *studniówka* or *bal maturalny*. Even if I were in Poland, I wouldn't go. What would be the point of not being invited by anyone and leaning against the wall, watching everyone else have fun? But here? A good campaign, and Aang will win prom king, and I'll be prom queen, and we'll slow dance ...

"Junior prom?" He frowns. "I don't think I want to go to junior prom."

My smile drops. "Why not?"

He shrugs. "It's a stupid American tradition, and I'm already a cheerleader. Prom sounds a bit much."

Oh my god.

The USA didn't invent the concept of a dress-up party at the end of a school year. But he knows nothing but America, and he sees the

most generic things as theirs. He's so American and doesn't even know it. I grit my teeth. "You know where you're from, right?"

His jaw twitches.

My nostrils flare.

"What a cute couple you two make!" We startle as a middle-aged White woman strolls up to us. "Your children will have such unique features!"

Aang's face goes ashy. My fist closes on his tie.

Here as well? Different languages, same "compliments." I spit out what my mom always used to say when strangers commented on me to her. "*Za to pani dzieci pewnie urodą nie grzeszą.*"

She gets the spirit of the sentence and hurries away.

Aang looks at me. "What did you tell her?"

"The rough translation? That her children's sin is probably not being too beautiful." I shrug. "It sounds better in Polish."

He snorts. "No, I think it sounds great in English."

My hand relaxes on his tie, and his eyes soften at my hand on his chest. "I don't want to fight with you. Not now. Not ever again."

"Me neither," I say quietly. "We ... we don't have to talk about it."

"Yeah." He checks his watch. "Let's go back. The team round will start soon."

I let him go into the changing room.

This will get solved on its own. Like the email did.

Clearly.



We sit down for the team round against Jefferson High from Texas. I lay down a piece of paper, a pencil, and a pen. Aang bumps my knee. It's the last time he'll get to do that. You can only have one senior on a team, so next year, only one of us will be on the A-team. I bump his knee back. *Let's end this on a win.*

Drew drums on the table with his hands. Georgie squeals quietly. I'm buzzing, waiting for the emcee to introduce herself and start the

round. She opens her mouth ...

And I freeze.

An accent. It's nasal. Harsh. Clipped. And I understand one of the five words spoken. Blood pounds against my skull. My knee starts to bounce. *Nie, nie, nie, nie.*

Aang puts a hand on my knee, but it doesn't stop the bouncing.

"You okay?" he whispers as the emcee does her final check of the question sheet. His hand tightens on my knee, and when even that doesn't stop the bouncing, I sense he's at the beginning of a freak-out as well.

If *he* gets nervous, we're done here.

I force my knee to still and give him my biggest cheerleading smile. "Sorry about that. I'm just excited to win!"

He doesn't have time not to be convinced by the lie, because the emcee starts the round with the first question. Which I don't understand.

Drew writes some numbers down. I guess it's his question. He hits the button before I finish reading his scribbles. "Seventy-four."

"That's correct! One point for Blackstock High!"

I imagine that is what she said, based on my team's cheers.

Aang solves a geometry question. Jefferson High beats us to the answer on question three. Georgie starts working on question four, and I help her out once I can read it. We get a point. Drew gets the next one right. It's 4-1 for us, but there are plenty more questions left. What is the likelihood that there won't be a single logic question? Zero.

Aang's fingers brush mine as the emcee turns the next page. "We're doing so well!" He grins at me. I show him my teeth, but I can't call it a smile.

The emcee says something. Apples? I think she said apples. All eyes at the table turn to me. Georgie's forehead furrows when I don't start writing. Aang raises his eyebrows at my unmoving pen. He grabs his pencil.

"All three boxes are labeled, but each label is wrong ..." Aang mutters as he draws out three boxes. One with apples. One with

oranges. One with a mix of apples and oranges. “You’re only allowed to pick one fruit ...”

Wait. I know this puzzle. I bet the question is about the minimum number of fruits you need to pick to label all the boxes correctly. That’s easy. You start ...

“Is that correct?” Aang shows me his piece of paper. It says two. I look at the other team. They’re nodding, close to reaching an agreement.

Two. Is it two? No, I don’t think so. It should be one. But he had more time to think about the question than I did. And I don’t know what the actual question is. In the corner of my eye, the opposition player moves his hand. I hit the button a millisecond before he does.

“Is it two?” I ask.

“No, that’s incorrect. Jefferson High?”

“It’s one.”

“That’s the correct answer! Two points for Jefferson High. The score is 4–2 for Blackstock High!”

Fuck.

Aang leans sideways toward me. “JJ, what’s going on?”

I clutch my pen, my eyes darting to the emcee. Aang’s eyes follow mine. The emcee reads out the next question, and Aang’s face changes. Like he’s hearing the presenter speak for the first time. He grabs an additional sheet of paper and writes out the question as the emcee talks. When she finishes, he slides the paper my way. “I’ve got you.”

A wave of relief, shame, hope, and inferiority overwhelms me so hard I could cry.

For the rest of the round, Aang writes down every question for me, while at the same time solving his own questions, helping Georgie out with the ones she struggles with, and checking Drew’s answers if necessary. His entire hand is stained with ink, and it has to be cramping, but with every correct answer, he bites his lip harder and pushes through until we reach the last question. A logic question. When I answer correctly and the round ends, he drops the pen and slumps down in his chair.

We win, thirteen to seven.

“We won by so many points!” Georgie claps while we’re walking back to our bags.

“That’s the best result in my four years on the team,” Drew agrees. “We’re definitely in the top eight.”

The eight teams with the highest combined scores from the individual and team rounds advance to the quarterfinals. Last year, our high school was nineteenth. This year, the aim is not only to reach the quarterfinals but also to win the whole thing. But what if we have this emcee for the finals? There’s no way I can be helpful in that scenario.

Aang grabs my hand and pulls me away from Georgie and Drew. “Why didn’t you tell me what was happening at the beginning of the round?” His eyes are bloodshot, and he looks like he’s fighting to stay upright.

Because I shouldn’t have to. Because that would bring attention to—

A commotion at the end of the hallway turns our heads. Results. Already? Yes, we were the last ones in the team round, but that was so quick ...

Aang’s exhaustion disappears in the blink of an eye. He tugs on my hand, and we’re running through the hallway.

Initial groans and cheers are already audible. My heart speeds up.

Aang pushes through the crowd to get to the board. He runs a finger down the sheet, starting from the top, searching for our school’s name. We destroyed Jefferson High. We didn’t discuss the individual round, but everyone was positive they did well. We should get to the quarterfinals.

Aang’s finger stops, and his hand drops to his side while the other squeezes my wrist a bit too hard.

Oh no. I push past him and find our school’s name. Blackstock High. Ninth place. One point behind the eighth.

If only I’d answered the apple question correctly ...

I swallow my scream, but it still comes out like a choked cry. I do a 180 and run to the bathroom. It’s quite impressive that I don’t collide with anyone, because I can’t see through the tears. I knew the answer was one. I knew it. I enter a cubicle and shut the door behind me. I should have told Aang about the emcee earlier. But I

didn't want to admit that this isn't my language. I didn't want to bring attention to the fact that I'm not from here. And now the foreigner has made them lose. I rock back and forth on the closed toilet.

The bathroom door opens, and a girl screeches, "You're in the girls' bathroom!"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry!" Aang's voice makes me stop crying. "It's just my girl—I mean, my teammate, she's in here, and she's upset—wait—no, actually, she is my girl." He ... giggles? "Sorry, I've never said it out loud before, it sounds—oh, yeah, you don't care. Makes sense. Please don't call security on me!"

The door closes. The screeching girl must have left the bathroom.

He knocks on my door. "I know you're in there. It's the only closed stall. Are you going to let me in?"

"No."

"I've got a Bounty ..."

I sigh and unlock the door. Aang comes in and drops the chocolate bar on my already-extended palm. He looks around the cubicle. "This is as disgusting as the guys' toilets. Who knew?"

I sniff.

"Okay, attempts at humor were not effective." He crouches in front of me. "What's up?"

"We lost, and it's my fault."

He frowns. "How, exactly?"

"The emcee ... their accent?" I focus on the chocolate bar in my hand. "I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. And you had to help me out. And it's my fault, because I can't speak English. And I know you're regretting—"

"Don't."

My head jerks up at him. I've never heard him sound this mad.

"Absolutely not. You're on this team because you deserve it. You've worked hard, and you're smart. So smart, it's really, *really* hot and makes it hard to concentrate on anything else. It's daily torture for me, by the way." He runs a hand through his hair. "We could have lost a point anywhere. And I'm the one who said two fruits, not

you! I'm going to beat myself up for that later. But for now ... you are exactly what this team needed."

My eyes get misty again. "But we'll never get to win this competition together. And what about Stanford?"

"Yeah, that sucks, but we have other competitions to win together. Cheerleading Nationals are literally a week away." He squeezes my knees. "And I'll find something else to get into Stanford. I've already joined cheerleading—clearly, the depths of my desperation are not known to man."

I eye him. "I thought you joined cheerleading for me."

"That I did. Clearly, the depths of my desperation to get with you are not known to man."

My mouth quirks up. "And I guess if the next year doesn't work out, you can always take a gap year and try again."

He rests his chin on my thighs. "That might be the least attractive thing that ever came out of your mouth."

Aang has very strong opinions on gap years. They're for White people who don't understand the joys of a rigidly structured educational pathway and want to get high in Thailand. I laugh at the thought of him actually doing a gap year. He smiles at the sound.

I exhale and dry my cheeks with my dad's tie. "I've never told you before, but I think you're an exceptional leader. Thank you ... Captain."

His lips twitch. "I must say, when you promised you'd call me Captain someday, I was imagining a different place than a public toilet. But I like it."

He kisses me slowly as the Bounty melts in the wrapper.

Chapter 29

never before has finishing a crossword caused so many problems

Aang

Losing Mathletes Nationals dampened my mood for days. And Remy's mood, because he had to listen to me mull over each question in excruciating detail. But the sulking hasn't lasted nearly as long as it did last year. I quickly realized the benefit of finishing the Mathletes season—more time alone with JJ.

We spent Wednesday afternoon hanging out at my house. JJ asked me a lot of questions about Chinese school. Which was odd at first, because no one has ever been so interested in this one of my extracurriculars. But once I got over the weirdness, it was nice. Talking about Hong Kong with someone who knows even less than I do and was learning about it from *me*.

It was also the only thing we could do, because my dad became very insistent on keeping all the doors in the house open for *ventilation*.

Now it's Friday, and we're sitting in the park in front of the convention center in Houston, where cheerleading Nationals are being held. My back is propped up against a tree. JJ's head is resting on my lap, and she's trying to solve a crossword on my phone.

Sunlight spills over her skin, illuminating every detail of her features. Arched eyebrows. Full cheekbones. Long eyelashes. I trace my fingers around the bruise on her thigh, which is in the vague shape of my hand. I made it yesterday during our last practice of the season, when we did way too many repetitions of the pyramid

sequence. She drew a tiny heart in the middle of the bruise with her lipstick.

I finally understand Remy's obsession with art.

"You're right," JJ says.

I blink. "Sorry?"

She shows me the crossword. "You were muttering something about art, and it's actually correct." Confetti fills the phone screen when she enters the last correct answer. "Yay! I've never finished a crossword in English before. I need to send the proof to myself." She takes a screenshot and switches to the Messages app, smiling.

I lean over her face. I want to kiss that smile so badly, but if I mess up her competition makeup, Remy will cut my body up for destroying two hours of his work. I kiss her on the collarbone instead.

She stiffens.

Uneasiness creeps up my neck. "You okay?"

Her hands grip my phone tighter. "Why am I saved as Józefina-Ibifubara?"

