



OPHELIA AFTER ALL

RACQUEL MARIE



Feiwei and Friends
New York



A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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To the queer & questioning kids,
I'm rooting for y'all.

And to Mom,
You were the miracle. Wherever you are now,
I hope it's good.



ONE

The fabric of my lilac gown brushes my bare legs, sending shivers of delightful anticipation up my arms. The flowers cascading down my skirt are so wispy and delicate, they look sugar spun. Light flashes in and out of my eyes, timed to the rhythmic turn of the disco ball that casts the entire gymnasium in a haze of sparkling light. Warm hands curl around the small of my back at the exact moment the music swells. My heartbeat crescendos with the music as I tilt my chin up to finally see my dance partner, none other than—

I'm ripped from my daydreaming as Agatha violently chucks a textbook into her locker.

“Do you remember during freshman year when they *promised* us we wouldn't end up with a shitty graduation song?” She pulls her locker door in to look me in the eye. “We really have to send off our youth to *Don't Stop Believin'*? Just hold me back at this point.”

“Is this outrage going to last for more or less time than your annoyance about the prom theme?” I ask, recovering

quickly as I swap out my chemistry binder for my US government notebook. Not for the first time, I'm glad Geraldo Inglaterra was so open to exchanging his locker—perfectly spaced between Linds's and Ags's at the front of the alphabet—with me for a few bouquets of my roses. I can't imagine all the chisme I'd miss out on if I was subject to my end-of-the-hall, R-last-name locker.

Lindsay's knees crack as she kneels to open her locker. “Don't get her started on that again.”

“Sue me for wanting a classic prom theme,” Ags shoots back.

“Technically *Under the Sea* is a classic theme,” I say. “It's just classically shitty.”

In every fantasy I've ever had of prom, not once did I imagine decor reminiscent of the scuba-diving expedition Mom and Dad took me on during our family vacation to Mexico two summers ago. Evidently, neither did Agatha.

Lindsay snorts. “I'm more concerned with this omnipresent *they* who knew what all our senior year selections would be when we were still puny freshmen who'd barely voted in our class representatives. We didn't even know how to open our lockers yet.” She accidentally spins her combination too far and curses under her breath. “Okay, so maybe some of us are still working the locker thing out.”

“Some of us are still puny too,” I joke, nudging Lindsay with the toe of my sneaker. It earns me her stuck-out tongue.

“Whatever,” Agatha says as we shut our lockers and head down the hall. “After our reps made our class color that

awful rusty orange, I should've known not to get my hopes up. If we had all just applied for senior council at the beginning of the year, *like I wanted*, this wouldn't be happening."

"Maybe I would've if the senior council president was still Vijay Khan from last year," I say, fanning my face while Agatha rolls her eyes. "Seriously, why couldn't he have just taken one for the team and been a super senior? He was easily the best president." Lindsay shoots me a look. "Okay, at the very least he was the most swoonworthy."

The stifling spring air hits me at the same time Lindsay's nudging shoulder does. I regret wearing my sunflower jeans, even if the floral patches make me smile, and envy Lindsay's breathable running shorts and tank top. At least I'm better off than Agatha in her turtleneck sweater dress, but it'll be a cold day in hell when Ags admits that comfort can trump fashion.

"Ignoring Ophelia's thirstiness," Lindsay starts, and this time I stick my tongue out at her, "need I remind you that senior council meets on Sunday mornings when I have church and Ophelia has her weird gardening rituals?"

Sammie and Wesley are already waiting for us at "our" picnic bench, mouths occupied with their food instead of with talking to each other. Wesley is picking at leafy greens while Sammie inhales a cafeteria veggie burger that looks barely edible, even under the mound of ketchup he's drowned it in.

"My gardening rituals are not weird," I protest, sitting beside Ags on one side while Lindsay squirms between Sammie and Wesley on the other. She ruffles Sammie's

mop of black curls and smiles at Wesley. Both boys look pleased by the attention.

Sammie swallows the last of his fries, speaking around the mush in his mouth despite missing the first half of the conversation. “You’re right. It’s totally normal for teenage girls to spend their weekends obsessively watering, pruning, and fertilizing their personal rose garden.”

“I like that she didn’t deny the ‘thirstiness’ part,” Lindsay adds.

“I, for one, think it’s sweet that O has a hobby she cares so much about,” Ags says, patting me on the head. I swat her hand away. “I just wish it didn’t get in the way of the thematic integrity of our senior year.”

“No one said you couldn’t join senior council on your own, Ags,” I reply. Lindsay nods in agreement.

Ags rolls her eyes, her bedazzled lashes shimmering in the sunlight. I swear a light breeze fans my face as she blinks. “Like I want to deal with other people.”

“Is she still worked up about the prom theme?” Sammie asks, making a face.

“Started off annoyed at our grad song, but we’re circling around to prom again,” I reply. Tomorrow, prom will officially be three weeks away, so her irritation was due to return.

Wesley, shockingly, speaks up, unshockingly keeping his eyes locked on his salad. “What’s so wrong with *Under the Sea*?”

“It’s a tragic cliché! It’s like the school *wants* us to spike the punch bowl and lose our virginities in a limo,” Ags huffs.

“Sounds good to me,” Sammie says, chewed-up veggie burger threatening to fall out of his mouth as he speaks. “Plus, Linds can just wear a mermaid tail and call it a day.” He tugs on a strand of her naturally vibrant red hair. She throws a carrot at him in retaliation, but he easily smacks it away, flinging it at Wesley’s chest. I bite back a laugh as Wesley slowly brushes carrot water off his expensive-looking gray polo.

“I can glue seashells to everyone’s corsages,” I add.

“Don’t make me protest prom, Rojas,” Ags threatens, wielding her fork. I bite back a dinglehopper joke.

“You think I can wear swim trunks?” Sammie asks before lobbing the last of his burger into his mouth. “I think it’d be tastefully in theme.”

“I think it’s a surefire way to guarantee you’ll be going stag,” Linds teases. Sammie and Wesley both visibly stiffen. She clears her throat and bites another carrot.

I feign ignorance. “You *are* always complaining when men don’t comply with the Met Gala theme,” I say to Ags. Bless her, she doesn’t double back to Lindsay’s comment.

“Me? Complaining?” She gasps, lips twitching into a smile.

The conversation drifts off while I pick at my dried mango slices. I’m half listening to Wesley stumble through complimenting Lindsay on her hair when Agatha nudges her bare knee against mine.

“Check your phone.”

I pull it out of my back pocket, no questions asked. I’ve got a new text from her.

wanna make a bet?

I raise my brows. We haven't made a bet in months. The last one was at Lindsay's eighteenth birthday party back in November, when I bet Ags three bucks that Wesley would be the first one to arrive and be immensely overdressed for the occasion. Agatha had faith he'd know not to show up to a house party in slacks and a tie, but she was horribly mistaken. Had Wesley ever tried to befriend me past casual smiles and obligatory greetings at lunch in the year since Lindsay pulled him into our group of friends, maybe I would've warned him to go with a graphic tee and jeans instead.

Suffice to say, I'd begun to worry we'd outgrown our betting. With Agatha trading in NorCal for SoCal when she leaves for fashion school in LA in the fall, part of me has taken every fragment of change in our relationship as a sign that she's going to forget all about me the second she's surrounded by avant-garde fashionistas whose wardrobes extend past floral print and canvas shoes. But maybe this means she isn't ready to let go either.

what are we betting? I reply.

five dollars says lindsay picks wesley before graduation

I give her a pointed look. "Really?"

She shushes me and motions to my phone, eyes flickering to our oblivious friends.

doesn't seem like our business, I reply

we've watched this shit show love triangle bullshit go on for months.

i think it's our business now

She's got a point. I love a good love triangle as much as the next romance fanatic, but if I have to suffer through one

more movie night where Sammie and Wesley crowd Lindsay on one side of the room and ignore Agatha and me the entire night, I might spontaneously combust.

fine. but if she picks sammie you better pay up, I type back, and she smiles brightly, her matte magenta lipstick starting to crack.

“Shake on it?” she asks. It’s then that I realize our other friends have gone silent.

“Are you two making a bet?” Sammie asks with narrowed eyes.

“We would never!” Agatha clutches her hand to her chest. “You know we gave up that immature practice *decades* ago, dear Samuel.”

“You’re so full of shit.” He shakes his head at her, then turns to me. “You promised I could be in on the next bet.”

“I didn’t think there would be one,” I admit, and shrug, slightly annoyed that the first time I successfully lied to Sammie in all our years of friendship came back to bite me in the butt.

“Hey, you’ve never promised me I could get in on a bet,” Lindsay says to Agatha. Ironic, given how often she accuses us of being immature for betting chump change on meaningless things—like the time I bet Ags a quarter that more girls would wear purple to homecoming than red, or when Agatha bet me a dollar that she could go a whole day without cursing and lost before we even made it to third period.

“Sorry.” Ags snorts. “I’ll up the amount of empty promises I throw your way.”

“Come on, we want in.” Sammie rubs his hands together.

Wesley musters up the courage to agree. “Yeah, me too.”

I glance at Agatha, both of us trying to keep a straight face, though it’s harder for me than for her. “I think you guys might want to sit this one out, trust me,” I reply.

“Wait.” Lindsay’s face softens. “Is this about you two still trying to find prom dates? I told you I don’t mind asking the guys on the track team if any of them would take you. It’s really no big deal.” She looks at me. “What about Trevor Yoon? You were practically drooling over him at my last meet.”

“I was not!”

“You were,” Sammie says. “It was gross. But doesn’t Trevor have a girlfriend?”

Agatha shakes her head while chewing. “They broke up last week.” She swallows. “He got into NYU and she’s staying local, so they called it quits early. She was a *mess* in ceramics.”

“She’s going with Mark Vega now,” I say, remembering the few weeks Mark and I spent as partners in freshman biology. He almost caught me doodling *Ophelia Vega* in the margins of my notebook more times than I’m willing to admit. “He asked her during English, I think?” I look to Ags for confirmation.

“Algebra,” she corrects with a mouth full of spaghetti. “Big poster, bouquet of daisies, lots of glitter for Mr. Semenya to clean up.”

Sammie scoffs. “How the hell do you guys even know this shit?”

Ags and I shrug in unison.

“Okay, so Trevor is on the market,” Linds recaps, biting her lip before adding, “I hear Lucas is still looking for a date. You should talk to him.”

“Snooze-cus?” Sammie laughs. “You practically threw O a party when he dumped her last year, and now you want them to go to prom together?” His laughter is cut short when Agatha shoots daggers his way.