"Um ... because it's your name?"

She shoots me a look.

I lean away. "What? Did I write it incorrectly?"

"No, there's not a single mistake in there." She forces the phone into my chest. "How do you even know how to spell it out?"

"That's how you signed your name in math class on the first day. When we met."

She groans, getting off my lap. "Yeah, literally just on that first day."

I stand up. "If this is about not having a nickname for you or something—"

"No, it isn't, just ..." She tightens her bow and points to my phone. "Why isn't it JJ?"

"Because I like your name."

Her eye twitches. "JJ is my—" She sucks in a breath, air swishing in through her nose. "No, I'm not doing this right now. I'm going to hang out with Bryn and Monique before the routine. See you later." Her ponytail swings furiously from side to side as she stomps away.

Irritation simmers in me.

Everything to fit in here, for what? We can be here for more generations than the White people, have the most English names possible, and they'll still ask where we're from. They don't need anything but our faces to decide we're the foreigners.

They all traded their real names for *this*. JJ and my parents, and my grandmother probably did too, but I'll never know what she sacrificed. I'm the only one who gets to introduce myself with the name my parents chose, but that's because I don't have a real Chinese name. I'm winning where I've already lost.

I stare after JJ, who's marching toward the convention center. I don't understand why she's like this.

Is this what us being together will look like?

A cold shiver runs down my spine. *No*.

No. I haven't spent years pining after her for these thoughts to enter my mind. We're not fighting. It's competition day. She's stressed. I went about explaining myself the wrong way. I'll try something else. Or learn to ignore it. Yeah, I don't care.



In the waiting area behind the curtain, JJ goes through her elaborate handshake ritual with Monique. Then with Bryn, complete with a surprising number of chest bumps. We still haven't done our handshake. We agreed we'd do it before this last routine of the year.

I don't think she's in the mood for it now.

She nods to Addy, gets a thumbs-up in return, then settles beside me. "We need to win." She points behind the curtain without looking at me. "No feelings on the mat."

Ice spreads through my core. *No feelings on the mat. No feelings on the mat. No feelings on the mat.* She grabs my hand, but her skin feels cold.

"And now ... in the performance, advanced, large, co-ed division from Massachusetts, the Blackstock High Cardinals!"

We run in and take our places. I take a deep breath. There's no other option but to win this.

The music starts.

Throw JJ up. Catch. High V. Let her down. Catch.

The hardest part is done.

The rest of the routine is bliss. No one wobbles. Every tumbling pass is landed to perfection. And before JJ jumps into prep for the last pyramid position, we exchange quick smiles. Yes, we'll be fine. Once we win, she'll be so happy that we'll be able to have a normal conversation.

One move left. I need to put JJ into prep so she can hold Alexis, who's about to do a braced double twist.

One last lift. And then we can talk about her weird aversion to her actual name. I drive her upward with every ounce of strength I have left.

A massive mistake.

We go up too fast, too aggressively, and JJ wobbles. Her hips go back, and the audience gasps.

I catch her upper thighs and push her up so she's back in the smoosh. She hasn't touched the ground, and she hasn't really fallen. But she's not in prep, which means Alexis doesn't have anyone to brace her, so her stunt group brings her down without doing the skill. There's no time to process the implications, because we have to move on to dance. Performing like nothing happened, like we're having the best routine of our lives.

I dip Alexis on the last count, and she gives the audience the biggest smile I've seen from her yet.

It evaporates as soon as the music stops.

We get off the mat as fast as possible. No one's celebrating. Everyone's avoiding each other's eyes. Monique rips the bow off her ponytail. Strands of hair dangle from the hair tie. Coach tries to give us a speech, but no one's listening to her.

And then Paige and the rest of the seniors start wailing.

I watch hopelessly as the underclassmen walk around me, consoling them. Bryn pushes past me to give her stunt group tissues.

JJ's holding a sobbing Addy, but there are tears pooling in her own eyes as well.

I sweep the backstage area until I land on a corner partially hidden from view. There, I slide down the wall and rest my head against my knees, but I can still hear their cries. Each weep builds on top of the previous one, smashing *it's all your fault* into my skull.

Someone slides down the wall next to me. The air fills with vanilla mixed with sweat. "You're horrible at sneaking away."

I bury my head deeper into my knees. "I'm so—"

"*Nie ma takiej opcji.*"²⁷ She pulls my hair, forcing my head up. My hair follicles protest. Her other hand is holding my glasses, which I left in my backpack before the routine. "There's enough crying going on out there. You're not allowed to beat yourself up. You helped me fly at Nationals. You helped us get to Nationals. And most importantly, you did your job as a backspot this year. We've competed three times, done dozens of game-day performances, and you kept your stunt group safe."

"I dropped you three times over the course of the year."

She lets go of my hair. "Oh well. I'm still alive to win Nationals next year, am I not? We are."

I shake my head.

"What does that mean?" Her hands fumble with my glasses. "Are you ... are you not staying on the team next year?"

I haven't given it much thought. I've liked the weight of her in my hands and the burn in my shoulders. It makes my brain quiet. It snuffs out the spiraling thoughts about Stanford, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Cantonese, my parents, my grandmother ...

It leaves just the physical exhaustion.

I want to stay. Not for her, not for college, but for myself. "You know what, I'll be there."

She beams, and the ice from before melts away. She slides my glasses onto my nose, and I should be happy, but I'm mostly confused. "How are you less upset now than during Mathletes?"

She leans a touch closer. "I was devastated when the stunt failed. I mean, I was getting ready for a lengthy cry alongside Addy. But then

I saw your face, and crying took a back seat. Cheering you up was more important than despairing about a mistake in a routine.”

I love you.

The thought crashes through my mind like thunder, deafening, drowning out everything else. She’s still talking—I can see her lips moving—but I’ve gone deaf. Blood roars through my ears, and my heart pounds against my ribs. I’m in love with her. What now? What now?

She bumps my elbow. “And the name thing? Let’s forget about it. It’s not important.”

What name thing? Oh, from earlier today, yeah, whatever, forget about it. I’m in love with you. I jerk my head in agreement.

She smiles and presses a kiss to one corner of my lips. I need her lipstick tattooed on my cheek. Forever.

What now?

[27](#) Not an option.

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Chapter 30

there's a visitor in my room

(do not tell my parents)

JJ

The Nationals participation medal for fourth place is hidden in my closet. I'm lying on my bedroom floor, and my laptop is propped on my chest. I'm analyzing every frame of the routine. Did I jump in too early? Did I stand up too early? Did I not shift my hips forward? Did I—

Doorbell.

I perk my head up. No one knocks on our door at ten a.m. in the morning on a Saturday. My parents are at work, pulling more shifts so they can have tomorrow off for Palm Sunday. Like this month could not get any worse.

Doorbell again. I groan and get off the floor, walk down the stairs, and open the door.

Aang is hopping from leg to leg on my front porch. "Hello! Do you need me to mow your lawn?" He points to my pretty pink wildflowers.

"What are you doing here?" I didn't even text him this morning. I assumed he'd be treating his competition hangover alone, like the rest of us.

Wait. He's at my house.

"Actually, a more important question is *how* are you here?" He's aware of where I live, but I've never told him my full address.

"Monique has your address from when she sent you a postcard from Cape Cod."

“And she disclosed that information to you willingly, without being under duress?”

He puts his hands up. “I just texted her.”

And she responded? She must be suffering from a mental breakdown caused by the competition loss. I’ll worry about her sanity later. “Okay? What are you doing here, then?”

“You invited me over.”

I blink. “When?”

“September, in front of your locker, when I agreed to join cheerleading.”

“That wasn’t—”

“I’m not staying long.” He looks at his watch. “Because we’re going to Boston.”

“Excuse me?” This is the most confusing conversation I’ve ever had in English.

“When we were in Boston for Chinese New Year, we said we’d go to the Polish restaurant after Nationals.”

My hand tightens on the doorknob. “That was if we won.”

“Let’s go anyway. It’ll be fun. To get away from here. With you.”

Going to a Polish restaurant after losing twice doesn’t sound particularly fun. Frankly, it sounds like the final nail in the coffin. But he has this hopeful look on his face, and my mouth waters at the thought of pierogi. A Pavlovian response I still haven’t trained my mind out of.

“Fine,” I concede. “I’ll go.”

His smile ignites a spark of hope that this day might not be a complete loss. I open the door fully so he can step in. “I just need to change.”

He takes me in. His face flushes red, his eyes fly upward, and he walks into the doorway.

My eyebrows shoot up. “What are you doing?”

He waves vaguely at me, his gaze still on the ceiling.

I inspect my thin tank top and pajama shorts. I’m not wearing a bra. “For someone who grabs my butt three times a week, you’re such a prude. You caught me by the boob once, remember? That was fun.”

He puts his hoodie over his head, but that doesn't hide the crimson cheeks. "I'm not a prude."

"Oh yeah, I can see how sexually promiscuous you are. Come, take me on the floor, right now."

"You're literally the worst." His face gets even redder, and I giggle. Maybe this day will get better because he's here.

He steps into the corridor and takes his shoes off. Thank god. I might have had to break up with him if he was one of *those*. I walk through the hallway to the first step of the staircase before I realize he's not following me. He's staring at the table in the living room. "What is *that*?"

My heart rate spikes in alarm. I could say it's my mom's weird neurosurgery thing. Or a gift from one of my dad's patients. But no matter how hard my mind is begging for a lie, my mouth chooses the truth. "*Palma wielkanocna*."

"What?"

"*Palma wielkanocna*," I repeat. "I guess the literal translation would be Easter palm tree."

He blinks at me.

I sigh. "It's ..." I don't know any English words to explain what it is. "Wait, I need to translate ..." I unlock my phone. "So many things."

He waits silently until I google what I need.

"Okay, so this is made from multiple willow branches, but you can also add other types of branches, like birch and currant, and then you tie the branches together to create a thick stick. You wrap it with colorful tissue paper and decorate it however you like, usually with dried flowers and ribbons. But you have to add pond grass at the top. Most people in Poland buy them already made, but that wasn't an option for us, so we had to make it from scratch with what we had. So it doesn't look exactly right."

I cringe at the poorly glued purple-and-orange tissue paper covering a third of the branches and the wobbly daisies attached in the middle. I need to show him an actual *palmę* online because our creation doesn't do justice to how beautiful they can be. But he

doesn't mind the lack of artistry. He moves closer, admiring it, which makes me keep talking.

"It's a blend of Polish paganism and Catholicism." I repeat what my grandma taught me in kindergarten. "In pagan religions, the willow signified rebirth and warded off evil spirits. I don't know how much you know about Christianity, but a week before his crucifixion, Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and people greeted him with palm tree branches. So, early Christians in Poland adopted the pagan willows as a symbol of those palms. And now, one week before Easter Sunday, people in Poland visit the church to bless them."

"This is beautiful." He walks around the palm.

It's not, but we did what we could. Frankly, we did more than ever before for this holiday. *Niedziela Palmowa*. How colorful the streets looked with people carrying *palmy wielkanocne*. You couldn't look away, whether you practiced the religion or not.

Heat builds behind my eyes. I push the memories away. "Let's go upstairs. I need to change, and we don't have all day."

This time, he follows. But his gaze darts around the house. The Kalabari tribe's wooden masks hang on the first part of the staircase wall. The second part displays Polish decorative plates with flowers, roosters, and a couple dancing *kujawiak*. In the corridor leading to my room, the left wall is decorated with black-and-white photos of my dad's childhood in Bakana and a massive world map with pins marking all the places where the family has settled. South Africa, Italy, the UK, Canada, to name a few. I wonder if they all feel the desperate need to belong to the place where they live.

The right wall has photos from my childhood in Poland. My mom teaching me to ice-skate. My dad and I learning to rollerblade. My grandma and I mushroom-picking in an autumn forest. Aang stops in front of a photo of a twelve-year-old me in a pink leotard, holding a gold gymnastics medal.

"Your house is so cool." He looks at me, beaming. "Let's see your room."

We enter, and a pinch of disappointment runs through his expression as he takes in the light-pink room. There's nothing Polish or Nigerian in this room. There are only English books on the

shelves. The walls are filled with cheerleading photos and posters of American films. *Bring It On*. *Mean Girls*. *Heathers*. The most interesting thing in this room has to be the New York shrine above my desk. He studies it while I grab pink cargo jeans and a white sweater with daisies that my grandma knitted for me off a shelf in the closet. If I'm going to a Polish restaurant, she might as well come with me.

When I exit the closet, he's not staring at the collage. He's fixated on the two flower bookmarks that have been sitting on my desk since the first day of junior year. He touches them gently. "I only gave you one flower." His voice wraps around me like silk.

"No. You gave me two."

He spins toward me. "I threw the other one into the garbage." His voice descends into a low timbre that vibrates through my chest. And I know that, whatever he asks me to do with that voice in the future, I'll do it. Immediately. Enthusiastically. He has so much power, and he hasn't realized it yet.

I drop the clothes on the floor. "I fished it out."

He's in front of me in a heartbeat. He grabs my cheeks and kisses me everywhere. My nose, my temples, my neck, muttering something. *Of you? Ove you?* I don't know. My fingers scratch his scalp, and he groans against my skin.

At some point, I start walking, or he starts walking, or we both start walking, until we end up on my bed. He's barely propped up on his elbow, every centimeter of his body solid against mine. All the cells in my body buzz, begging for more of him. His right hand slides up my leg until it hits the hem of my shorts.

Which, through the fogginess of my brain, makes me realize how little clothing I'm already wearing.

He must have the same thought, because his hand twitches on my hip and his lips freeze on my collarbone. And then he's moving away from me, propping himself up on his hand instead of his elbow. Not the smartest decision on his part, because now he can take in more of me.

His eyes slide down from my face to my chest. Red creeps down his neck, and he purses his lips. But his hand is still on my hip, and

his eyes are still focused on my braless chest. He looks like he's short-circuiting. Maybe internal heatstroke is a thing, and I could diagnose both of us with it.

I force out a breath. "You okay?"

"I ... um ... " His eyes rush between my face and my chest. Like he can't decide which is more crucial to look at. "I ... um ... hi?" He settles on my face.

I giggle. "Hi."

"Hi." A slow smile spreads on his face.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Yup, his brain is definitely not working correctly. Neither is mine, but someone with a driver's license has to get us to Boston. "Okay, let me change." I lift myself up.

"Wait."

My heart skips a beat.

"I just ..." His thumb is making circles on my hip. "I think ..."

My eyes soften. "It's okay. We don't have to do anything."

"No—I mean yes. Yes, we don't have to do anything, and I want us to go to Boston ... but ..." He sucks in a breath, his hand traveling up from my hip bone to play with the spaghetti strap of my top. My heart hammers against my chest.

"You're so pretty—no, not enough." He jerks his head before finding my eyes, his gaze sharpening. "You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. I can't believe I'm actually with you."

I love y—my eyes snap wide in alarm. What was the beginning of that thought?

He slides off me, and the sudden lack of pressure makes me cold. "I'll let you change." He walks to the door, but not quite in a straight line.

I dress with shaking hands, trying not to think about my last thought before he moved.

When we get to my driveway, once he hears the beep of the car unlocking, he nudges me out of the way. He grabs the handle of the driver's door.

"You know you can't drive, right?" I ask.

He doesn't respond. He opens the door fully and puts his hand out to me. *Oh.*

I stumble up to him on jelly legs and put my palm in his. I'm not quite sure how I'm standing, because I've lost feeling in my muscles, tendons, and bones. Everything's gone. He's consumed every corner of me and is now holding me up with his eyes.

"Thank you for driving us to Boston." His lips brush my knuckles. *I love you.*

My heart crushes in and explodes out, and if I open my mouth right now, the thought will escape, and he'll hear it. I get in the car without a word, and he closes the door behind me.

It's way too soon for love declarations. I mean, if I were Bryn, I would have said it the second he kissed me on Valentine's Day. If I were Monique, I wouldn't have gotten myself into a situation where I wanted to kiss someone on Valentine's Day. But I've never said *I love you* to a guy before. How long do you wait? When do you know it's actually love? What if he doesn't say it back?

I focus on the road.



The early spring sun makes the car wonderfully warm. I slap away Aang's hand when he tries to put the AC on. Air-conditioning makes you ill; everyone knows that. When we stop arguing about that, we start arguing about who will have a higher GPA at the end of the year, since we're tied now. Tied to three decimal places, and we agreed we won't go any further than that. We argue about which university is better, Columbia or Stanford. We argue about whether Brad and Remy have gone on a first date already and just haven't told us.

I haven't thought about the fall and the loss since he rang my doorbell. I haven't worried that I'm going to a Polish restaurant. I haven't thought of anything but him and me, arguing. It's so much fun.

As crazy as it sounds, it stays fun in the Polish restaurant. We sit down at a yellowish wooden table, him on a massive pine chair, me on a wooden bench pressed against a dark-red wall, covered in photos of famous Poles who have visited. Polish folk music—a mix of high-intensity violin, fiddle, and accordion—plays in the background while Aang takes his time attempting to pronounce every single thing on the menu. *Where are all the vowels? How is “barszcz” a word?* He tries to guess what the dishes are. *Rosół. Is it tomato soup?* Chicken soup. *Pierogi z kapustą i grzybami. Is it meat dumplings?* Dumplings with sour cabbage and mushrooms. *Golonka. Is it chicken?* I don’t actually know how to translate it, so I just say it’s meat. And as I anticipated, people do turn their heads, and they do stare, but that’s because I’m laughing so loud. I hope.

When our food comes, Aang points to his rye soup with sausage, bacon, and boiled egg, served in an edible bread bowl. “Again, what did I order?”

“Żurek.”

“What?”

“The first letter, ‘Ż’? It’s like the ‘S’ in *pleasure*. ‘U’ is like the ‘OO’ in *book*. Round your lips slightly, tongue pulled back.”

He repeats the first syllable after me.

“Okay, now roll your ‘R.’ ‘E’ like in *bed*. And then just ‘K.’”

“Zu-ek.”

“No, no. Zhoo-rek.”

“Zhu-ek.”

“No.” I grab his mouth and squeeze so it looks like a duck face. “Say it now.”

“Zhoo-ek.”

“That sounds better.” I pat his cheek. “You haven’t rolled your ‘R,’ but I don’t think your tongue is capable.” I snort and take a drink of water.

“I should start training my tongue, then.”

I choke on my water so hard it shoots out of my nose.

“What?” He looks at the water dripping from my nose. “How am I going to learn Polish if I can’t roll my ‘R’?”

I cough harder.

His eyes crinkle at the edges, the cogs whirring in his brain. “*Oh my god.*” He turns crimson. “That’s not ... that’s not what I meant.”

“Sure.” I dry my nose with a napkin. “Is this because I called you a prude earlier?”

“No! Really! That’s not what I meant!”

I give him a pointed look.

“Oh, what the hell!” He throws his hands up. “Yeah, I’ll literally do anything for you. Anything that ever crosses your mind. I’ll do it. Happily. And if I don’t know how, I’ll learn. Whether it’s speaking Polish, cooking your favorite meal, braiding your hair, or taking photos that might finally capture how beautiful you are. And yeah, having sex with you. I’ll learn to do it the way you’ll enjoy it. So stop annoying me.” He grabs his spoon, grumbling about how one day I won’t be calling him a prude anymore.

Who knew the feeling I get when flying could be recreated on the ground? And that he would be responsible for both of them? I don’t think I can last much longer without telling him I love him.

I’m grateful for the distraction when he tastes the first spoonful. His eyes widen. “This is so good.” More soup travels to his mouth, and it hits me how devastated I would have been if he didn’t enjoy Polish food.

Instead of *pierogów*, I decided to order *racuchy*²⁸ because I haven’t had them since I left Poland. When I bite into the first of four pancakes, I know it was the right call. The cook made the batter with shredded apples instead of sliced ones. *Racuchy* are pillowy and warm, and the restaurant didn’t skimp on the powdered sugar dusted on top. I moan quietly. Tastes like home.

“Would you like to tell me about Poland?” He asked me this question many times in our freshman year. It always felt like he was gathering evidence, ammunition, that neither of us belonged here. But he has the luxury of rejecting this place because he’s from here. Even if he doesn’t want to be.

Today, for the first time, he sounds like he wants to know about Poland without an agenda. So I tell him.

I don't even mind speaking English in here. I remember times when I would be on a bus in Poland, and I would pretend someone was calling me and speak loudly in Polish so people around me would know. *Listen to me! I am Polish. I speak the same language as you!* I would never, ever have made the mistake of speaking a different language anywhere near Polish people. But here? My mind's protests aren't quite as strong when he's smiling at me.

Every fact I share makes me lighter. I tell him about *Marzanna*, a straw doll my preschool would make every year that represented winter and death. And how on the first day of spring, we would drown her in the river. Or, in the case of my preschool, an outdoor swimming pool. "It's like ending winter and saying hello to spring. Most people don't do it anymore, especially in the cities, but my preschool loved it."

"Yeah, what's not to love about drowning a woman?" he mutters. "That's psychotic."

"Don't judge my culture!" I laugh. Good thing I didn't add that we set her on fire first.

I tell him how Polish was banned for 123 years of Austro-Prussian-Russian occupation, and how hard people worked to preserve the language until we regained our independence. I tell him how in Polish, you don't say *It makes sense*. You say *It has sense*.²⁹

"And you know, it makes more sense to say it has sense than makes sense!" I chuckle at my own joke. That laugh is the first time I've stopped talking in ... how many minutes? My throat is dry, and my food got cold. "How long was I talking for?"

Aang shrugs. "Like an hour?"

"*An hour?*" My eyes pop open. "Why didn't you stop the rambling?" I grab the fork to finish my *racuchy*.

"Because I love you."

My fork clatters on the plate. Aang goes rigid at the realization of what he just said. Out loud.

"You ... what?" I gape at him.

He loves me. He said it. *Say it back.* I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. He's staring at me. He's staring at me, and I'm not saying

anything, and he probably thinks ...

His phone pings, and he lunges for it. *No, wait, I was going to say it!*

As his phone lights up, I get a glimpse of the wallpaper. It's me with a scrunched nose, closed eyes, and green eyeshadow on. That's from Brad's party. When did he take it? When did he set it as his wallpaper? It wasn't on his screen yesterday.

His eyes scurry over the screen. "It's an email from Chinese school."

My heart stops. *The email.*

As he reads, his forehead creases more and more. Panic builds in my core. I should have told him about this earlier. I shouldn't have sent that message in the first place.

His head whips up from the phone. "You told Ms. Leung that Michael and the others were bullying me?"

My throat is arid, and the only thing I manage is a nod.

He stares at me for ten seconds. Without blinking. Then another ten. His knees hit the table when he stands up. He marches out of the restaurant.

"Aang, wait!" I run after him onto the sidewalk. I try to grab his hand, but he shakes me off.

"Do *not* touch me." Each word cuts like a cold knife.

"I'm sorry." I wrap my arms around myself. "I'm so sorry. I know you asked me not to do that, but ..." I take a tiny step toward him.

He jumps away from me. Something clicks in his expression. The color leaves his face, and he stumbles even further back. "Is this why you asked about Chinese school? To find out if they got the email? You didn't actually care about what I was telling you?"