Lucas is a sore subject for me. We dated for six months junior year, which feels like forever when you’re sixteen and have never had even one of your dozens of crushes like you back, let alone kiss you.

I thought we’d at least make it to senior prom, followed by a tearful breakup-farewell at graduation, but two weeks before junior year ended, he dumped me with little to no warning after losing his championship soccer game. Agatha reassured me he was just pissed about the loss and would come around, but he avoided me until the end of the school year, and we haven’t spoken a word to each other since.

I guess in retrospect, his only wanting to make out in my garden (surprisingly, not a euphemism) and sit in his basement playing video games he’d never give me a turn at should’ve been red flags. But, as many of us have been before, I was fooled by a blond soccer player with chocolate-brown eyes.

“I think I speak for both Ophelia and myself when I say we’re good, Linds,” Agatha replies, the tightness of her jaw betraying her calm tone. Lindsay’s been offering to help find us dates for weeks now without once realizing that forcing one of her many suitors to take us to prom isn’t exactly fairy

godmother-level kindness. Yeah, it would be nice to not attend another—and my final—high school dance dateless, but a pity date isn't a much better alternative. I want the pretty poster, the bouquet of flowers, the silly social media post with a punny caption about saying yes to the promposal. I don't want some guy taking me just because I'm the next best thing to getting in Lindsay's pants.

"Well, if you change your mind . . ." Linds drifts off before snapping another carrot between her perfect teeth. I flinch at the noise and her words.

In three weeks, all of us will be dressed to the nines in my backyard, surrounded by the roses I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into, wondering how prom, the final peak of teenage experiences before adulthood, came so quickly. Either Sammie or Wesley will have his hands wrapped around Lindsay's waist, while Agatha and I will pose off to the side for our photography-loving parents.

But lately I'm a little haunted by the image I've always had of me dancing with a pretty boy in a tux. There was a time, when I was much younger, that I pictured Sammie next to me. Then it was Jackson from sixth-grade English, then Adam from Honors bio, then Ethan from the nursery on Main Street, then *both* Franklin and Nathan from PE (messy deal, crushing on twins), dozens of other boys—tall, short, kind, mean, sporty, nerdy, and so on and so forth. And finally: Lucas, the one I *really* thought would work out. He lingers there, even now.

Occasionally, as my mind wanders during class or while

gardening, someone stands out against the collection of boys I've dared to want. Even considering Sammie and Lucas, this face has taken the strongest presence, especially as prom approaches.

But she shouldn't—doesn't—belong there.



The air-conditioning in government feels heavenly on the back of my neck as I take my seat. The desk before mine is still empty, thankfully. I adjust the straps of my top and wipe at my undoubtedly shiny forehead, then busy my hands with twirling my pen.

I hear her before I see her, surprising given her usual shyness. But the tan work boots she wears every day, even days as hot as today, are heavy on the classroom tiles. Her tall figure casts a shadow in the doorway.

Talia Sanchez walks into class the way she always does, eyes trained on her bootlaces, thick, dark curls bouncing around her long, brown face. My pen slips from my sweaty fingers, tumbling to the ground. Before I can grab it, she's already bending down.

"Thanks," I say, throat dry. She smiles, tight-lipped, and takes her seat in front of me.

I pull out my notebook and flip it to a clean sheet, scratching down today's date so my fidgeting hands will have something to do other than, you know, fidget. When I finally find my voice again, it comes out shakier than I hoped. "Did you finish the mock DBQs?"

She turns around and tucks her hair behind her ear. “Almost,” she says quietly. “Zaq and I are going to finish them after school. You?” She slides her notebook out of her bag, the one with the funky doodle of the White House I’ve always assumed Wesley drew for her. She and her best friend, Zaq, an artsy boy Agatha knows from our school’s Black student union, are Wesley’s other friends, i.e., the ones he actually makes an effort with. He spends lunch with them in the art studio on Tuesdays and Thursdays, sitting with us at the bench the rest of the week.

“I meant to work on some yesterday but had a gardening issue I had to deal with first. I forgot to ask my dad to buy fertilizer this week, so I had to steal bananas from Sammie’s house to compensate. It took longer than expected to convince him to give them up though.” Sammie made me promise he got first pick on corsage and boutonniere flowers. But joke’s on him, I was going to give him first pick anyway. Next-door-neighbor privileges.

“I didn’t know bananas were good for roses,” she says. It’s refreshing to talk about my roses with someone who hasn’t known me for years. Strangers are always in awe of my knowledge, while my close friends only care about my garden when they need flowers for Mother’s or Valentine’s Day.

“Oh yeah, they’re fantastic for them, but just the peels. They decompose really quickly and release phosphorus, nitrogen, and potassium into the soil, which the roses *love*,” I explain, shedding the cracks in my voice. “Plus, my dad

loves freezing the leftover bananas and using them to make plátanos maduros.”

“Now I’m hungry,” she laughs, starting to turn back around.

“I can show you updated garden photos!” I showed her the first of this season’s blooms a few weeks back, but the Midas Touch bushes were her favorite and they’ve drastically blossomed since.

The final bell rings before I can get to my phone. Ms. Fell clears her throat and asks us to get ready for a pop quiz.

“You can text them to me later,” Talia whispers, then turns away. My face warms, but I clear everything in my head that doesn’t have to do with checks and balances.