"No, no." I shake my head frantically. "I mean, at the beginning, yes, I asked because of the email, but then I kept asking because you seemed happy, and please believe me, I didn't write anything that bad in the email—"

"It's not about the fucking email!" His voice cracks. "You have everything I'll never have! You speak the language! Your house is your heritage! You know the history and the customs, not because you looked them up but because you've lived them!" He jabs a finger at his own chest. "But me? I have nothing to show for my

culture but my fucking face. Even my name. I'm named after an American cartoon. Because that's who I am. A cartoonish version of Hong Kong. But you ...” He points to me. “You throw away your home like it's nothing. I call you by your *actual* name, and you act like I punched you. Why do you hate your own identity?”

The accusation cuts straight to the bone. Shame curdles my stomach now that someone has finally said it out loud. For a moment, I can't breathe. But then fury comes, white-hot and blinding.

“You don't know what it was like! In Poland, when I introduced myself as Józefina? People thought I was lying. Clearly, the Black girl can't have a Polish name. And Ibifubara? That was a punchline to them. My names—a lie and a joke.” Tears blur my vision. “And you speak of home?” I take a step toward him, but this time his feet are cemented to the ground. “My home rejected me every time I left my house. Shouting at me to go back to where I came from, taking photos of me on the street like I was an exotic animal. Seeing my existence as a threat to what it means to be Polish. Can you imagine? Loving something that doesn't love you back? That will *never* love you back?”

“Yes, I can.” He swallows hard. “But I still try. Not only do you run from your culture, but you sent that email to drag me away from mine. To drag me from what *I* love.”

“Oh, please.” I roll my eyes. “You don't love Hong Kong. You don't love Chinese culture. If you did, you wouldn't tear down Chinese Americans, snicker at Asian fusion, or cling to some idea of Asian purity. You know what that makes you closer to?” I look him dead in the eye. “An American.”

His face contorts. “Like what you're trying so hard to be?” He steps into my space, eyes cold. “I'll let you in on a secret. You'll never be an American. They'll make sure you're not.”

I clench my jaw. “Good luck going to Hong Kong. *To home*. They'll take one look at you and call you a foreigner.”

“Won't be anything new.” He turns around and starts walking away. “I'm taking the bus.”

“The bus?” My stomach drops. “You’ll get home in the middle of the night.”

“Better than being stuck in the car with you.”

“But ... no, come with me. Please.”

He stills, and a wave of relief almost knocks me off my feet when he turns and walks back to me. It’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.

He reaches into his pocket, takes out his wallet, and puts a hundred-dollar bill in my hand. “For the food.” He disappears around the corner.

I start to run after him, but the restaurant door creaks. The waitress peeks her head through. “*Przepraszam? Musi pani zapłacić.*”³⁰

I go back into the restaurant to pay. The woman points to the bill in my hand, but I clutch it to my chest. “No. Not with this.” I take out my card instead.

In the car, it takes me two hours to stop crying and calm down enough to drive back.

²⁸Polish apple pancakes

²⁹To ma sens.

³⁰Excuse me? You have to pay, Miss.

Chapter 31

dripping water can penetrate the stone

Aang

The next day, I'm pacing the corridor of the church, waiting for Ms. Leung to invite me into the classroom. I'm going to say I have no idea who sent the email, that I love being here, and no one ever said a bad thing to me. I should say it in Cantonese as well. How do I say *love*? Shit. I stop pacing and rub my temples. Oi,³¹ but what tone? No, I should say *like*—*hóu jūng yi*.³²

"Aang?" Ms. Leung opens the door. "Please come in."

The second I sit down, she starts talking. "I'm very sorry about your experience here. I've already talked to Michael, and I'll talk to the other kids later. It's unacceptable and ..."

I stop listening to her. A piece of paper with my name on it lies on her desk. My exam. I scored twenty points.

Out of a hundred.

"I failed the exam."

Ms. Leung looks down and winces. She puts a hand over the paper. "We can talk about that later, but for now—"

"I failed the exam," I repeat.

Ms. Leung shakes her head. "You couldn't fail this test. It was constructive feedback."

"I studied. Every day."

She turns the exam paper upside down, but the twenty is burned into my corneas.

I press my lips together and open my backpack, taking out the stack of notebooks, any loose pieces of paper I practiced on, the Hong Kong history books, and the Buddhist literature. I put it all on

her desk. “I’ve been learning ... I mean ... I’ve been studying to ...” My hands still. Now that I’m trying to say it out loud ... studying to do what, exactly? Be from Hong Kong?

“Aang ...” My teacher blinks at the mess on her desk. “Have you considered that your motivations are making it hard for you to learn? You seem to think that you have to be here, instead of wanting to be here. Maybe this isn’t the place for you?”

My shoulders slump. *If this isn’t the place, then there’s nothing out there for me.* I grab the exam paper and slide all the books into my arms, not bothering to put them into the backpack.

My teacher’s eyes widen. “Wait, Aang, that wasn’t—”

“Joi gin,”³³ I say quietly. The irony of telling her *See you again* is not lost on me, but I don’t know the words for *This is the last time we’re seeing each other, right?*

I rush through the corridors and wrench open the door of the church.

And walk straight into someone.

Everything I’m holding—the papers, notebooks, books—goes flying. And because this day can get worse, the person standing in front of me is Michael.

“Terrific.” I grit my teeth and squat down to gather everything. And because this day can get even more miserable, he crouches down and helps me. He picks up notebooks and books, reading the titles, his eyes flicking between them and me.

“What the fuck do you want?” I hiss.

He tightens his grip around a notebook but doesn’t say anything. He flips through the notebook, filled with only two characters. and . He takes in the constant repetition of *Hong Kong*.

He mouths, *Wow*. He picks up another notebook, this one with fifty pages of ³⁴ .

His face shifts like he just found out I have a terminal disease and he has to be nice to me now. “You know ... I went to Hong Kong earlier this year. For the first time.”

Great. He gets to speak Cantonese. He doesn’t need to practice the characters constantly so they don’t all immediately blend into

one. And on top of that, he gets to go to Hong Kong. The papers tear where my nails dig into them, and I speed up the gathering to get away from him before he starts bragging about how amazing Hong Kong was for him.

"I spoke the language and still spent weeks feeling like a tourist in what was supposed to be my homeland. They pegged me as an American straightaway. It was brutal." He sighs and hands me the notebook. "Everyone in the class feels not-really Asian. And I guess it's not a good enough reason, but excluding you made us feel better about our identities. Not for long. But for long enough that we kept doing it. I'm ... I'm sorry for that. But you have to chill with your lectures about *Real Chinese Culture* because it makes it very hard to be civil toward you."

My phone lights up. Michael stares at the photo of JJ as the screensaver. "Man, your girlfriend is way too hot for you."

"She's not—" I cut myself off. Is she my girlfriend? Is it even worth pondering after yesterday? Probably not.

But the idea of having to change my wallpaper, of not being able to taste the sugar on her tongue when we kiss ... of ... of having to stop thinking of myself as hers makes me queasy, no matter how mad I still am.

Michael eyes me. "She better be your girlfriend. Otherwise, your wallpaper is even more psycho behavior than all of this." He picks up the last piece of paper. My exam sheet. He crumples it up in his hand before handing it to me. "By the way, I lied at the party. You pronounced my name correctly. Just use the family name as well next time."

He stands up and wipes his hands on his jeans. "Well, if your girlfriend ever breaks up with you, give her my number. Tell her I'm willing to overlook that she's clearly the one who snitched on me." He walks away.

I push myself off the ground. I throw the exam paper into the garbage on my way out of the parking lot. And when I sit at the bus stop for an hour, waiting for the sorry excuse for public transportation that we have here, for the first time ever, the Hong

Kong-shaped wound in my heart bleeds not only for me, but for all of us.



When I walk into the house and see the door to my mom's study half-open, I don't tiptoe anymore. I push the door in. Mom startles at her desk.

I start talking before I chicken out. "Every day, I mourn the loss of a culture I never got to experience. How can I miss something I've never had? It's agony."

Mom doesn't answer, so I step into the room. "I'm never going to give up." I point to my grandma's altar. "I need this to be *mine*. So please, help me."

She looks between the altar and me. Her face shifts from surprise to an expression I've only ever seen once, when private equity bought the nursing home she works at.

Pure anger.

"You need this to be *yours*? You want *my* help?" Her hands tighten on the desk, and my blood freezes. "And what would be the point?" She pushes off the chair. "So you can scoff at our Chinese New Year traditions? How exactly do I help you when your own family isn't good enough for you?"

The room tilts, everything growing slow and heavy. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Her anger evaporates as quickly as it appeared, and her eyes widen in regret.

I spin on my heel and stumble up to my room. The sun reflects off the cheerleading medals on the board, blinding me. I rush to the desk and tear them down. I weigh the medals in my hand as Bruce Lee stares at me.

"Fuck this!" I scream and fling them across the room. They hit the poster, knocking it off the wall.

Remy's new frame shatters, and the glass goes everywhere.

Mom runs up the stairs and shoves the door open. "Are you okay?" She gasps as she takes in the shattered glass and the medals.

“ ,”³⁵ she says quietly.

Her first thought is in Cantonese. Mine never will be. “How is this possible?” I shout. “How is it possible that you speak Cantonese and I can’t? You’re telling me that my family isn’t good enough for me, but clearly, *your* mother thought that you were worthy of learning how to speak, but I—” I hiccup.

Fantastic. Exactly what I need when trying to get a rant out.

“Never mind.” I slide down the wall next to the desk. “Can you close the door on your way out?” I hiccup again.

She doesn’t leave. Instead, she grabs my garbage can. I stay where I am as she collects the larger pieces of glass. After putting the eighth one in the can, without looking at me, she says, “My mom and I, we lived in a neighborhood of only other Cantonese speakers. I didn’t learn how to speak English properly until I got to school. The first year was not fun, believe me on that.” She starts picking up the smaller pieces. “I wanted to teach you. But I didn’t realize how much effort it takes to teach a language when no one around you speaks it. How frustrating it is to try to get a small child to talk in Chinese when everything is in English. It was hard, and it was lonely.”

My throat is tight, but the words get out either way. “You’re acting like there aren’t two of you in this house who can speak Cantonese.”

Mom shakes her head. “Your dad speaks like a seven-year-old, and it pains him every time he opens his mouth. He wasn’t going to help. So, I convinced myself that it was fine, that you wouldn’t know what you were missing.”

“You were wrong.”

“I know. I took the easy way out. And when you decided to learn on your own, instead of joy, I felt shame. Because you should have already known it, because it was my job to teach you, and I screwed it up. And every time you mentioned your school or your homework, it was simpler to run away from the shame than sit in it.” She gives up on the smallest shards of glass.

I hold my breath, hoping the lack of oxygen will make my brain stop producing the tears in my eyes before they run down my cheeks.

“And it became easier and easier to run away the more critical you became of how we act and what we do,” she says. “You started putting Hong Kong on a pedestal as some holy land that neither your dad nor I should have left when it wasn’t our choice to begin with. But that didn’t mean that it was right for me to choose my own comfort over yours. I’m sorry.” She sniffs and rubs her eyes. “Ugh, tears.” She switches her attention to my bookcase.

My lungs are burning, begging me to take a breath, but the physical pain is better than whatever emotional pain is going to flood my brain the second it gets some air.

With shaky hands, she picks up a book about Buddhism. She goes through the annotated pages, her eyebrows rising higher with every scribble her gaze lands on. “This is ... wow.” She closes the book. “Let’s go. No arguing.”

She doesn’t use her serious tone often. Directed at me, it’s so surprising I forget not to breathe.