Talia finishes her quiz after me, flashing me a small smile on her way back to her seat. It’s impossible not to notice the way the harsh overhead lighting illuminates the golden ring hooked around her nose and highlights the lighter tones in her dark hair. As she sits, she pulls her thick curls into a bun with such ease, it almost looks like a magic trick. All that volume being condensed to defy gravity within seconds. When she drops her hands, the light catches on her glittery red fingertips.

When I formally met Talia at the start of senior year, I only knew four things about her:

1. She is friends with Wesley Cho and Zaquariah Field.
2. She is quiet.
3. Her nails are always painted a sparkly red color.
4. She once kissed a girl and liked it.

I never went out of my way to learn these things about her. But I've seen her around school enough that it was inevitable for me to recognize her face in a crowd and learn her name. Especially after Wesley started hanging out with both of us. I only noticed her nails because she and Lindsay had a math class together sophomore year. Lindsay thought it was weird that a girl who rarely wore makeup and whose closet seemed mostly comprised of flannels and khakis always had such pristine, glittery, in-your-face nails.

Our first real conversation happened in this class at the start of the year, after we were seated near each other alphabetically and coerced into an icebreaker about our summer break. It wasn't as awkward as it could have been, both in spite and because of the events the week prior, at Lindsay's end-of-summer party.

Half our senior class had been crammed into Lindsay's stuffy basement, chugging watered-down beer Lindsay scored using her new fake ID, a birthday present from her cousin. The cliché topics we all silently swore to leave untouched until school began started slipping into every conversation anyway. "Where are you applying?" "What majors are you considering?" "Are you taking a gap year?" "What did you get on the SAT? Or did you take the ACT?" I finally snapped the tenth time someone asked me what I planned to do with a degree in botany, practically shouting, "I don't know, maybe grow some plants?"

Agatha hauled me away before I could embarrass myself further, and shoved a Solo cup of Diet Coke into my hand.

She managed to pull Lindsay away from her third round of shots to play the ten-finger method of Never Have I Ever. Zaq dragged overdressed Wesley over, and Sammie joined soon after, because where there is Wesley and Lindsay, there is usually Sammie buzzing around them, trying to intervene. Slowly even the stragglers who I'd never seen at any of Lindsay's other parties were playing along.

The room shook with laughter at the expense of friends and echoed with whistling following every dropped finger, even if the admission wasn't particularly promiscuous. We all groaned when Evan Matthews said, "Never Have I Ever dyed my hair multiple colors at once," because his ex, Danica Peters, was sitting directly across from him with freshly dyed rainbow hair. Never Have I Ever could get extremely petty, and I was grateful Lucas wasn't there to tempt me.

My fingers stayed mostly raised due to what Lindsay likes to call my "lack of teenage experience." My only lowered fingers were from cop-out answers about crushing on someone in the room or having piercings. Lindsay and Sammie, on the other hand, were in the negative finger zone within the first few rounds.

Usually my raised fingers would've felt like a glaring sign above my head screaming "Look at me! I'm boring!" but something about the communal participation made me feel less on display. Like the collective vulnerability protected all of us from judgment. Maybe it was the feeling of senior year creeping up on me, the unspoken realization that it was the beginning of the end for our teenage years, but the laughter

and cheers and ache in my cheeks from smiling so much made that night feel less like a subtle competition of slut shaming, blatant callouts, and discreetly raised or lowered fingers, and more like a celebration of whatever the past three years of high school had or hadn't been comprised of.

Most of my summer had been spent watering my roses with tears over Lucas. Even Agatha and Sammie dragging me to the local mall to scope out cute boys working at those clothing stores with shirtless guys on their bags couldn't cheer me up. But that night, surrounded by my drunken peers and best friends, I'd forgotten all about my heartbreak.

Agatha and Zaq got up to refresh their drinks, leaving an empty space between me and Talia. I'd been focused on ogling Lou Santos from across the circle, in all his basketball-playing, six-foot-five glory, but something about the way she stood out in the corner of my vision drew my attention away.

She turned and smiled politely when she caught me staring, raising her red Solo cup in friendly greeting. Even in the dim basement lighting I could see the way her nose ring and deep red lipstick sparkled like her nails. I'd never noticed how full her lips were before then. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but a shrill voice interrupted my thoughts and drew Talia's attention away.

The voice belonged to Jackie Mitchell, one of those people you go to school with for ages but never actually get to know. The type whose birthday party you'd get a pity-invite to in middle school. That night, she wore a tight black tube top and a neon miniskirt that glowed in the dark room,

accentuating her curves and leaving her collarbones on full display. I forced my eyes from her body, my face flushed from what was definitely jealousy over how good she looked, but I listened as she huskily said, “Never have I ever . . . kissed a girl . . . and *liked* it.” She batted her lashes at Lou, and he grinned devilishly as she, against the rules of the game, dropped her finger with a wink.

Jackie’s claim to fame was when, during our freshman year, she and her best friend snuck into some senior party and drunkenly made out in a pool together. Some of the boys recorded it and posted the video to Twitter, because “girl-on-girl action is *so hot*,” making it the talk of the school for a week or so. I nearly broke Sammie’s phone when I saw he retweeted it.

Most of the guys dropped a finger, and everyone moved on to the next confession, but I couldn’t. The ease with which Jackie admitted she liked kissing a girl alongside the blatant use of that admission as flirtation with Lou made my stomach inexplicably clench. My tenseness must’ve shown, because when I looked up from my drink, Talia was staring.