We go down to her study, Mom still clutching the Buddhism book. She hands me the bowl of water from my grandmother’s shrine.

“Go, pour fresh water in.”

When I come back from the kitchen, we bow three times. Mom adjusts the horse and the cigarettes and looks at me expectantly.

I make no comments about the lack of incense, and she smiles.

“In Hong Kong, not liking the incense smell would have been a weird quirk,” she says. “But here, it’s suddenly a sign that I’m not Chinese enough.” She arches her eyebrow at me, and my gaze falls to the floor. “As soon as you step out of Hong Kong, you’ll always be held to a higher standard, and yet at the same time, you’ll never be Chinese enough. You’ll never win.”

She turns my Buddhism book over in her hands. She looks at her mother's photo and mutters something in Cantonese with her head bent. She then hands the book to me. "You can learn the language, the food, the history, the religions. But you're already starting whole. Learning can only make you more. Don't think not knowing makes you less. Don't think it makes *anyone* less."

JJ's words echo in my head, and I turn away from Mom. I brush the daffodil pollen off the altar with one hand, the other squeezing the book. "I just wanted somewhere to belong." My voice catches.

"But you do belong," Mom says. "You're Chinese American. I'm Chinese American. It's a culture created for us by us. It's not worse than what they do in Hong Kong, and it's not better. It's just different. It's proof that we made this place our home, along with millions of people who look like us, no matter how hard they tried to make us leave."

I clutch the book to my chest.

It doesn't feel enough.

But what did I achieve by searching for something better? I made Michael and others hate me when I could have had Chinese American friends. I poked my parents' wounds that were already hurting. I left JJ in Boston, forcing her to drive two hours back alone and upset. If something had happened to her, that would have been on me.

My blood congeals with guilt and shame. It will take a long time to unclog it.

But I can start now.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'll ... I'll try working on accepting this."

"Take your time." She grins. "I'm proud of you. All of you. Look at how much you've achieved this year! You joined the cheerleading team, you won fourth place in a national competition, you captained your Mathletes team to Nationals. And you took your first shot of vodka!"

My eyebrows shoot up. "How did you—"

"Remy told me, and don't interrupt me. You'd think *don't interrupt your elders* would have shown up as the first rule when you googled how to be Asian 101."

I drop the book and hide my face in my hands, groaning.

“Too soon?” She laughs. “By the way, I fished your pot out of the trash and cleaned it. The weather is too warm for claypot rice, but we could still make it. If you’re willing to defy the great Hong Kong tradition you’ve read about?” She extends her hand to me.

I grab it and let her pull me to the kitchen.



The rice soaks while we prepare the rest of the ingredients. Mom’s cutting up chorizo because we couldn’t find *laahp chéung*³⁶ anywhere. I’m on soy sauce duty, smashing garlic and peeling ginger.

Mom puts on the TV in the background. I don’t know if she does it on purpose, but it’s a rerun of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

A cartoonish version of an Asian.

I smash the garlic too hard, and half of it catapults off the counter.

My mom’s knife hovers above the last piece of chorizo. “You know that it was your grandma who proposed we call you Aang?”

I freeze midway through picking the food off the floor. “It was?”

“Yeah.” Mom pushes the chorizo into a bowl and starts cutting the mushrooms. The knife hits the cutting board rhythmically.

“When I started school, I kept using my Chinese name. My mom loved it. She went to a feng shui master to get it chosen. . It means *wise phoenix*.” She looks at me. “I’m sure you know what a phoenix symbolizes?”

“It’s associated with good luck and good fortune. It’s a symbol of grace, femininity, and the Chinese empress.”

“That’s exactly right.”

A warm feeling spreads through me. It doesn’t even matter that I quoted this from Wikipedia. I drop the ingredients into the pot with the soy sauce and turn on the burner.

“Either way, Mom said that I’d choose my English name when I started school. But where we lived, everyone used my Chinese name. So I didn’t see a point in changing it. That was my mistake.

The White kids and teachers kept mispronouncing it. And something would die inside me every time they butchered it. So I chose the simplest, the most basic English name, and I made it easier for them. But their faces were always like, *Well ... Jane is not your real name, is it?*” She cuts the mushrooms more aggressively. “And they were right. It’s not my name. But I’m not gonna give them my name. They don’t have the right to destroy how beautiful my name sounds.”

She points the knife at the TV. “Your grandma was watching this show on the hospital TV when you were born. She thought that *Aang* had something special about it. And I agreed. It was made up by Americans, but from Chinese characters.” She throws the cut-up mushrooms into a bowl. “We thought you’d have your cake and eat it too.”

It has to be enough.

I lower the heat on the burner and come up to her. I hug her so hard, I’m scared I’m about to break her ribs. She squeezes me even tighter.

The door opens, and my dad walks in, back from his board game club. His gaze locks on the pot first, then sweeps across the chopped ingredients. His eyes become distant, like he’s seeing something beyond what’s actually there. He turns around and leaves the kitchen.

My shoulders sag, and I lean more into Mom. She brushes my hair away from my face. “He misses talking to you.”

I frown. “But we do talk.”

“No, you don’t. Besides exchanging niceties, you haven’t talked to your dad for a long time. And *he’s* tried. You, on the other hand ...”

... fixated on the one thing he couldn’t give me, ignoring everything else. His seven years in Hong Kong were the most valuable thing he could offer me.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Mom, can you finish the soy sauce? I need to do something.”

Her face breaks into a beam, and she gives me a thumbs-up. “I’ll handle it.”

I leave the kitchen and walk through the corridor to their bedroom. I knock on the door. “Dad? Can I talk to you?”

“Just give me a second.” His voice is muffled. When he opens the door, he’s trying to stash a tissue in his back pocket.

Oh god, I’ve made the three people closest to me cry in two days. It’ll be four when I tell Remy I broke his frame.

I take a step toward Dad. “I’m ... I’m so sorry. I’ve been behaving like a dick—I mean, really badly—for so ... so long. We can cook something else if you want to. Or you can disown me. That works too.”

His sniff turns into an amalgamation of a chuckle and a cough. “You’re so dramatic. No wonder you do well in cheerleading. I love you.” He brings me in for a hug. *When did I get taller than him?*

Still hugging me, he speaks quickly, as if he wants to get the words out as fast as possible. “Being adopted out of Hong Kong wasn’t easy. The family wanted an Asian child, but they didn’t want an *Asian* child. And I’m working on it, but it hurts, and it’ll never be a finished project, and it’s something that I need to do on my own, okay?”

I wonder why they went to such lengths to get a child from a culture they were ultimately uninterested in engaging with. I guess my dad has been asking himself this question for most of his life. I hug him tighter and nod.

He lets me go. “Now, let’s not leave your mother cooking on her own for too long. She tends to get distracted.”

We go to the kitchen together, where an acrid burnt smell assaults my nostrils. My mom scrambles off the barstool. “Oh, Aang, Justin, fancy seeing you here!” She lowers the volume on the TV. “Let me wash the rice!”

She watched one thing, and it was most definitely not the soy sauce. I sigh, get a fresh pot, and start again. My dad settles into the newly vacated chair and watches me. If this is the most he can do, I need to make peace with that. On the TV screen, a cartoon man shouts about the destruction of his cabbages. I chuckle. One day, I should actually watch the show.

I cut all the ingredients before mixing the ginger, garlic, and sugar into the soy sauce on the stove. The savory-sweet-smelling vapor spreads around the kitchen. A faint smile appears on my dad's face.

My mom notices the smile as well. She turns to me, her hand in the bowl of wet rice, circling it around. "How about I teach you some Cantonese?"

I stop mixing the sauce. "Really?"

"Yeah. Repeat after me. ."

My dad snickers.

I frown. "What does it mean?"

"I'll tell you after you repeat after me."

"*Díu néih lóuh móu,*" I say slowly. I cringe.

"Don't make that face. Your tones are fine. You're saying exactly what you're supposed to."

"But it doesn't sound right." I switch off the burner when the soy sauce bubbles too much. I stir, watching the ingredients swirl.

Mom tilts the bowl, draining the water into the sink. "What do you mean? You're just speaking with an American accent. It sounds exactly like it should, coming from you."

My knee-jerk reaction is to argue that I shouldn't sound like that. But what is the alternative? Just never say anything? I repeat it again, the sounds not coming out perfectly, but more easily. "So, what does it mean?"

"Fuck your mother."

I drop the mixing spoon on the ground, and the sauce splatters on the white floor. "Mom!" I stare at her, wide-eyed, horrified, while my dad laughs out loud.

"What?" She grabs the spoon from the floor and cleans it. "If you can't swear in Cantonese, you can't talk in Cantonese. Bet your teacher didn't teach you that." She takes over my role, mixing the soy sauce.

"No, she most definitely didn't!" I cover my face, but the laugh that erupts from my mom makes me laugh too. My dad cackles even louder. Eventually, I have to sit on the barstool next to my dad's, clutching my stomach. My parents ... are definitely their own thing.

Next to Dad, my phone pings. He doesn't read the notification but smiles at the wallpaper. "Would you like to invite JJ for the meal?"

"No," I say quickly.

Both of them raise their eyebrows at me.

"I mean ... we're ... I don't know if we're broken up or not—"

"Absolutely not!" Mom drops the spoon into the pot and waves a kitchen towel around. "Whatever happened, apologize! You're not depriving me of my daughter-in-law!"

"Daughter-in-law?" I blink at her. "We're not married. And we're seventeen."

"You won't be seventeen forever. It's time to think about bringing a nice girl home. Especially one who's a future doctor with good earlobes."

"Mom ..." I shake my head. "I know our whole talk was about not defining identities, but you've never sounded more Chinese than in this moment."

She throws the towel at me. My dad swats it away before it hits me. "Ignore your mother. She gets intense about matchmaking." He smiles gently at her before turning to me. "Do you want to tell us what happened?"

"She ... involved herself in something that I asked her not to get involved in. And that led to some negative consequences." I look around our kitchen, at my mom mixing the soy sauce and my dad, here with us. JJ caused some positive consequences as well.

"Please be more vague." Mom scoffs. "Teenagers."

"He said what he needed to say." My dad pats me on the shoulder. His gaze falls onto my T-shirt, on the Chinese characters printed across the chest. ³⁷

"Dripping water can penetrate a stone," he says. "A classic."

I've always believed the proverb. That over time, with enough effort and persistence, I could overcome the seemingly impossible obstacle of not being born and raised in Hong Kong.

"People always interpret it as being about hard work," Dad says. "That they're the dripping water, doing the impossible. But

sometimes we are the stone, getting slowly destroyed by forces we can't control. Or sometimes we sit next to the stone and are slowly driven crazy by the constant noise."

My mom puts the pot of soy sauce in front of my dad. He inhales the scent. "And from time to time, what we need is for someone to make the dripping quiet down." He meets Mom's eyes, and so much emotion passes between them that I have to look away.

Someone has looked at me that way before. JJ, in the car when we shared the seat, and the constant dripping of not being enough did quiet down. In the girls' bathroom, after we lost Mathletes Nationals. In the Polish restaurant, right before I got the email and everything came crashing down.

Being with her has been the most peaceful I've ever felt, even before we got together. Being her friend and teammate, having a crush, and falling in love ... It's the most authentic thing I've ever done. Just a guy in love with a girl.

It is ... liberating.

I check my watch. Two p.m. Doable, and both of my parents like driving. "Would you like to go a road trip to Philadelphia? Preferably today?"

My parents exchange a look.

"Why Philadelphia?" my dad asks.

"I have to buy a really specific suit." I point to my mom. "It's for your daughter-in-law."

She squeals. "Great American road trip! Here we come!"

We finish cooking. My parents comment that chorizo makes the rice taste good.

"But not better or worse. Just different," I add.

We're all lying. It tastes like shit because, clearly, claypot rice is ridiculously hard to make, and none of us knew what we were doing, even with the recipe. I propose we grab Panda Express on the way to Philly.

We get into the car and drive. About three hours one way. Plenty of time for them to teach me more swear words, but I generously let my mom spend thirty minutes doing a sales pitch for gap years.

Apparently, they're not only for mentally unstable White kids anymore.

And the hole in my heart, in the shape of Hong Kong, starts mending. It'll take a long time to heal. And there's always going to be a scar that hurts. But it won't be a wound.

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)ngóh nêh mihng

[35](#)āiya (There's no direct translation. It's generally used to indicate surprise, frustration, exasperation.)

[36](#)

[37](#)séui dihk sehk chyūn

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Chapter 32

bread cut with a stranger's knife is seldom tasty

JJ

If I said my mom knocking on my door at seven a.m. on a Sunday woke me up, I'd be lying, because I never fell asleep. Instead, I sobbed and screamed into my pillow, recalling yesterday's argument with Aang.

However, what she does achieve is making me groan and slither out of my bed onto the floor. I spend some more time sobbing and screaming into the rug before getting up.

I grab the clothes Mom insisted I wear today: a black skirt and her old white shirt embroidered with flowers. *Perfect for Sunday church!* She would never have made me go to church in Poland. She didn't even go herself. But being here has made her desperate to do Polish things, and celebrating Catholic holidays is clearly one of them.

In church, I put all my effort into not falling asleep. I sneak peeks at Mom, but even the priest's monotone voice can't stop her from enjoying the mass. When *ksiądz* comes over with holy water to bless our wonky palm, I can't stop thinking about how happy I was telling Aang about all of this. I blink the tears away before my parents spot them.

After the service, I sit on the bench outside, waiting for Dad to grab the car, while Mom's standing on the steps of the white church, chatting with strangers in Polish. I drum my fingers against the wood.

I could join the conversation. But what's the point? They'd first assume I can't speak Polish. Then would come the little tests. *Where in Poland? How long?* And somehow, even after I pass their little pop

quiz, they'd still launch into patronizing explanations of what they're talking about. Ethnic gatekeeping at its finest. What's the point of joining them if it's going to hurt?

Because sitting on this bench hurts more.

I dig my nails into my thighs. There's no winning.

"It's you."

I look up. A blond girl is standing in front of me. Even without the cheerleading makeup on, I recognize her. "You're the one from the State competition." The one who was flirting with Aang.

"I'm Kaycee."

"Okay, sure ... What are you doing here?"

She points toward the lawn, where an elderly couple is laughing with a younger copy-paste version of Kaycee. "Grandad claims you can only do Palm Sunday in this church. They don't bless the palms as well anywhere else."

"I didn't mean at church—wait. You're Polish?"

She shakes her head. "No, my grandparents emigrated. But we still do all the stuff. My last name is Vishnevsky." She pronounces *Wiśniewski* wrong. Without the soft *v*, *nyev*, and *skee*. Also, since she's a girl, it should be *Wiśniewska*.

I'm about to correct her, but an image of Aang flashes in my head. His face, when he struggled to pronounce the dishes during Chinese New Year.

I let go of her abysmal pronunciation and just say, "I see."

"Can I sit here?" She points to the bench.

I scooch over.

Laughter erupts from the group in front of the church. Kaycee balls her hands into fists.

"You okay?" I ask.

"They're talking about the latest Polish election. I tried to join in, because I followed the news with my grandpa, but they didn't take my Polish seriously."

My mouth falls open. "You speak Polish? *You*?"

Immediately, my throat scorches with acid.

My tone. People used the same one with me when they didn't believe *I* spoke Polish. And I've just done it to someone else. Bile

rises in my throat. It's so easy for the judgment to escape, so easy to doubt someone's claim to an identity ... Oh god, I think I'm about to throw up in front of her.

Kaycee shrinks. "Not really—I mean technically, yeah, but everyone always tells me I have a horrible accent. I sound so American."

This is bizarre. Kaycee, with her long blond hair and light blue eyes, is an Eastern European standard come to life. But she sounds different, so she's out. I could not sound more Polish, but I don't look it, so I'm out. Who gets to claim this stupid identity?

"So ..." Kaycee tilts her head. "What are *you* doing here? I've never seen you around before."

"My mom wanted to come this year. She's Polish."

Why do you hate your own identity?

I hesitate, but the words fight their way to the front of my tongue. "I'm also Polish. Born and raised."

She slaps her hands on her thighs so hard, I jump up. "I knew I wasn't crazy! There was a tinge of how my grandparents sound in your voice. But I was like, no way, this girl has to be American."

She might as well have punched me in the stomach.

This should make me ecstatic. But the pain spreads from my core to every cell in my body. I pull on my curls. If that's what I wanted to hear, but now it isn't, then what do I actually want to hear?

I pull harder, my hair follicles protesting. I don't know what I want. I don't know. I don't know. Strands of my hair are leaving my scalp, flowing away in the wind as I rock back and forth. I don't know. I don't know what I want. I don't know what to do.

"Would you want to talk in Polish?" Kaycee asks quietly. "It would be nice to practice with someone my age. Since we're here."

I let go of my curls. Yeah, I can do that.

She was right. She has a shocking American accent. But I can understand her, and that's all that should matter. I speak more slowly on the long words. She sometimes uses an English word when she can't think of a Polish one. We talk about cheerleading, because we don't have any other shared topics of conversation. She wants to go to the University of Alabama, specifically for their

cheerleading program, but it's insanely competitive. I tell her that my friend's mom used to be an Alabama cheerleader, and I can put them in touch.

"Really? You'd do that for me?"

"Obviously. Less competition for cheerleading teams on the East Coast." I say *East Coast* in English. It's faster.

Kaycee laughs. "Girl, you're so right. But don't think for a moment that will stop me from trash-talking you next year." She winks. "And it won't stop me from flirting with your backspot."

My hands tighten on the bench.

She arches an eyebrow. "Territorial flyer thing or just a boyfriend thing?"

"No, he—I don't actually know. We've kissed, we've been on dates, and I like him so much, but I did something stupid, and he said awful things, and then I responded with something horrific ..."

Kaycee's eyes light up. "Start from the beginning, I beg you."

"Okay, so—" I stop myself. She looks way too eager to hear about my problems. "How do I know you won't use it against me?"

She looks around. "Because we're in the house of God?" Her lips twitch.

I snicker, and she bursts out laughing. "I couldn't even pretend for a minute. No, clearly if I use it against you, I won't get my Alabama contact."

"That's true."

She motions with her hand. "Go on, then."

I start with the first day of high school, go through Women's Day, the sophomore year argument, the Valentine's Day kiss, and finish with relaying yesterday's Boston trip.

"Okay, girl, I understood about fifty percent of what you said because you were speaking real fast and my Polish is not *that* good." She flicks her hair off her shoulder. "But in my opinion, you've made life too hard for yourself with all the thinking."

"Huh?" I stare at her. "That's all you have to say?"

She shrugs. "I'm not your therapist."

A shadow looms over us. "Kaycee? Is this your girlfriend?" An elderly woman dressed in a pastel-pink suit with a flower brooch

stands behind us. She has short grey hair and glasses. For a second, I'm convinced my grandmother is standing in front of me, and I almost jump up to hug her. Until Kaycee reminds me that this is not my grandmother.

"*Babcia!* You need to stop asking that about every girl in my proximity." Kaycee buries her face in her hands. "She's just a fellow cheerleader. Also Polish. This is ... actually, I don't know your name."

"Józefina." My grandma would have a stroke if she heard me call myself JJ. For some reason, I'm convinced this woman would have one too. I extend my hand for a handshake.

She raises her eyebrows. "Józefina?"

I nod, my insides bracing for a hit.

The woman laughs and shakes my hand. "Poor thing," she says in Polish and looks at her confused granddaughter. "Józefina is an old person's name. It's as if your mother named you Getrude. Let me guess, named after your grandmother?"

My insides warm. "Yeah, named after my grandmother." *Grandmothers.* "The second part of my name is actually Ibifubura. After my Nigerian grandmother. So Józefina-Ibifubara." And since we're already here, might as well add everything up. "Józefina-Ibifubara Wyróżnicka-Johnson."

"A powerful name." Kaycee's grandmother pats me on the shoulder. My chest tightens. My grandma used to say that.

She turns to Kaycee. "We should go. Your grandad needs a toilet."

"Give me one more minute." When her grandmother walks away, Kaycee leans over. "Listen, Józefina."

"Józefina-Ibifubara."

"Józefina-Ibifubara," she repeats. "Yes, you made life harder for yourself. Because that guy? Obsessed with you. At the September football game, I was shouting at him, basically doing cartwheels to get his attention, and he didn't even notice. His eyes were following you everywhere like he was your bodyguard. At State? When you showed up while I was talking to him? He lit up like a Christmas tree. It was nauseating." She rolls her eyes. "Just date a hot guy who's clearly into you and let go of the philosophical crisis."

I chuckle. “Sounds pretty simple.”

“It is.” She eyes me. “But you can’t stop me from flirting with him. He has too much of that hot nerd energy thing going on.” She waves and walks away.

“Thanks, Kaycee!” I shout after her. “But I’ll beat you up if you go near him!”

“I just know he’ll find that so fucking hot!”



On our way home, we drop Mom off at the hospital. There was a car accident on the highway, and they need her to conduct emergency operations. At least she got to go to church.

You’d think I’d get sad, but that’s the reality of our lives. I’m proud of my parents. They raised me as best they could while helping others. And I want to dedicate myself exactly the way they do. I wonder if whoever I end up with will understand that.

Once home, I take out the dusty *Felix, Net, i Nika* book collection from my closet. I trace my finger over the *Biblioteka Józefiny-Ibifubary*³⁸ stamp my grandma gave me for my seventh birthday, which graces the front page of every book I own. Besides the ones I bought in the US, naturally.

I go to my closet, take out a pink wooden box, and dump everything out of it. I grab a small black container that falls out. The stamp is there, but the ink has dried up. I run to the car. Fifteen minutes later, I’m back from the shop with fresh ink. I go through all my new books—mainly textbooks on English and American history—and I stamp. And I stamp. And I stamp. *Biblioteka Józefiny-Ibifubary*. I push most of the textbooks to the back of the bookcase and put the eighteen-book *Felix* collection at the front.

And then I call my grandmother.

She answers immediately, her neon-pink sweater filling the frame. “Józia! So happy to hear from you!” she says in Polish.

I open my mouth to answer, but *Babcia*’s background gets my attention. Like muscle memory, the smell of antiseptic hits my nose.

I would recognize those cyan walls anywhere. I spent too much of my childhood playing in those hallways while my parents were working. “Why are you in the hospital?”

“I’m just having a check-up.”

“For what?”

“A broken leg?”

“*You broke your leg?*” My stomach drops. “When? How?”

“I fell down the stairs. Like two months ago?”

“*Two months ago?* Why didn’t you say anything? I’m going to book the summer flights; you need help. Have you organized physiotherapy? I’ll do that when I’m back.”

“And ... that’s exactly why I told your mother not to say anything.”

“What?” I sit on the floor. “Why?”

“I wanted you to come back to Poland because you wanted to be back here. Not because you felt obliged to.”

“*Babcia ...*” I choke out.

“Listen, I actually have to go. I got to the hospital two hours ago, and it’s *finally* my turn for the check-up. But I’ll call you later, okay?”

Don’t go. “Okay.”

“*Kocham cię, Józia.* And you don’t have to come back just for me, you know?” She hangs up before I can tell her I love her too.

I start wailing.