She glanced at Jackie and rolled her eyes, then fiddled with her nose ring, dropping a finger discreetly in the process. Except she was looking straight at me as she did it.

I didn’t react. I didn’t know how to, given the hot, oddly pained feeling that the look she gave me left in my chest. More than that, I was overwhelmed by the confusing intensity of why I suddenly needed to know everything about her.

Before I could muster up the courage to scoot closer, Agatha and Zaq returned, passionately debating the difference between thrift stores and vintage stores, and I lost hold of what exactly I expected to get out of Talia in the first place.

We didn't interact for the rest of the night, the game dying out a few rounds later when Evan targeted Danica again and Sammie had to calm them both down before a fight broke out. Ags and I slept over once everyone went home, well into the night, and I watched in envy as Linds and Agatha comfortably shared a blanket on the other side of the couch. I wasn't envious of them cuddling together; I was envious that they could do it without feeling weird like I always did. I fell asleep to the sound of Lindsay mumbling about prom and Wesley, as I forgot all about Talia and her red lips, red nails, and red cup.

By the first day of school, a week later, the significance of Talia had completely vanished. But when she turned around in government to pass back the syllabus and said hello to me for the first time, it all came rushing back.

Every time she asked to borrow an eraser or reminded me of an upcoming test, I felt like I was sitting on that basement carpet all over again. I never brought up Linds's party, too uncomfortable with the memory of how our small interaction affected me. But no matter how hard I tried, my mind couldn't let go of the one thing I'd wanted to ask her most.

What did she see in my face that night, looking at Jackie and Lou across the room, that made her confess?



TWO

By the time we're back at our lockers after school, Agatha has a plan.

“I am *not* running for prom queen,” Lindsay says, slamming her locker shut as she stands. “You know how I feel about Little Mermaid jokes. Why would I subject myself to that shit?”

“Because *you* know how *I* feel about this theme. A prom-campaign project could salvage the end of senior year.” Agatha slams her locker even harder, like that’ll solidify her point. “I’m getting bored.”

Linds rolls her eyes far enough that her green irises vanish. She turns to me. “O, how would you feel if prom was *Hamlet* themed? Would you run for queen?”

“Of course I would. I’d finally have an excuse to re-create Ophelia’s iconic mad scene. Prancing across a stage throwing flowers and singing off-key would be very on-brand for me.” I mime pulling flowers from a basket, flicking my hand

as if showering Lindsay with them. “Look, a fantasy of mine come true.” She bats me away.

I get her annoyance, but if I endured an entire unit of studying *Hamlet* in English last fall without complaint, she can survive running for prom queen. If I had a dollar for every time Sammie told me to get myself to a nunnery, I’d have the type of financial security that would justify getting a BS in botany.

“I heard ‘Ophelia’s fantasy’ and came running,” Sammie says as he and Wesley approach from opposite ends of the hall. I mime barfing while he wraps an arm around Linds, leaving Wesley stiff as a board on his own.

“Agatha is trying to get Linds to run for prom queen,” I say.

“We could get some real use out of that hair,” Agatha says.

“We are not using my hair, nor my mortal enemy, Ariel of the Sea, to earn me a pointless plastic crown and a title that turns school dances into beauty pageants.”

“Yeah, the title is what makes school dances about beauty,” Sammie says.

Agatha raises her hands in surrender. “Fine. No go on the prom queen campaign.” Linds huffs a sigh of relief before leaving, with Wesley close on her heels.

Once they’re out of earshot, Agatha turns to Sammie and me with a mischievous glint in her dark brown eyes. “I’ll get started on campaign slogan ideas, and we’ll reconvene on Monday.” She shimmies away to catch up with Lindsay

and Wesley, her thick halo of corkscrew black hair wavering as she goes.

“Please tell me she doesn’t actually care this much about a meaningless theme,” Sammie says as we follow our friends to student parking. He’s towered above me for a while now, ever since his growth spurt halfway through freshman year, but I always forget just how tall he is until he’s right beside me. A consequence of being friends since infancy, I suppose. It’s just hard to reconcile childhood Sammie, awkwardly lanky with a bush of untamable black curls, with young adult Sammie, endearingly spindly with soft spirals of hair framing his narrow face.

“Depends on which *she* you’re referring to,” I reply, cocking my head for emphasis and to see his face better.

“Both of them,” he replies, but I watch his eyes track Lindsay as she bounces between Agatha and Wesley, telling a story with her entire body. I look away, the yearning in his eyes too much. “Agatha’s disdain has been made abundantly clear, but she’ll get over it once she refocuses on the bigger picture: getting to judge everyone’s fashion choices.” He laughs. “But I don’t want this Little Mermaid bullshit keeping Linds from enjoying herself.”

“You know what would really help Lindsay enjoy herself?” I ask, nudging him with my elbow. “Having a date. I hear Wesley is interested if you want to help him ask her out.”

The funny thing is, when Wesley transferred here half-way through junior year, he and Sammie actually got along

pretty well at first. Lindsay tutored Wesley in math and invited him to sit with us at lunch because he didn't have any friends yet. And while Sammie had never complained about being the only guy in our group of friends, I could tell he felt relieved by the company.