I’m terrified. I’m terrified of going back to Poland. When they used to tell me to go back where I came from, the answer to that was easy. I never came from anywhere else. But now? After three years in America, there’ll be a sliver of truth in their words that makes my stomach churn.

My teeth are chattering, and I can’t control the shaking of my hands to the point that my phone falls out of my grip.

My dad knocks on my door. “Ibi, you okay?” he asks in Polish.

I open the door. “No,” I say through sobs.

His brow knits together hard. “What evil has befallen this household?” He switches to English.

When emotions overwhelm him, my dad transforms into an English wordsmith. *Nigerians walked so Shakespeare could run*, he likes

to say. Once, he lost a ten-dollar bill in a park and spent the entire day muttering that his village people had finally located him.

He surveys my puffy eyes. "Is it the boy? Has he become an enemy we have to slay?"

I'm so surprised I stop crying. "How do you know about the boy?" I ask in Polish.

Dad rolls his eyes and switches from English to Polish. "Your mother and I are busy, not stupid. You're aware you're in trouble, right? You know what the dating rules are."

I groan. They didn't notice when I was dating Brad, so I didn't think it'd be obvious this time around.

"He must make an appearance in this household soon. We'll make him a Polish–Nigerian feast. Unless we have to finish his life first."

"There's no need to kill him." I'd be the dead one if my parents found out he's already been over. In my bed. When they weren't here. *Abort the thoughts. Abort before Dad guesses them from your facial expression.* I dry my cheeks with the back of my hand. "The food? He'd love that."

"Excellent. A point in his favor already. He needs only three million more." He takes in the state of my room. "So if it's not the boy, then what's wrong?"

I study his green Nigerian football shirt and the orange headscarf he wears around the house when his bald head gets cold. On impulse, I ask, "Why haven't you gone back to Nigeria?"

Dad blinks.

"Why haven't you gone back home?" I sniff, new tears forming in my eyes. "Please tell me."

He walks around the mess on the floor and sits on my bed. He sinks into the pink comforter. "I haven't seen my home in three decades. I'm scared that when I go back, it won't be my home anymore. I will be more European, more American, more Western. I don't have the Nigerian passport anymore. I forget more words in Kalabari than I remember. Outside of Nigeria, people don't know that. I'll say I'm Nigerian, and they won't doubt that claim. But in

Nigeria? They'll see right through me." He sighs in defeat. "I don't want them to take my Nigerian-ness away."

"No." My heart breaks. "Not you too." I collapse on the other end of the bed. "You were supposed to be safe from this feeling."

"Why?"

"You were born and raised there. You look Nigerian. You cook Nigerian food every week, you speak Kalabari to yourself, and you were definitely on your way to watch the Nigerian football team just now. You are Nigerian."

Dad grabs my childhood bison plushie off my bed and bounces it on his knee. "How much of it do I do because I am Nigerian? And how much of it do I do because I want to feel Nigerian? I don't know. I think when we move away from home, culture feels more and more like a performance. We do it because we want to be. Not because we are." He points around my room and finally at me. "You obviously know that. All of this screams performance of an American teenager." Before guilt can settle over me, he points at himself. "Just as much as this screams performance of a middle-aged Nigerian man."

My eyes fill with tears again. "But your performance makes you happy." I see it in the way he prepares the food, in the way he smiles while listening to songs, and in the care he takes with his clothes.

"Well, what performance will let you be at peace with yourself?"

Not pretending to be an American. The assimilation costs too much. My brain rejects the accent and the customs like a bad transplant. The energy to maintain it costs me a piece of my sanity every day. They can go fuck themselves with their Fahrenheits, lack of kettles, and prescription drug advertisements.

But to say I'm Polish? It means accepting that my life will always include questions, justifications, and explanations.

And Nigeria ... she gave me the warm brown skin that immediately labeled me as hers in the eyes of Polish people. Even when I tried to cut her out.

I curl into a ball on my bed. "There's no peace. The rules of performance are too confusing."

The New York collage hangs proudly above my desk. “Can I just go to Columbia and become a New Yorker? That’d be easier than this whole Polish Nigerian business.”

“It definitely would be.” Dad strokes my hair. “For your mom and me, the rules of performance are pretty easy. They were set up by people who look like us. But I think we raised a daughter who is brilliant and strong enough to take on the responsibility of creating something new. It’s a heavy duty, but it’s also a great freedom. To be able to leave a mark on what it means to be Polish Nigerian. To define a new culture. For yourself and for those who’ll come after you. Because they will.”

I hug myself tighter, my knees digging into my chest. “I don’t trust myself. I’ll get to Columbia and take the easy way out.”

“Then don’t go to Columbia.”

I gasp, flying straight up. “If I repeat that to Mom, she’ll divorce you.”

Dad rolls his eyes. “I didn’t mean never. I’m not of an unsound mind. But I once talked to a nice Asian lady at the supermarket who told me about White kids whose minds haven’t qualified for university yet. Apparently, they take something called gap years to fix themselves. Maybe do that? Go to Poland for a year, be with Grandma?” He tilts his head. “Well, you’re technically half White, so maybe six months will be enough.”

“You’re advising me to do a gap year?” I blink. “And you’re calling me mentally unstable?”

“I’d never make a diagnosis without supporting evidence.” He kisses me on the forehead. “The longer you stay out of Poland, the harder it will be to go back. And the pain of not going back will get worse. Consider if it’ll be worth it. Now, get your room in order. It’s a disgrace to the eyes of your parents.” He switches to English for his dramatics.

I switch too. “I beg forgiveness for the shame I’ve brought upon this household.”

“Well said.” He cracks up. “You’re also grounded for two weeks for dating a boy we haven’t met.” He stands up. “I’m going to fry us plantain.”

“What? But—”

“Be grateful it’s only two weeks. Can’t wait to meet him!” He shuts the door on his way out.

I groan. They have met Aang before, but technically, that doesn’t matter. He’s back to the factory setting of boy equals suspicious.

I get off the bed and clean up the mess, putting the stamp with the fresh ink on my desk. I brush over the bookmarks. The rough, dried-out flowers soothe my skin. Kaycee’s advice rings in my ears: Forget the heavy stuff, date someone hot, don’t complicate it. But dating him would be so much better than that. Aang’s presence creates pockets of peace in which I don’t have to chase the elusive feeling of worthiness, because I already have it.

How would it feel to be with him in Poland? How would he feel with me in Hong Kong? How would it feel to experience those places together, protecting each other from the feeling of not being enough? How would it feel to go about creating that whole Polish Nigerian culture, always safe in his arms to make mistakes?

My fingers tighten on the bookmarks.

Huh.

Maybe my dad and the Asian lady from the supermarket were onto something.

My dad comes back with plantain. The slices are soft, sticky, perfectly caramelized, and they melt in my mouth.

I ask Dad to braid my hair into cornrows as I eat. I don’t mention it’s because my maybe-boyfriend once said he liked them.

³⁸The Library of Józefina-Ibifubara

Chapter 33

so that's how it feels
to belong

Aang

COME TO THE GYM, Bryn texts JJ as I'm reading over her shoulder.

RIGHT NOW, Monique adds to their group chat.

I look around the gym. Brad, Remy, and the whole cheerleading team are sneaking looks at the door, waiting. I shift from foot to foot. "School's finished for the day. You sure JJ hasn't left yet?"

Monique shakes her head. "I drove her here. Her parents took her car away for two weeks."

I frown. "Why?"

"For dating you without official permission." She rolls her eyes. "You were already a boy who wanted to date their daughter. Suspicious enough. A boy who dated her before introducing himself? Good luck. Her mom uses a scalpel daily, and her dad has access to a lot of drugs."

"But ..." Blood drains from my face. "They've met me before."

"Don't worry! They'll like you!" Bryn elbows me. "Eventually. I think. But *do not* mention you've already been to the house when they weren't there."

I nod weakly. This is a problem for later.

Bryn's phone pings. "That's her." She shows me the message: *I will be there in five minutes.*

Huh? My face scrunches up. "Does JJ always text you like that?"

Bryn double-checks her phone. "What do you mean?"

"Like ... legibly."

“Yeah? Honestly, the girl sounds way too formal over text. Why?”
My face breaks into a helpless grin. “No reason.” *She only does it with me.*

I hope what I’m about to do next is what she wants. I roll my shoulders back and nod at Bryn and Monique. “Game on.” I hide behind Brad while the flyers get into prep. “Thanks again ... man.”

“Bro, no problem.” Brad takes my usual place in the stunt group, backspotting Addy.

“If you hurt Remy, I’ll make your life a living nightmare.”

“Jeez ...” Brad shivers. “JJ was right, you have no chill. Don’t sweat it. I promise your bestie is in good hands.” He winks at Remy, who blows him a kiss from his place next to the wall.

The door screeches open, and my lungs forget how to inhale air. I’m going to pass out from the lack of oxygen before I get to ask her the question.

JJ walks into the gym, frowning at the whole cheerleading team—five stunt groups are in a line, the flyers in prep holding blank white signs. Remy takes out his phone and starts recording. I begged him not to do it, but it was his payment for making the signs at such short notice.

Step by step, she’s getting closer, but she can’t see me yet. Brad’s wide shoulders make a good hiding spot. “What’s going on?” she asks, and my mouth kicks up automatically at the Polish accent making a comeback. I try to move, but my legs have turned to concrete, pinning me in place. What if she says no and I’m humiliated again, this time not just in front of Monique and Bryn but in front of the whole cheerleading team?

Then you’ll get humiliated, and it’ll be worth it. I step out from behind Brad.

Her jaw drops.

I’m wearing the black suit from the Philadelphia mall, the white shirt, and the dark pink tie, this time actually tied. There’s pink glitter splattered across my cheekbones, and her scrunchie is on my wrist. None of the shades match, according to Remy, but that wasn’t on my list of priorities.

I take her in. Her hair is in the two cornrows with the golden cuffs. She's wearing the green hoodie I gave her at the party. Now that I think about it, she never gave it back.

Sunlight floods my veins and dissolves any leftover concrete in my legs.

I take the eight steps needed to reach her.

"Aang ... I ..."

"Wait." I take her hands. "Me first." I speak quietly so only she can hear me. "I'm so sorry for the things I said. I can't take them back, but I promise they'll never leave my mouth again. I'm so sorry for leaving you in Boston. I promise I'll always consider your safety before I do something stupid. Because I will be doing stupid shit; I don't think there's any way around it. And it'll take me a lot of time to figure myself out, but I would like to do it with you by my side. Because the version of me who's in love with you has been my favorite one so far. So ..." I wave my hand, and the flyers turn the signs around.

PROM?

JJ stares at the letters.

"Would you like to go to prom with—"

"Yes."

I chuckle. "You didn't even let me finish the sentence."

"Because you don't need to finish the sentence." She throws her arms around my neck. My hands slide around her waist, my head dips to the crook of her neck, and I spin her around.

The room explodes with noise as the cheerleaders do what cheerleaders do best. They cheer.

When I finally put her on the ground, she says, "You know what's a massive coincidence? I also have a proposal for you. But not here." She yells thanks at everyone and pulls me out of the gym to the boos of the crowd that just stopped being entertained. We run along the corridors into ... the math classroom?

Her backpack is there, and she starts taking stacks and stacks of papers out of it.

"That's a lot of paper. Are you going to bully me into doing your homework?"

She doesn't laugh at the old reference. She drops the last stack on the desk and turns to me. "This is going to sound crazy. I mean, it's at least eighteen months away, and how would it even work? All the planning that'd we have to do while in our senior year. And convince our parents to give us money. And convince my parents to let me go with you and—"

"JJ?" I stroke her shoulders. "You're not having much sense to me."

Her lips curl up. She nods like it makes sense that it doesn't have sense and takes a deep breath. "Let's defer college."

"What?" My hands involuntarily tighten on her shoulders in a panic response. Half of our personalities are built around going to college.

Maybe they shouldn't be. Maybe the fact that you had a mini heart attack just now is not a good sign. Oh my god. Maybe I can be flexible about more stuff than just how Chinese I am?

Her eyes widen. "I completely forgot to apologize first. I should have written it down, I'm getting, what's the word ..."

I shift my hands to her biceps and tap my fingers against her arms to the rhythm of our cheerleading routine. She closes her eyes. When she speaks again, her voice is level. "I'm sorry for ignoring what you wanted and sending the email. I'm sorry for saying those things in Boston. I should have been your safe space, but I wasn't. But I want to be."

"I want that too." I step closer to her. She's wedged between me and the desk. "And the brilliant college deferral plan?" I cradle her cheek.

She plays with her scrunchie on my wrist. "I know you hate the idea of a gap year, but hear me out. We'll go to Hong Kong. And it's going to be hard for you. It probably won't solve a single thing. But I'll be your safe space when you discover what it means to be there. Then we can go to Poland. I'll show you where I grew up and introduce you to my grandmother. I know in some ways I'll always struggle, but I feel like struggling with you by my side wouldn't be so bad. I know it's a crazy idea, but—"

"Yes."

“You didn’t even let me finish the sentence.”

“Because you don’t have to.”

“But you should think about it. It’s not an easy—”

“Yes.”

“I’ve prepared spreadsheets.” She points to the stack of papers.

“And—”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“JJ ...” I tilt her jaw up. “Can I kiss you now? Please, I beg you.”

She shakes her head. “Not yet.”

“Not yet?” I groan, pressing my forehead against hers. “I promise, I’ll read every single one of your spreadsheets later. Multiple times. What else is there to do?”

“A handshake.”

“Okay.” I smile. “That is an important thing left to do.” I force myself to step back from her.

We go in for a shake, our open palms meeting in a crisp slap before our arms swing back.

Three high fives. One fist bump. Four high fives. One fist bump. Five high fives. The sounds echo in the classroom.

And because there’s no way I can survive clapping out any more digits of pi, I grab her hand when she extends it again, pulling her toward me. I wrap my other arm around her back and dip her down. Cheerleading-learned skills can be applied outside of the mat. Who knew.

“From now on, the handshake ends with a kiss. What do you think?” I dip her even further, until she’s parallel to the ground, her braids cascading down. I catch a hint of her vanilla perfume, and my heart races.

She’s already closing her eyes. “Excellent idea.”

Our lips meet, soft and tentative at first. She exhales against my mouth, and I wrap my arms tighter around her waist. Her fingers thread through my hair, sending a shiver down my spine from where her fingernails scrape my scalp. I kiss her harder.

“Wait.” She pulls away from me, but my lips follow hers before my brain registers her words.

“Huh?” My eyes peel open.

She puts her hands on my chest. “I need to say something.”

I set her upright and try to refocus my eyes.

“I love ...”

My heart speeds up, but she clamps her mouth shut. Something sinks in my chest, but I make myself say, “It’s okay. You don’t have to —”

“No, that’s not it. Just ... *I love you* doesn’t feel right.”

“What feels right, then?” I manage through my tight throat.

Her smile illuminates her face, orienting everything to her.

Permanently. “*Kocham cię.*”

Tension leaves my body, and it’s hard to imagine that I’ll ever get stressed out again. Cantonese has never felt easy to me. But this time, when I open my mouth, the words flow out, and I know this is exactly how they’re supposed to sound.

“ .”³⁹ I lean in to kiss her.

She makes a soft sound against my lips, something between a sigh and my name.

So that’s how it feels.

To belong.

³⁹ngóh oi néih

Epilogue

first day of senior year

JJ

I'm sitting next to him in our guidance counselor's office. His thumb is tracing circles on my hand. He's watching Stanford's cheerleading routine on his phone.

I'm reading about Kalabari's New Year.⁴⁰ Turns out we have our own calendar, with the year beginning mid-November. I'm learning most of it from my dad and Facebook posts because, god, are Kalabari people active there. My mom wants to celebrate Polish All Saints' Day⁴¹ on November first, and I wonder how we can honor the holidays together. They might not blend together well, but it's worth a try. I'm in the United States of America, after all. They all mix things together, brand it fusion, and call it a day as if they haven't just created Frankenstein's monster.

But sometimes they arrive at something special.

My boyfriend's hand shifts from my palm to my leg. His index finger draws hearts on my bare knee.

My skin got darker after the summer in Poland. My grandma and I went camping in Mazury, where mosquitoes bit every part of our skin and smoke from the fire seeped into our clothes. I even managed to earn some money for the gap year by teaching English to Polish kids.

Aang started volunteering, teaching math to kids at a Chinese center in Quincy, twenty minutes from Boston. He's picking up Cantonese from chatting with them. He says it's easier to learn when he can teach something back. The plan is for me to drive him

there on weekends while I go to Boston for extra partner-stunting practices.

That reminds me ...

I poke his shoulder. "Are you jealous that I have a different stunting partner on weekends?"

He smirks and leans over his chair toward me. "*Extremely* jealous." His mouth brushes mine, and my heart speeds up.

"You should be. I clearly have a track record of falling in love with them."

"Please." He rolls his eyes. "You were in love with me before we did the partner stunt."

"*Excuse me?*" My jaw drops. "Where's all this confidence coming from?"

His eyes dance over my body, and everywhere they land, they leave my skin burning. "Dating a hot cheerleader is doing wonders for my ego."

I'm about to pull him into a kiss when Ms. Foster enters the office. "Finally, you're here as seniors!" She seems genuinely happy with the fact.

It doesn't last long.

As we talk, her smile slowly disappears from her face. "You won't be applying to colleges. You want to do a gap year. Both of you."

We nod in agreement.

"Mr. Lau." She points at Aang. "You scheduled three meetings in one month to go over the best SAT strategies. In freshman year. And you're deferring?"

He nods.

"Miss Johnson." She points at me.

"Wyróżnicka-Johnson."

"Sorry?"

"My last name is Wyróżnicka-Johnson. Vyh-roozh-neets-kah."

"Okay ..." Ms. Foster repeats my full surname. Not very well, but oh well, she'll learn. "You sent me an email once a week your whole sophomore year, complaining about unfair grading in World History, which prioritized style over content. And you want to do a gap year?"

I nod.

“You’ve tormented me for three years to defer now?” Her eye twitches. “I’m not getting paid enough for this.” She searches for a coffee cup, but she didn’t bring one with her. We kick ourselves out of the office before we’re witnesses to her mental breakdown.

The second the door closes, Aang wraps his hands around my waist. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I close my eyes, ready for the kiss.

“Actually ...” He steps away. “Not yet.”

I stomp my foot. “You’re getting way too comfortable.” My American accent falls away. I still use it when I think it’ll be useful for me. But standing in front of him is not one of those times.

“Get used to it. I have something to show you first.” He pulls me through the corridors to where his new locker is and opens it.

Inside, there’s a photo of our send-off before the junior prom, in front of my house. It took Aang one dinner to win over my parents. I was excited to use the dishwasher because we finally had a guest, but he offered to wash the dishes by hand. Now they like him more than me. Which he claims is only fair, since his own mother prefers his girlfriend over him.

In the photo, I’m wearing a floor-length pink dress with flowers stitched onto it. I’m laughing at the camera. Aang’s wearing the Philadelphia suit. He’s smiling at me.

I hug him from behind. “That’s very cute, but I’ve seen this before.” He had it in his old locker the day after prom.

“No, no, that’s not it.” He rummages through the locker, and my hands around his stomach register every shift of his solid muscles. He conceded that going to the gym with Remy will let him do harder stunts in cheerleading.

“Found it!” He turns around as I let go of him. He shows me the flattened and dried-out pink camellia I gave him for Valentine’s Day last year and puts it in his transparent phone case. “Do you like it, ?”⁴²

I’m smiling so much it hurts. He overheard a couple calling each other that in the Quincy Center and decided it fit me. When his

parents heard the nickname, they were rolling over laughing at him for an hour. They said he sounds like an elderly Hong Kong weirdo.

But out of every single name people call me, it's my favorite. "I love it, Peach Pie."

He grabs my waist, spins me, and pushes me against his locker. "That nickname is growing on me. Slowly. Extremely slowly."

"Can you kiss me already? It's been months."

He lets out a breathy laugh and cradles my neck. "I kissed you in your car before the meeting."

"Exactly. Months."

His other hand snakes under my shirt to rest on my waist. "Is this like in those American high school movies?"

"No. It's better."

"Good." He smiles against my lips. "*Kocham cię.*"

I like the way he says it. He's careful with every syllable, guarding them from being mispronounced. It's like he's promising to be just as protective with other parts of me.

"*Ngóh oi néih.*" I wink at him.

He groans, his fingernails digging into my waist, leaving crescent moons in my skin. "I explicitly forbade you from saying that in public." His lips collide against mine in a hungry kiss.

Fucking finally.

There's no one in the hallway, but we still get detention later for kissing at school. First-ever detention for both of us.

An excellent start to the senior year.

⁴⁰The end of Ngbula Ama-dé diñ

⁴¹Wszystkich Świętych

⁴²bóu bui (Treasure)

The end.

Koniec.

.

Uluku me fa dze.

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WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW THE STORY BEHIND AANG AND JJ'S FIRST-EVER MEETING?

Sign up for my newsletter on www.rozaliabomawrites.com for exclusive bonus chapters! While you're there, you can leave me a note in my guestbook about anything you want. If you're not being a racist, I'll respond!

If you want to see what I'm currently reading, you can find me as *rozaliabomawrites* on Pagebound (an indie, anti-AI social book tracker). In my library, you'll find a list of books I read for *I'll Be a Home for You*. I've also created a list with books I'm reading for my next project to give you an idea of the plot ;).

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Free Palestine

Free Sudan

Free Congo

End capitalism

And fuck the police

<3

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THE MOST RANDOM SHIT TO LEARN ABOUT THE CULTURES

POLAND

YouTube videos:

- *Lost Polish Tribe of Haiti* by turk chap
- *The Weird Rebellion of Polish Movie Posters* by Pyramid Peak

Books:

- *Blood of Elves* (The Witcher series) by Andrzej Sapkowski (*Wiedźmin. Krew Elfów*)
- *Stones for the Rampart* by Aleksander Kamiński (*Kamienie na szaniec*)

Music:

- Dawid Podsiadło, Natalia Przybysz, Wilki, Lady Pank, Varius Manx

HONG KONG

YouTube videos:

- *Hong Kong State of Mind (aka SAR of Mind)* by smnl88
- *How Hong Kong built the world's most valuable subway* by The Flying Moose

Books:

- *Diamond Hill* by Kit Fan
- *My City: A Hong Kong Story* by Xi Xi

Music:

- Sam Hui, Anita Mui, Leslie Cheung, Aaron Kwok, Jason Chan

NIGERIA

YouTube videos:

- *Nigeria Is Not What You Think!* by Gano Did It
- *Nigerians are so poetic* by @christalluster [yes, this is a YouTube Short, check out the comments]

Books:

- *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad* by Damilare Kuku
- *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Music:

- Wizkid, Burna Boy, Davido, Tiwa Savage, Ayra Starr

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O kurwa. Napisałam książkę.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rozalia Boma Davies writes YA contemporary romances. She was born and raised in Poland to a Polish mom and a Nigerian dad before moving to the UK at sixteen. She lives in Hong Kong. Her hobbies include playing football, learning languages, and being a Rachel Berry apologist. *I'll Be a Home for You* is her debut book.

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