The problem is that for as long as Sammie and Lindsay have been friends, they've had pretty obvious crushes on each other. And by obvious, I mean obvious to everyone *but* each other. Their flirting was never serious enough to cause real tension in the group and not enough where either seemed willing to act on it, but it was there. For years, Agatha and I waited for the day our group would be rocked by the intensity of intragroup dating, but every time it seemed like they were ready to commit, they dropped the ball. Lindsay would start dating a guy on the track team, so Sammie would get jealous and kiss another girl at one of Lindsay's parties, and our fears would subside for the time being.

Sammie finally seemed ready to ask Lindsay to the Valentine's Day dance last year, but she asked Wesley before he got the chance. After that day, Sammie brooding at the punch bowl as Lindsay and Wesley slow danced among card-stock hearts and glimmering pink streamers, the budding bromance was no more. Just like my minor crush on the shy new boy, as Wesley went from stake-free fantasizing territory to Lindsay's unforeseen romantic interest.

This year has basically been a ticking time bomb of passive-aggressive comments between the boys while we all

wait to see who'll finally make a real move before we graduate. Though truthfully, Wesley is all passive and Sammie is almost exclusively aggressive.

Sammie smirks, taking my taunts and jabs in stride. "Don't rush my process, O." He even has the audacity to wink.

"What happens when Wesley asks her out before you do? Should I get some tissues ready? Ask my dad to prepare some of those cream cheese pastelitos for you?" I poke him in the side. "Just give me the word and I'll tell him to cue up the heartbreak canciones."

He rolls his eyes. "I'll just take you to prom to make her jealous."

"Wow." I pause, fanning my eyes to dry imaginary tears. "I've waited all seventeen years of my life for this moment. I can finally, *definitively*, say I will be used by a man. Thank you for making my dreams come true, Samuel. Truly, it's an honor."

He flips me off. "Whatever. You don't have to worry about it because I got this. You'll see." We finally catch up to our friends as Agatha pulls a dingy orange flyer promoting cap and gown sales off her windshield, gagging at our class color.

"Now they're just mocking me." She balls it up and tosses it to me. "For your roses."

"You can't use colored paper as compost!" I shout as she blows several kisses, gets in her car, and leaves. I pocket the flyer anyway.

“I better get going too,” Linds says. “I have to grab my car and pick up the twins from soccer practice.”

“Where’d you park?” I ask, looking around for her signature red whatever-you-call-small-square-shaped-cars car that’s normally parked right beside Agatha’s white whatever-you-call-small-round-cars car.

“I actually didn’t drive today,” Linds replies casually, but her eyes flash quickly to Sammie, then back to me. “Wes gave me a ride.”

“That’s cool,” Sammie says in a voice that says he very decidedly does not think it is cool. Lindsay smiles, and she and Wesley leave for the other end of the lot.

Even with as limited car knowledge as I have, I know Wesley’s car is *nice*. I don’t know what Mr. and Mrs. Cho do for work, but Wesley’s cashmere sweaters and polished loafers don’t exactly hide their salaries. All things considered—rich parents, muscular body, handsome face—he should’ve turned out to be a massive tool. I suppose I should be more grateful for his silent demeanor, given the potential alternative.

“You’re drooling again,” Sammie snaps as he stalks toward his car and opens the passenger door for me, tugging on it since it sticks no matter how many times he oils the hinges. He worked two summers at the vegan burger joint down the street from us to save up for his car, but his parents chipped in as long as he promised to help drive his sisters around. Instead of investing the additional money in, I don’t know, a car with better doors, he bought an entire

set of encyclopedias that he keeps in the back seat. He's a massive history nerd and uses them to pick his next personal research project.

"Am not." I wipe my face with the back of my hand while he isn't looking. Wesley is cute, sure, but definitely off-limits.

"Do her sisters even have soccer practice today?" he asks.

"How am I supposed to know?" I get in and toss my bag onto the *O-P* volume.

"You spent half of last year at the soccer fields watching Lucas's games," he says before starting the car. The engine sputters but eventually roars to life. "Didn't you run into Linds all the time?"

"His games were on Saturday mornings, not Friday afternoons. I have no idea when the twins have practice."

Sammie must notice my irritation, because he takes a deep breath and says, "Hey, I'm sorry about my Snooze-cus comment earlier."

"I don't care that you think he's boring."

"You mean your love life doesn't hinge on my opinions? Color me shocked." I make a face. "Seriously though, sorry."

"It's fine." I shrug, deciding it is. "I just wish Lindsay wouldn't have brought him up like that. She acts like it's some *tragedy* Agatha and I are ending high school single."

"You know I'm contractually obligated to point out the Shakespearean tragedy reference you just made, right?" he jokes. "But come on, you know she's just trying to help."

“I get that. But she’s forcing it. I want someone to *want* to take me to prom.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d ask if there’s a guy you’d *want* to *want* to take you.”

“And why do you know better?”

“Because there’s no way you’d have gone this long without yapping about him if there were,” he says, laughing. “Is it mean to point out that this is probably your record for the longest you’ve gone without liking a new boy? I mean, ignoring the usual daily drooling. Are you holding out for the influx of crush-worthy boys you’ll meet in the fall?”

“It wouldn’t be mean, but it would be incorrect.”

He laughs and rapidly drums his hands against the steering wheel. “Do you need me to pull out receipts?”

“I really wish you wouldn’t,” I moan, but his shit-eating grin tells me he’s beyond stopping.

“Let’s start with the infamous Ezekiel incident from second grade, shall we?”

“We shan’t.”

“I, personally, will never forget the look on Ms. Leigh’s face when she knocked over your pencil box and found literally dozens of doodles you’d made of you and Ezekiel as adults surrounded by your adorable children.”

“I was seven! And he shared his big pack of crayons with me . . .”

“I’m letting that euphemism slide because I love you,” he says. “Okay, let’s see, how about in eighth grade? Nathan from PE? Remember how he offered to tie your shoes

before the mile run that you ended up *failing* because you were too busy mentally picking out what roses you'd use as centerpieces at your wedding?"

"I'll have you know I picked out my bouquet flowers, thank you very much," I correct, wringing my seat belt in my hands.

"Forgive me," he chuckles. "You could always see if Marty still needs kissing practice." He waggles his thick black eyebrows.

"That's not fair! That was freshman year, and everyone was having their first kisses. Can you really blame me for thinking his offer meant something?"

He slaps the steering wheel. "Yes! Yes, I can!" He's laughing so hard I'm scared he'll veer off the road and we'll crash into a tree. Though given the topic of conversation, I'm not sure that'd be such a bad thing. "O, he literally asked Lindsay to practice kissing *a week* before he asked you. You were there!"

"Okay, okay, I get it. At least I didn't actually say yes."

"Yeah, because he moved on to Velly Jackson before you got the chance."

"I seem to remember this starting off as an apology."

"You're right," Sammie says, but he's fighting back a smile. "I am very sorry you depleted your adolescent dating pool options this quickly while I sat by, unknowingly complicit."

"You're genuinely the worst best friend ever."

"At least you still got Ags," he says. And it's true. When

Sammie temporarily ditched me in middle school because the pressure of *Why Would A Boy And A Girl Even Speak At This Age If They're Not Dating* got to him, I stumbled upon a friendship with Ags and, by extension, Linds.

“Good, because at this rate, it looks like she’s going to be my prom date.”

“As her date, at least try to talk her down from sneaking in Parisian decor to replace the inevitable fish cutouts.”

“I kind of hope she enlists me to hide berets to replace the scuba masks they’ll probably have for the photo booth,” I say. “Oo! We can speak in French accents too!”

“Oui, oui, mon petit croissant,” he adds, and I about lose it.

As he parks along the strip of sidewalk between our houses, I’m grateful, not for the first time, that Sammie and I haven’t grown tired of each other after this many years of friendship. Middle school weirdness aside, we’ve been glued at the hip for as long as I can remember.

Dad’s parents passed away when I was a baby, and Mom’s parents live on the East Coast. We visit them every couple of years, but some of her family never exactly warmed to her marrying the son of two Cuban immigrants. I didn’t pick up on it as a kid, but recent political elections finally cued me in. I’ve had little interest in seeing anyone but Grammy and Pops Kennedy since.

The point is, with no real extended family around, my childhood got lonely at times. Inversely, Sammie has three younger sisters and one older one, let alone dozens of cousins and aunts and uncles. So my big, empty house became his

refuge, and his big, full family became my extended one by proxy.

“Want to come over? Mom’s making her chicken biryani.” Sammie’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. He grabs our bags from the back seats, knocking over the *T* volume.

“Tempting,” I admit as I take my bag and get out of the car. His mom’s Pakistani cooking is to die for. “But my parents are making *ropa vieja*, so I’ve got Cuban obligations. Save me some for when we work on those sample DBQs tomorrow?” We’ve got the same teachers but different periods for most of our classes.

He winces. “Shit, O. I totally forgot. Linds and I are seeing that new horror movie tomorrow. You know, the one about the lady who murders all her daughter’s boyfriends to protect her from heartbreak?” He pauses. “You can come if you want . . .”

“I’ve got too much work to do. Besides, you know I can’t handle horror.” I shudder dramatically to hide my hurt. “You guys have fun though.” I muster up what I hope is a convincing smile as we split off toward our individual houses.

“I’m home!” I shout as I slam the front door behind me. I dump my backpack on the end table in the foyer and pointlessly shuffle through the stack of mail. College acceptances have been out for weeks, and most of them came by email. Plus, Sammie and I already committed to North Coast State a few weeks ago, a state school only an hour drive from home. Botany for me and general history for him until he decides on a specific focus. Lindsay is off to

Chicago, Ags to LA, and Wesley to San Francisco. Still, I've yet to kick the daily habit of checking for a new cheesy postcard promising me an enriching future for the low cost of never-ending student debt.

"Hola, mija," Dad says, sitting on a stool as I enter the kitchen. The island is crowded with half a dozen cookbooks and glass spice bottles, the smell of them a little overwhelming.

Mom frantically stirs a pot on the stove, brown sauce dotting her pale face. "I thought we agreed yelling wasn't the most effective way to announce your arrival," she says as I kiss her cheek, avoiding the sauce below her eye.

"Careful with your word choice, Professor," I reply. I sit beside Dad and kiss his cheek too. "Its effectiveness was never called into question."

"Claro que it was the annoyance being debated," Dad contributes.

"Y tú, Miguel?" she says, wielding her dripping spoon. "Siding with your daughter over the love of your life?"

"She's got my hair and last name, but that attitude of hers is all you, my love." He leans over to scrunch my nose.

He's joking, but he's not wrong. Dad gave me his brown eyes; dark, wavy hair; and unquenchable love of papas rellenas. My sarcasm, only somewhat ironic love of Shakespeare, and the light smattering of freckles across my cheeks and nose are all Mom.

Mom purses her lips but doesn't argue. "Why didn't you invite Sammie in for dinner? We're going to have plenty of

leftovers.” She tosses a bowl of peeled and chopped potatoes into the pot before snatching a spice bottle from Dad to shake generously into the mix.

“Friendly reminder that if you actually want Sammie over for dinner, you might want to buy halal,” I reply as I break off a piece of the hard bread set out to go with dinner. “Like I’ve told you a million times.”

“Make sure to chew that,” she says, ignoring my reminder. Dad rolls his eyes and grabs a piece too.

“¿Y cómo está tu novio?” Dad asks, looking knowingly at Mom in the least parentally discreet way possible. Parents with the delusion their daughter’s boy best friend is their future son-in-law really shouldn’t give an extra house key to said boy, even if it’s just for emergencies.

“Cálmate,” I scold. “He’s ditching me to hang out with Lindsay tomorrow.”

“Are he and Wesley still fighting over that girl à la Cold War style?” Mom asks.

“Bringing up the Cold War at dinner with two Cubans is a bold choice,” I joke. She rolls her eyes, and Dad claps his hands twice as he chuckles. “But yes, of course they still are.” I tell them about the bet.

“Warms my heart to see my daughter treating her friends’ romantic lives with the utmost sensitivity,” Mom says.

“Speaking of tomorrow, you’ve got your graduation photos in the afternoon.” Dad nods toward the rose calendar hanging above the sink.

“No te preocupes, I haven’t forgotten,” I reply, but Mom

scrambles over to the calendar with a scowl. “What’s wrong?” I ask her, trying to keep a straight face as Dad vigorously seasons the food behind her back.

“I have to look over my students’ final papers this weekend if I’m going to get their grades in the system by the end of the week.” She sighs, running her hands through her straight, light brown hair. She’s an English professor at the liberal arts college just outside town, specializing in Shakespearean texts. It’s not hard to imagine who chose my name, even without knowing Dad is a paralegal. At least they didn’t name me Malfesance. “I don’t have time to take you, honey. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I can just ask Agatha to take pictures of me in the backyard next weekend. You know, like I wanted to in the first place.” Mom and Dad share a look over my head. “Parentals? I can still see you.”

“You know I think Agatha is incredibly gifted and the sweetest soul to walk the Earth. But the last time you two did a photo shoot in the backyard, you were wearing orange eye shadow and a sparkly green tutu.”

I groan loudly. “Mom, that was an editorial shoot for her designs. She knows how to take boring pictures of me.”

“Mija, your mom already made the appointment,” Dad says. “Though I’m golfing con Alberto mañana, entonces no te puedo dar un paseo tampoco.”

“Well, Ags has her cousin’s wedding, so I guess Uber or Lyft it is.”

“You are not getting in the car of a stranger from the

internet,” Dad says swiftly. I’m beginning to regret taking a study period instead of driver’s ed last year. “Especially not after that news clip my prima shared on Facebook—didn’t I send it to you?”

I really should put parental controls on the computer. “I’ll figure something else out then.” I visibly cheer myself up for their sakes. Bright smile, voice pitched higher. “I swear, it’s not a big deal. I’ll get another friend to take me.”

I leave the room and head upstairs before they can say what we’re all thinking: I don’t have any other friends.



I spend the next half hour scrolling aimlessly through Instagram while toying with my new rose-printed duvet, the bright pink flowers complementing my lavender bedroom walls. I see so many promposal pics that I actually start to miss college commitment posts. Until I see Jeffry Adebayo got into Harvard, and then I just miss classic selfies and faux candid.

I toss my phone aside and get up to splash water on my face, the anxiety of encroaching prom, graduation, and college making me feverish. I tuck my hair behind my ears, the length almost reaching my shoulders now, and hold back my bangs before wetting my face. Pushing aside long-term thoughts, I refocus my attention on how I’m going to get to my grad pics tomorrow.

When I reopen my phone, I see Wesley shared a post from Zaq, advertising his photography services for senior portraits and prom pics. I scroll through the post, all gorgeously

framed shots of our classmates, then click on Zaq's profile. I freeze on the most recent photo.

It's Talia, smiling brighter than I've ever seen her, looking directly into the camera. I don't know who I'm more jealous of—her for looking so stunningly happy, or Zaq, behind the camera, who got to be on the receiving end of this smile.

An idea hits me, and I'm suddenly extra grateful that Talia and I exchanged numbers after that initial icebreaker in government. I type the text before I can talk myself out of it, dropping my phone on my bed like it's on fire as soon as I hit send.

hey, sorry if this is weird, but is there any chance you'd be able to drive me to get my graduation photos taken tomorrow?

I adjust my top, suddenly feeling exposed. It was just a text. It's just a favor. I don't really have a choice unless I want to ruin my parents' dream of savoring their only child's high school graduation for years to come.

"Ophelia! Dinner!" Mom shouts from the kitchen.

"Coming!" I yell back. Parents forget that *someone* had to teach us our bad habits.

I'm halfway out the door when I hear my text tone. I practically pounce on my bed, ruffling through the bedding until my fingers find the cooled glass screen. I yank my phone to my face.

Sure, what time?? Talia replied.